

**THE DRAMATIC ACHIEVEMENT
OF WILLIAM SAROYAN:
A RE-ASSESSMENT**

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH,
FACULTY OF ARTS, MINIA UNIVERSITY
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

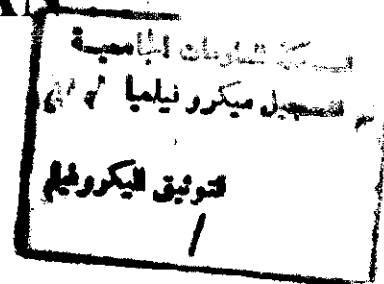
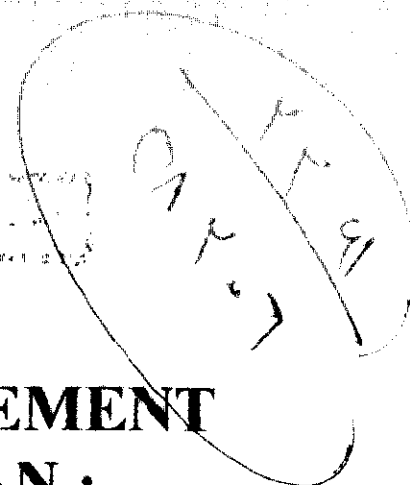
BY

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AIN-SHAMS UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

William Saroyan was one of the most important writers in twentieth century American literature. He appeared on the American literary and theatrical scene in the mid 1930's and remained there until his death in 1981. He was born in Fresno, California on August 31, 1908. His parents, who were cousins emigrated from Bitlis, Armenia to the United States in 1905. His father, Armenak Saroyan who was a former Presbyterian minister, essayist, and poet worked from time to time as a farm laborer. Armenak died in 1911 at an early age when William was three years old.⁽¹⁾

As a result of the death of his father, his mother was forced to place her four children in an Oakland orphanage. In 1915 his family reunited and returned to Fresno, where Saroyan attended public schools, worked as a newsboy at the age of eight and a telegraph messenger at fourteen. At fifteen he dropped out of Fresno High School because he was bored by the slow pace of school work and spent his time at the public library reading books and

(1) William Saroyan, My Name is Saroyan. Comp. James H. Tashjian (New York : Coward - McCann, 1983), p. 21.

magazines. He worked also in his uncle's vineyards with Armenian immigrant groups.⁽¹⁾

Saroyan's dream was to be a writer therefore in 1928 he left Fresno to San Francisco to realize his dream. His first story was published in a San Francisco magazine. Some of his poetry and short stories appeared in **Hairenik [Fatherland]**, an English language Armenian Journal published in Boston in 1933⁽²⁾. But Saroyan's real success and fame came in 1934 when Story magazine published **The Daring Young Man on The Flying Trapeze**, a short story about a young writer who starves to death, with dignity⁽³⁾. The popularity of Saroyan's initial work led Random House to publish this story and twenty-five others under the title **The Daring Young Man on The Flying Trapeze, and Other Stories**⁽⁴⁾. The title story of the book was awarded the O. Henry Memorial Award for the best short-story of the year. The Award brought him both fame and fortune and attracted the public's attention to his artistic talents. It is with the short-story

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- (1) Brian Darwent, " Saroyan's Life and Work : An Overview." William Saroyan : The Man and the Writer Remembered. ed. Leo Hamalian (Rutherford, N.J. : Fairleigh Dickinson U.P., 1987), p. 25.
- (2) Lawrence, Lee and B. Gifford, Saroyan : A Biography (New York : Harper, 1984), p. 317.
- (3) Brian Darwent, " Saroyan's Life and Work," Op. Cit., p. 28.
- (4) William Saroyan, The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze, and Other Stories. (New York : Random House, 1934).

genre that Saroyan is most clearly associated in the minds of many readers.

In 1935, Saroyan wrote his first one-act play, the **Subway Circus** which was published later as part of the contents of **Razzle-Dazzle**(1942), a collection of sixteen experimental dramatic pieces. Thus, he began his career both as a short-story writer and a playwright almost simultaneously and throughout his career he was very prolific trying his hand at the various genres of short-story, play, novel, autobiography, and essay.

William Saroyan wrote a large number of plays during his life, including both published and unpublished works. He published and produced his best works for the theatre between 1939 and 1943 which led John Gassner to identify those years as “ the Saroyan period in the American theatre.”⁽¹⁾

Saroyan’s career as a playwright began in earnest with his first major play. **My Heart’s in the Highlands**. The play was produced by the Group theatre in April 1939. It was originally an adaptation of one of his earlier short stories, **The Man With the Heart in the Highlands**. As the play was well received by the majority of critics, its run was extended on Broadway and established Saroyan’s first

(1) John Gassner, Form and Idea in Modern Theatre. (New York: Holt, 1956), p.356.

major success in the theatre⁽¹⁾. In October 1939, Saroyan's greatest theatrical success, **The Time of Your Life** was produced by the theatre Guild. The play received both the Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize for the best play of the 1939-1940 season. It was the first play to win both. However, Saroyan refused the Pulitzer on the ground that the play was no better than any of the rest of his work and also because " he didn't like wealth patronizing art."⁽²⁾

After writing **The Time of Your Life** Saroyan wrote several other plays, including **Love's Old Sweet Song** (1940), **Sweeney in the Trees** (1940), **Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning** (1941), **The Beautiful People** (1941), **Hello Out There** (1941), **Get Away Old Man** (1943), **Jim Dandy** (1947), **Don't Go Away Mad** (1949), **Sam Ego's House** (1949), **A Decent Birth, A Happy Funeral** (1949), **The Cave Dwellers** (1957), **The Dogs or The Paris Comedy** (1960), **Sam the Highest Jumper of Them All or the London Comedy** (1960), and various other plays.

Saroyan usually wrote quickly as well as in great quantity. It took him only a few days or hours to write a play. He wrote for

(1) John Mason Brown, " Second Thoughts on Saroyan, " Broadway in Review. (New York : Norton, 1940), p. 187.

(2) Brenda, N. MaGarity, " Drive, He Said," William Saroyan : The Man and the Writer Remembered. Op. Cit., p. 108.

example, **My Heart's in the Highlands** in three-days⁽¹⁾, **The Time of Your Life** in six days, **The Cave Dwellers** in eight⁽²⁾, and his ballet play, **The Great American Goof** (1940), in exactly thirty-three minutes⁽³⁾. According to Foster, Saroyan wrote about "five hundred short stories (by his own account) between 1934 and 1939,"⁽⁴⁾ and several full-length and one-act plays between 1939 and 1943, although many were never produced. Throughout his career, Saroyan wrote many more plays than were produced or even published. Saroyan himself mentioned that in the spring and summer of 1975 he wrote more than fifteen plays which were all unknown⁽⁵⁾. In his article, "How to Write a Great Play," Saroyan wrote :

After the first two plays in 1939 came "Love's Old Sweet Song" with Walter Huston, "The Beautiful People" with Eugene Loring, "Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning" with Canada Lee, "Get A way, Old Man" with Richard Widmark, "Hello Out There" with Eddie Dowling, "The Cave Dwellers" with Eugene Leontovich, and that's all on Broadway. In London in 1960 I wrote, produced and directed

(1) William Saroyan, The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze, Op. Cit., p. 105.

(2) William Saroyan, "Saroyan on Himself," New Republic, 4 (Nov. 1957), p. 21.

(3) George J. Nathan, The Entertainment of a Nation (New York : Knopf, 1942), p. 44.

(4) Edward H. Foster, William Saroyan (Boise : Boise State University, 1984), p. 38.

(5) William Saroyan, An Armenian Trilogy (California, Fresno : Fresno State University), p. 3.

“ Sam the Highest Jumper of Them All.” In 1961 I wrote, produced and directed three plays under the general heading of “Trash Along the Wabash.” These performed works constitute less than a quarter of the plays by me in manuscript⁽¹⁾.

Saroyan emerged as a prominent writer on the literary scene in the thirties. The thirties was the era of proletarian literature and Marxist criticism. Unlike the playwrights who were his contemporaries, Saroyan never adopted any of the political or social theories of this time. Therefore, he was accused of lacking a social conscience. Whereas his contemporaries dealt with matters concerning the changing social and political problems of the thirties and forties, Saroyan belonged to a group of writers who concerned themselves with matters of contemporary interest and who sought new meanings and new values⁽²⁾ for their work, and who differed markedly from their predecessors. The depression of the thirties was so destructive and so despairing that the writers were affected not only by the economic problems but also by deep social and spiritual crisis. For the writers of the thirties, the suffering and poverty of America's depression years were well-known experiences. According to Alfred Kazin :

(1) William Saroyan, “ How to Write a Great Play,” TV Guide, 6 March 1976, p. 5.

(2) Maxwell Geismar, Writers in Crisis. (New York : Hill and Wang, 1966), p. VII.

the "new" writers looked as if they had been born to trouble-as in fact they had been, for they were usually the products of city streets, factories, and farms. More than the age of the ideologue, of the literary revolutionary and the "proletarian" novelist, roles usually created within the communist movement, the Thirties in literature were the age of the plebes-of writers from the working class, the lower class, the immigrant class, the non-literate class, from western farms and mills-those whose struggle was to survive. When you thought of the typical writers of the Twenties, you thought of rebels from "good" families. Dos Passos, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Cummings, Wilson, Cowley. What was new about the writers of the Thirties was not so much their angry militancy, which many shared, as their background, writers now came from anywhere.⁽¹⁾

This is an analysis of William Saroyan who suffered an unhappy childhood, selling newspapers, working in a telegraph office and roaming the streets of Fresno, he had been "born to trouble," to poverty, to an orphan's life. Having known all these experiences in his life, he was different from many of his contemporary playwrights by the content, as well as, by the treatment of the thematic matter of his plays. He often dealt with the life of simple and good-natured people in their varying individual situations, whereas the other contemporary playwrights

(1) Alfred Kazin, Starting Out in the Thirties (New York : Vintage, 1980), p. 12.

dealt with matters concerning the changing social and political problems of the thirties and forties. He praised the brotherhood of man and the integrity of the individual. He wrote about the survival of human values; how the individual can live a happy, decent life full of grace, civility and generosity of spirit. He was specifically concerned with how the individuals realize their dreams in a harsh and inhumane world. For Saroyan, no political plan of action could be successful, for "the revolution" had to take place within the human heart. According to Foster :

Saroyan cultivated a highly personal vocabulary and attitude. This special voice was in turn the medium through which the historical moment could be interpreted. Instead of insisting on an objective reality to be interpreted through a political ideology or system, he recorded the world according to a personal, idiosyncratic perspective expressed through his literary voice : sentimental, generous, genial, warm, whimsical, amused, and amusing.⁽¹⁾

For Saroyan, art had deeply personal and therapeutic values. It is a way toward health and reconciliation. He once remarked that he needed to write "because I hate to believe I'm sick or half-dead, because I want to get better; because writing is my therapy."⁽²⁾ Being aware of the confusion and spiritual chaos of life in the

(1) Foster, William Saroyan, Op. Cit., p. 29.

modern world, he expressed his desire to achieve joy, self-realization, and psychic integration to the individual. Saroyan noted that :

the imperative requirement of our time is to restore faith to the mass and integrity to the mass and integrity to the individual. The integration of man is still far from realized. In a single age this integration can be immeasurably improved, but it is impossible and useless to seek to imagine its full achievement. Integration will begin to occur when the individual is uninhabited, impersonal, simultaneously natural and cultured, without hate, without fear, and rich in spiritual grace⁽¹⁾.

It is this state of balance which Saroyan attempts to achieve in his work. For him it is the quest of self-realization which gives life its ultimate purpose and meaning.

To understand Saroyan, it is important to go back to his Armenian-American background for the past seems to shape his vision of experience in his best works. The place to begin with is not America but Ancient Armenia in eastern Turkey. During its long history, Armenia was ruled by the Arabs, Mongols, Persians, and, most recently, Turks. The Armenians had been subjected to all

(2) William Saroyan, Don't Go Away Mad and Two Other Plays (New York : Harcourt, Brace, 1949), p. XV.

(1) William Saroyan, Three Plays (New York : Harcourt, Brace, 1940), pp. 6-7.