

Naturalism and Theatre of Cruelty in Selected Works of Arthur Miller and Wole Soyinka

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Abstract This paper looked closely at Theatre of Cruelty and critically analyzed its concept using plays selected from two playwrights. The Theatre of Cruelty is a form of theatre generally associated with Antonin Artaud., Literary mythology was used to collect and analyze data for this paper. This paper evaluates the dramatic presentation style of Antonin Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" within the praxis of "Naturalism" in those selected plays with the purpose of asserting the symbiotic connections between the analyzed works of Arthur Miller and Wole Soyinka with a view to establishing the veracity of naturalism and the feature of Theatre of Cruelty in those plays.

Keywords: Naturalism, Theatre of Cruelty, Arthur Miller, Wole Soyinka

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INTRODUCTION

The 19th and early 20th centuries represent a watershed in European and American theatre traditions. The period several philosophical/theatrical movements that would ultimately redefine theatre practice and theory. There was a widespread challenge to long-established rules surrounding theatrical representation; resulting in the development of many new forms of theatre, including Modernism, Expressionism, Impressionism, Political theatre and other forms of Experimental theatre, as well as the continuing development of already established theatrical forms like naturalism and realism. (Brockett and Hildy, 2003). This essay examines some of the major movements and the theatre theories and practices they engendered, vis-à-vis proponents of the moments. Among these essays are Theatre of Cruelty and Naturalism.

Theatre of Cruelty is ascribed to Antonin Artaud'. Many experts however, in Theatre studies, have written and criticized the incorrect understanding and interpretation of Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. For example, according to Komolafe and Adeyemi (2019)

quoting Brook 1997 wrote that the theatrical style of Antonin Artaud is described as trying to create a theatre that is more intense, less logical, more extreme, less focused on words, and riskier. This shows that performing this presentation style on stage from any dramatic work is difficult. The last part explains this idea better and how it is important in theatre. Antonin Artaud created a type of theatre called the Theatre of Cruelty in the 1970s. This style has been difficult for many theatre artists to understand and put into practice on stage. Artaud was a poet and writer who created the Theatre of Cruelty. He wanted to shake up the audience and make them more involved in the performance. He wanted them to experience the actions on stage and be inspired to change how they behave in a positive way. Nandini (2018) and Sakurain. (2014). believed that Artaud noted that we are not free and bad things can still happen to us. The main purpose of theatre is to teach us important lessons. Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty was influenced by a type of playmaking called surrealism, which sees dreams as a way to understand reality.

Through dreams, the things we experience every day are shown on stage for people to watch and think about. Theatre of Cruelty is different from Surrealism. It has its own style of performance that is not like Greek classical drama.

Lennart and Jan (2019) state that Artuad: rejects the thought of an ideal world, and instep yearns for a perfect of 'true culture', as he accepted that conventions, craftsmanship, and gotten thoughts as it were speaking to the stagnation of 'true culture'. In a sense, he yearns for a primordial frame of culture, an experience with strengths associated with those including within the life and character of the brutal Dionysus in Euripides' *Bacchae*. Characteristic of Artaudian thought is the reversal of the goals of Western civilization, and the eulogization of their refutation

To reaffirm this assertion, Bullard, (2013) states that: The Theatre of cruelty which is invariably referred to as theatre of remorselessness endeavours to enter a distant more profound than naturalistic theatre. The introduction of such physical interpretations of crude feeling takes off more naturalistic pieces of theatre showing up to be candidly hindered and filled with wrong pretences. The foremost ghastly viewpoints of human nature are deciphered into captivating craftsmanship, where, by a few bizarre catches, the as-it-were thing that would appear out of put is reality.

On the other hand, the worldview of the so-called logical naturalism has gotten a developing sum of basic consideration from the inside and exterior of explanatory philosophy to Theatre Exhibitions. Many writers, dramatists and playwrights have used the phenomenon or the nomenclature as an ingredient to model their literary works.

According to Dennett (2003) Naturalism, in reasoning, is a hypothesis that relates logical strategy to reasoning by confirming that all creatures and occasions within the universe (anything their inalienable character may be) are common truth and real

Williamson (2014) stated that: Numerous modern rationalists depict themselves as naturalists. They are cruel that they accept something like this: there's as it was the natural world and the perfect way">the most perfect way to discover approximately it is by the logical strategy. So why do I stand up to being portrayed as a naturalist? Not for any devout compunction: I am an atheist of the foremost clear kind. But to acknowledge the naturalist trademark without looking underneath the slick bundling is an informal way to make one's convictions almost the world, so not something that indeed naturalists ought to prescribe. From the above, a naturalistic practitioner must align with what Sambrotta (2023) that a Naturalism is loosely the view that all of what there is belongs to the natural world, where the natural world is the world described by the natural sciences. That is to say: naturalism should

look it original state when reenacting the incidence in any form of presentation.

Objective

The paper made efforts to underscore the universality of some of the theories and practices by aligning them with our African realities. In this case, Artuad's Theatre of Cruelty as reverberated in Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists* is put in focus.

In the same vein, naturalism is epitomized in the *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller.

Methodology

The study employs the literary method for its inquiry. This essentially involves the collection of data or materials from scholars who have written on similar topics. Also, it involved a thorough diachronic and synchronic analysis of the selected plays of Arthur Miller and Wole Soyinka to enhance a comprehensive understanding of the study.

THE WORLD OF ARTHUR MILLER

Arthur Miller was an American playwright who cared about social issues and the emotions of his characters. He was born in New York City in 1915 and died in Roxbury, Connecticut in 2005. Most people mostly remember him for *Death of a Salesman* (1949).

The Great Depression affected Miller's life because it caused his father, who was a small manufacturer, to lose all his money. This showed Miller how uncertain life can be in modern times. After finishing high school, he got a job at a warehouse. He used the money he made to go to the University of Michigan and started writing plays there. He became well-known with his first book called *Focus*. It was a story about hatred against Jewish people. They also made a movie based on the book in 1962. *All My Sons* (1947; film 1948) is a play about a person who makes weapons that don't work well during a war. It is influenced by the writer Henrik Ibsen, and it was the first important play written by the author. Miller won a Tony Award because of it, and it was his first big project with the director Elia Kazan, who also won a Tony.

Miller's next play, *Death of a Salesman*, became extremely popular and well-known during its time in America. This is the sad story of Willy Loman, a man who was ruined by wrong beliefs that were mostly the same beliefs held by his society.

Miller had been thinking about the ideas behind *Death of a Salesman* since he was young. He wrote a story about a Jewish salesman when he was a teenager. He also used his memories of an uncle to help with the play. He wrote the play in 1948. It opened in New York City in February 1949. Kazan directed it. The

play received two prestigious awards: a Tony Award for being the best play and a Pulitzer Prize for being a great drama. Additionally, Miller and Kazan both won individual Tony Awards for their roles as the author and director of the play. The play was changed to fit the story on a movie or TV screen in 1951 and also was performed multiple times on Broadway again later.

Arthur Miller was an American writer who wrote plays and movies. Arthur Miller was an American playwright and essayist who gained prominence for his plays, including "Death of a Salesman" and "The Crucible." He wrote about social and political issues and often examined the American Dream and the consequences of its pursuit.

Miller wrote *The Crucible* (1953) using the witchcraft trials in Salem, Massachusetts, which happened in 1692-93. He saw these trials as similar to the McCarthyism of his time, when there were many investigations into people who were accused of being against the government. Even though it's not as well-liked as *Death of a Salesman*, it won a Tony award for best play. It was made into many movies and TV shows as well. In 1956, Miller was asked to testify before a government committee called the House Un-American Activities Committee. He decided not to name the people he had seen at a meeting of writers who were accused of being communists 10 years before. He was found guilty of disrespecting the court, but he disagreed and eventually succeeded in his legal challenge.

REFLECTIONS OF NATURALISM IN ARTHUR MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALEMAN*

In theatre, the naturalist movement developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Naturalism in theatre was an attempt to create a perfect illusion of reality through detailed sets, an unpoetic literary style that reflects the way ordinary people speak, and a style of acting that tries to recreate reality (often by seeking complete identification with the role, as advocated by Stanislavski). Many critics fail to make a distinction between "realism" and "naturalism."

Certainly, the distinction does not involve a major critical view. Realism bothers on an attempt to present life with a large degree of verisimilitude. As a movement, it preceded naturalism, its essentially an attempt to carry the position of the realist to a further degree.

The naturalists believe that realism had not treated all aspects of life and was determined to show everything connected with life. They also accused the realists of failing to depict things which are unpleasant, ugly, or sordid. Consequently, naturalism largely concentrates on those aspects of life which are of dubious value, and seldom does it depict the higher nature of humanity.

In theory, the naturalism saw humanity trapped by forces which it could not control. Humanity is caught in a hostile universe and there is no chance for it to escape.

In general, the philosophy behind naturalism might be called determinism — that is, humans are totally unable to control their own destinies.

With this philosophy, the naturalist will often use the image of humanity trapped in some type of cage or in some type of circumstances which could be symbolically viewed as a net or cage. An example is Miller's tragic protagonist, Willy Loman. Then the dominant image will often involve a person as some sort of animal. The naturalist uses this animal imagery to reinforce the position that people cannot control their urges and are ultimately reduced to bestiality. The Frenchman Emile Zola and the American Frank Norris are the most famous for their uses of animal imagery to depict the lack of nobility in humanity.

The naturalist, wishing to capture verisimilitude to the highest degree, would often belabour his descriptions. Many times, this type of writer would often continue his description of physical objects far beyond the patience of the reader. Their flaw then is a result of their desire to give an absolutely accurate account of their position, and in doing so, they often became tedious with their laborious descriptions.

Finally, in trying to be completely true to life, the naturalist distorted life as much as did the romantic writer. While determined to present the true side of life and therefore concentrating on the ugly and the sordid, the naturalist emphasized this aspect of life to the exclusion of any other aspect. The realist knows that there is the sordid side, but he often presented the pleasant or happy side of life; the naturalist restricted life to the ugly and unpleasant, thereby distorting real life instead of depicting it as accurately as he thought he would.

This essay, thus, examine naturalism and expressionism in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. It argues that the play employs both naturalism and expressionism in the author's portrayal of Willy Loman's losing struggle against social, familial and economic forces beyond his control, and that these literary and philosophical approaches are used to show the break-up of Willy and the family (an expressionistic effect) as well as the cause of that break-up (through expressionistic devices). At the same time, Miller was not restricted by the traditional uses of expressionism and naturalism in this play, choosing instead to use those approaches according to his own needs and interpretations.

Although there are many varieties of naturalistic writing, in all of them there is a strong sense of the individual as the victim of natural or social forces. There is a certain degree of determinism in every naturalistic

approach, but Miller can hardly be considered as a core naturalist, as he tends to be sympathetic toward Willy and his plight, and many readers have seen in Miller's play the suggestion that the capitalistic system, rather than some immutable natural force, is the culprit in Willy's tragedy. There is a profoundly humanistic sense to Willy's play, which undermines the pessimism or even cynicism of many naturalism-based works, even those critical of society and economic forces.

Miller's approaches to the naturalistic elements of his play are also intensely coloured by this sympathy--or empathy--in terms of the Willy's motivations. After all, as selfish as Willy certainly is in his extramarital dalliance, and in his desire to be a success as a salesman, he nevertheless is doing what society has taught him is the right thing---to work hard and provide for his family. The primary naturalistic element of the play is found in Willy's belief that if he works hard he and his family will be rewarded with a good life. However, Miller clearly suggests that the socioeconomic system which has shaped Willy's aspirations is also the force which prevents him from fulfilling those aspirations. Miller, therefore, employs a sociological version of naturalism. Willy believes he is free to make decisions and pursue goals which society will allow him to achieve because that is what he was taught by that society. However, society has deceived him because in the naturalistic framework of the play he is not the recipient of society's rewards but rather the victim of its false promises.

The question of the play, then, considering Miller's sympathy for Willy and his family, is whether Miller holds out any hope for changing that socio-economic system which has crushed Willy. Miller leaves no doubt whatsoever that Willy himself has learned nothing from his experience. Whatever recognition he might have won of his helpless predicament, Willy is shown at the end of the play to still be under the spell of the dream which has driven him his whole adult life, the dream that the individual can indeed triumph. This is demonstrated in his exhortation to his son. It is telling that Willy frames this exhortation in the metaphor of the sport - American football, where the individual with talent and hard work can emerge victorious:

I always knew one way or another we were gonna make it, Biff and I! . . . Now when you kick off, boy, I want a seventy-yard boot, and get right down the field under the ball, and when you hit, hit low and hard, because it's important, boy. . . . There's all kinds of important people in the stands, and the first thing you know . . . [suddenly realizing he is alone] Ben! Ben, where do I . . . ? . . . Ben, how do I . . . ? (108).

Willy may realize he is alone, a basic naturalistic situation, but he still does not comprehend how he came to be alone, especially when he saw himself as the head

of a ... family who is operating according to the most basic principles of society. The exhortation to his son also reveals his desire to please others ("all kinds of important people in the stands") and his faith that if one performs well, those important people will make sure that he is amply rewarded. His entire life, however, contradicts such hopes and dreams. He has worked hard his whole life and end up with nothing to show for it.

If we have any doubt about Miller's sympathy for Willy, it is surely eroded by Charley's response to Linda's consideration that the people Willy knew did not attend his funeral because "maybe they blame him": "Naa," says Charley, "It's a rough world, Linda. They wouldn't blame him." In that "Requiem," we also see that Willy's wife is still under the spell of society's promise: I can't understand it. At this time especially. First time in thirty-five years we were just about free and clear. He only needed a little salary. He was even finished with the dentist (110).

Willy and Linda in essence, simply do not understand the forces they are contending with – the stark reality of an emerging social order where the worth of man is measured using strict economic indices. It is the truth of the new norm – the commodification of humanity. This is one ugly aspect of real life which naturalists accused realists as evading. In portraying this therefore, Miller successfully depicts things which are unpleasant, ugly, or sordid about modern society. He concentrates to a greater extent on those aspects of life which are of dubious value, and seldom does it depict the higher nature of humanity – in this case, it is the deceptive concept called the American Dream.

THE UNIVERSE OF WOLE SOYINKA

Born July 13, 1934 as Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka. Wole Soyinka was a writer and activist from Nigeria who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. Sometimes, he wrote funny stories about West Africa today, but he also talked about serious things and believed that having too much power is bad.

Soyinka is from the Yoruba tribe. He went to school in Ibadan and later in England. He finished his studies in 1958 and got a degree in English from the University of Leeds. When he came back to Nigeria, he started a theatre group and wrote his first important play, *A Dance of the Forests*. It was performed in 1960 for Nigeria's independence celebrations, and later published in 1963. The play makes fun of the young nation by taking away the romantic stories and showing that the present is not better than the past.

He wrote many plays that were funny and made fun of silly, Westernized teachers in *The Lion and the Jewel*. This play was first performed in Ibadan in 1959 and

published in 1963. He also made fun of clever preachers in *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *Jero's Metamorphosis*. These plays were performed in 1960 and 1973 respectively and published in 1963. But his more serious plays, like *The Strong Breed* (1963), *Kongi's Harvest* (opened the first Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, 1966; published 1967), *The Road* (1965), *From Zia, with Love* (1992), and even the funny imitation *King Baabu* (performed 2001; published 2002), show that he doesn't respect African leaders who have a lot of power and he is disappointed with Nigerian society as a whole.

From 1960 to 1964, Soyinka worked as a coeditor for *Black Orpheus*, which was a significant literary journal. From 1960 onwards, he taught literature and drama at different universities in Nigeria, such as Ibadan, Ife, and Lagos. He also led theatre groups. After he won the Nobel Prize, many people wanted him to give talks, and a lot of his talks were printed, especially the Reith Lectures in 2004, called "Climate of Fear". He also novels.

Soyinka was the first black African to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. A book about my life when I was a child, called *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, was published in 1981. Two other books, *Ìsarà: A Voyage Around Essay* (1989) and *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years: A Memoir, 1946–1965* (1994), were also published and they go along with *Aké*. He wrote another book called *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* in 2006. In 2005-06, Soyinka worked on the Encyclopædia Britannica Editorial Board of Advisors.

ELEMENTS OF ANTONIN ARTAUD'S THEATRE OF CRUELTY IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *MADMEN AND SPECIALISTS*

Theatre of Cruelty birthed by Antonin Artaud in theatre studies, is a concept that has drawn attention of critics and also theorist overtime. Some critics have majored on the misconception and mis-interpretation of this concept. For instance, Kimberly (2010) asserts that Theatre of Cruelty as a theatrical style is "a groping towards a theatre, more violent, less rational, more extreme, less verbal and more dangerous". The sentence above further established the presentational style as a controversial and problematic one. Anthony Artaud, was a poet and a surrealist writer whose Theatre of Cruelty was geared to destabilize the audience and radically transform them into active participants who can directly engage and feel the effects of the actions (catharsis) on stage, which is motivated towards behavioral change. This style evolved in the 1970s and has challenged many status quo in theatre studies most especially in terms of theatrical representation, realization and presentation on stage.

According to Prentki and Preston (2009) "While most drama and fiction of the West during the four centuries, from the sixteenth to nineteenth, assumed

that man has the freedom of choice, Artaud claimed that "We are not free and the sky can still fall on our heads. And above all else theatre is made to teach us this". However, Theatre of Cruelty is a sharp shift from the ideology of Surrealism, to create its own "violent" style of performance that is non-narrative and non-descriptive.

Outlined his theories in *The Theatre and its Double*. The Theatre of Cruelty can be seen as a break from traditional Western theatre and a means by which artists assault the senses of the audience. Ridout (2009:46 says

"that theatre has been around for thousands of years and the ways we study it have changed decisively... theatre has taken its place within a broad spectrum of performance, connecting it with the wider forces of ritual and revolt that thread through so many spheres of human culture."

In his writings on the Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud notes that both "theatre" and "cruelty" are separate from their colloquial meanings (Lennart 2022). For Artaud, theatre does not merely refer to a staged performance before a passive audience. The theatre is a practice, which "wakes us up nerves and heart," and through which we experience "immediate violent action" that "inspires us with the fiery magnetism of its images and acts upon us like a spiritual therapeutics whose touch can never be forgotten" (Gorelick, 2011:263).

Similarly, cruelty does not refer to an act of emotional or physical violence. According to scholar Nathan Gorelick, Cruelty is, more profoundly, the unrelenting agitation of a life that has become unnecessary, lazy, or removed from a compelling force. The Theatre of Cruelty gives expression to everything that is 'crime, love, war, or madness' in order to 'unforgettably root within us the ideas of perpetual conflict, a spasm in which life is continually lacerated, in which everything in creation rises up and asserts itself against our appointed rank (263).

For Artaud, cruelty is not exclusively sadism or causing pain, but just as often a violent, physical determination to shatter a false reality. He believed that text had been a tyrant over meaning, and advocated, instead, for a theatre made up of a unique language, halfway between thought and gesture. It is this violent, physical determination to shatter a false reality that Soyinka's text, *Madmen and Specialists* explores.

Madmen and Specialists centers on the conflict of principles and spiritual orientation between Old Man and his scientist son, Bero on the one hand, and both men and the women: Iya Agba, Iya Mate and Si-Bero (earth-mothers who are healers) on the other. A third set of characters, The Mendicants (devotees of the AS cult founded by the Old Man) are lost in the middle of the conflicts. *Madmen and Specialists* is a two act play by Wole Solyinka about a man who kidnaps and tortures his father, who is a physician. The play begins when four

crippled veterans from the war are begging outside the office of Dr. Bero. During the war, Dr. Bero abandoned his career as a physician and became an army intelligence officer. Also, as he reveals, he became a cannibal. He claims that his father (known as Old Man) served human flesh to him and the officers, and they began to like it. Due to his father's abuses, he claims, Bero keeps him safe inside his surgical office, with the crippled veterans guarding him.

Bero's story disguised the truth, however, as he is actually keeping his father captive in an attempt to learn the secrets of the cult of as, a harsh and unforgiving religious cult that condones the practice of cannibalism. When Old Man refuses to divulge the cult's secrets and threatens one of the crippled veterans who questions the validity of the cult, Bero shoots him. *Madmen and Specialists* has been interpreted as a satirical commentary on the abuse of power in Biafra, which was formed when a group of states in West Africa seceded from Nigeria and formed their own state, resulting in the Nigerian civil war. Soyinka was imprisoned during the war when he protested the abuses in Biafra.

To reveal some of the horrors that war can inflict on a society, Wole Soyinka makes just a few characters central to his play. It takes place in one family's home after the soldier Dr. Bero returns home from a war. By making the protagonist a physician, Soyinka draws further attention to the paradoxes that can be created by serving in the military for a controversial cause. Bero's relationship to his own family members and to the people in his community is analogous to the broader responsibility of each person to the nation. Bero and his father have lost their moral compass, but other community members offer hope that society can heal. The village women are healers who have taught their art to Bero's sister, Si Bero. In the end, because the women suspect that Si Bero is tainted by her family, they destroy the herbal medicines; they believe that Si Bero might misuse them. However, they protect the knowledge of healing herbalism.

When he left for the military, Bero believed he would serve as a physician. Instead, his profession was distorted into a grotesque, evil mirror of itself. He uses euphemisms like "specialist" and "intelligence" when he tells his sister of the work he performed. Bero claims to savor this work, heavily implying that he performed acts of cannibalism, saying that flesh is delicious. However, Soyinka carefully avoids offering anything like proof that Bero's endorsement of his cannibalism is true. It seems, that "cannibal" is another euphemism. The playwright implies that Bero's job was to torture people, probably mutilating them while they were alive (during the Nigerian civil war with the Igbo, who formed Biafra, starvation was also a weapon of war, consuming bodies in a different way).

Bero seems already to be lost beyond hope of saving himself. Although the audience cannot know how he was pressured to participate in committing atrocities, it remains the case that he has returned alive and with all his limbs intact. His elderly father, also physically unharmed, has nonetheless suffered a mental collapse. Rather than hides his actions in shame, the Old Man officially abandoning any pretense of morality; why not make cannibalism legal? Why not eat the bodies of those they kill? Soyinka makes us ask where and how these moral lines are drawn; if we can justify any one of the atrocities committed, then can't other atrocities be likewise justified?

While the heart of Soyinka's play is absurdist, its violence, illogical and dark humor raises existential questions about fundamental human relationships and the choices that war compels people to make. Images of violence or the suggestion of it pervade the play both in structure and language. Bero takes a decisive action to stop further social madness from spreading throughout his home, community, and country. He does so by killing his father. The older women also take decisive actions (destroying the herbs). Bero admits to being serious about the virtues of cannibalism. Si Bero is horrified. Bero continues to amaze her as he recounts the crucial event in his life: eating human flesh that the Old Man had served him and his fellow officers.

The characters are, for the most part, have moved beyond the ordinary world onto a cosmic stage. It is a world of risk, horror, and madness. The goal: a "revolution" in the minds of the audience. The tragic hero's blasphemous defiance of cosmic law sure sends a shudder through the audience as it joins Bero on his cosmic journey. These images and more therefore serve to shock the sensibilities of the audience in the true Artuadian tradition, unbalancing their rationality to set free the impulses buried in the subconscious mind.

Conclusively, this paper has summarily identified the ideals in the plays, *Death of a Salesman* and *Madmen and Specialists*. The playwright's addresses loss of identity and a man's inability to accept change within himself and society which is the true essence of Artuad's *Theatre of Cruelty* a disturbing mishmash of absurdity, irrationality and illogicality intending to force the audience to confront the harshness of their tragic reality. There is a profoundly humanistic sense to Loman's play, which undermines the pessimism or even cynicism of many naturalism-based works, even those critical of society and economic forces.

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