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Reflections of Bergson's Duration Theory on “Long Day's Journey into Night”, “Death of a Salesman” and “The Glass Menagerie”¹

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of thought, philosophers and thinkers have tried to understand and explain 'time' in their own ways. Yet, the conventional concept of time -a chronometric, linear construct- had not changed much until the beginning of the twentieth century when the French philosopher Henri Bergson published his revolutionary ideas about 'time'. For Bergson, the previous thinkers' explanations of time were unacceptable since they rated time with space and divided it into three distinct units the past, the present and the future. Challenging this long-established belief, he asserted that the past and the present are not different entities which succeed one another linearly. Instead, the past and the present intermingle with each other, according to Bergson. His attack on the traditional concept of time contributed to loss of trust of people living in the Modern Era in mechanic perception of time and paved the way for breaking the illusion of it in Europe. Later, his radical opinions reached America and enabled the American intellectuals to question their views on time. However, in America, the new time perception introduced by Bergson did more than just providing a new understanding of time. It also helped the breaking of another deception; the American Dream. Since the American Dream is closely related to the idea of progress, it can only be realized in a linear time sequence which was rejected by Bergson. Demonstrating the deficiencies of the linear concept of time, Bergson's ideas also imply the meaninglessness of the American Dream. It is possible to find the marks of Bergson's "duration theory" in the masterpieces of the American drama. Accordingly, in this article, it is aimed to analyse Bergson's "duration theory" in Eugene O'Neill's Long Day's Journey Into Night, Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, and Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie investigating the characters Mary Tyrone, Willy Loman, and the three members of the Wingfield family; Amanda, Tom and Laura.

Keywords: Time, Duration Theory, American Drama, American Dream.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The French philosopher Henri Bergson challenged the long-established concept of time by asserting the co-existence of the past, the present and the future which had been seen as distinct units. Bergson believed that former philosophers' fractionating time into different parts in order to measure it was deficient to explain the real time, in other words, duration. For Bergson, the temporal experience of the subject was a crucial factor to understand the real time. Emphasizing the effect of the past on individuals, Bergson believed that the past, the present and the future are interwoven, and therefore, they are undetachable from one another. Time was not only unmeasurable according to Bergson but it was also subjective since every individual had a different past. Bergson also categorised individuals in terms of their relations with time. He claimed that the ones who adhere to their pasts are 'dreamers' whereas those who disregard the past and prioritize the present are 'conscious automatons'. Bergson's duration theory also suggests the futility of the American Dream which is very much in line with the idea of progress, and therefore, with the chronological time. Influenced by his ideas, the major American playwrights reflected the temporal experiences of individuals and the concurrence of the past, the present and the future in their plays. Correspondingly, the purpose of this study is to investigate the marks of Bergson's duration theory in Eugene O'Neill's Long Day's Journey Into Night, Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, and Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie. In O'Neill's Long Day's Journey Into Night, the past is connected to the present and the future by the

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character Mary Tyrone who constantly remembers her old days, recalls her memories and illustrates the impact of her past on her present condition. Similarly, the protagonist of Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman, combines the past and the present by recalling the important moments in his past. However, unlike Mary Tyrone, Willy cannot differentiate the past from the present. While *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *Death of a Salesman* highlight the simultaneous existence of the past, present and the future, Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* concentrates on the subjectivity of temporal experience. The narrator and protagonist Tom, his sister Laura, and his mother Amanda experience time quite differently. Amanda sticks to her past in order to cope with the daily problems whereas Tom's way of dealing with the unpleasant present conditions is to ignore the past and the present and to focus on the future but he cannot escape from his past. Likewise, his crippled sister Laura is highly affected by her bleak memories. In addition to impartibility and subjectivity of time, these works mirror Bergson's duration theory by including 'dreamer' and 'conscious automaton' characters. Mary Tyrone in O'Neill's work and Willy Loman in Miller's work are dreamers who live in the past. On the other hand, Tom Wingfield in Williams' play is a conscious automaton for he neglects his past and focuses on his future. Moreover, neither of these characters can attain the American Dream because they cannot escape from their pasts. As is seen, Bergson's ideas on time are reflected in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *The Glass Menagerie* as they foreground their characters' subjective relation with time.

Bergson'un Süre Kuramının "Günden Geceye", "Satıcının Ölümü" ve "Sırça Kümes" Oyunlarındaki Yansımaları¹

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ÖZET

Düşünce tarihi boyunca filozof ve düşünürler, zaman kavramını anlamaya ve açıklamaya çalışmışlardır. Ancak, geleneksel zaman anlayışı yirminci yüzyılın başında Fransız filozof Henri Bergson'un fikirleri yayımlayınca pek değişmemiş; zaman, kronometrik ve doğrusal olarak görülmüştür. Bergson, zamanı mekanla ölçerek geçmiş, şu an ve gelecek olmak üzere üç farklı bölüme ayıran filozofları eleştirmiş; geçmişin ve şimdiki zamanın birbirini takip eden apayrı iki oluş olmadığını savunmuştur. Bergson'a göre geçmiş ve şimdiki zaman birbiriyle iç içedir. Bergson'un geleneksel zaman anlayışına bu şekilde karşı gelmesi, Avrupa'da modern insanın kronolojik zamana olan güvenini sarsmış ve zamanın yarattığı illüzyonun yıkımına yol açmıştır. Daha sonra Bergson'un zaman üzerine fikirleri Amerika'ya ulaşmış ve oradaki düşünür ve yazarların zaman kavramını sorgulamasını sağlamıştır. Ayrıca bu yeni zaman algısı Amerika'da başka bir aldatmaca olan Amerikan Rüyası'nın da yıkılmasına katkıda bulunmuştur. Gelişim ve ilerleme fikriyle yakından ilişkili olduğundan Amerikan Rüyası ancak ve ancak doğrusal bir zaman dizisinde gerçekleşebilir, Bergson da böyle bir ardışıklığı kabul etmemektedir. Bu nedenle denilebilir ki Bergson'un süre kuramı doğrusal zaman görüşünün eksikliklerini ortaya dökerek bir yandan da Amerikan Rüyası'nın anlamsızlığına işaret etmektedir. Amerikan tiyatrosunun en başarılı örneklerinde Bergson'un süre kuramının izlerine rastlamak mümkündür. Dolayısı ile bu çalışmada Bergson'un süre kuramının Eugene O'Neill'in *Günden Geceye*, Arthur Miller'in *Satıcının Ölümü* ve Tennessee Williams'ın *Sırça Kümes* oyunlarındaki yansımalarını Mary Tyrone, Willy Loman ve Wingfield ailesinin üç üyesi olan Amanda, Tom ve Laura karakterleri üzerinden incelemek amaçlanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Zaman, Süre Kuramı, Amerikan Tiyatrosu, Amerikan Rüyası.

1. Introduction

Throughout the history of thought, philosophers and thinkers have tried to understand and explain 'time' in their own way. Yet, the general concept of time -a chronometric, linear construct- had not changed much until the beginning of the twentieth century when the French philosopher Henri Bergson published his revolutionary ideas about 'time'. According to Bergson, the way how the former scientists and philosophers explained time was wrong because they rated time with space (McMahon, 2013). Bergson's going against the traditional concept of time contributed to European modern people's loss of trust in mechanistic time and paved the way for breaking the illusion of time, which was "certainly the most important legacy Bergson has left cultural and literary studies" (Randall, 2007, p. 29). His opinions on time also reached America thanks to his friend William James, an American philosopher and psychologist, and the impact of his ideas on the Americans increased after he gave a lecture in Columbia University in 1913 (McMahon, 2013). However, in America, the new time perception did more than just providing a new understanding of time; it also helped the breaking of another deception; the American dream. With his works, Bergson demonstrated that the present and the past are not different entities which succeed one another linearly; instead, they intermingle with each other (Al-Saji, 2007). Therefore, Bergson's ideas imply the meaninglessness of the American Dream since the American Dream is closely related to the idea of progress which can only be realized in a linear time. It is possible to find the marks of Bergson's duration theory in the masterpieces of the American drama. Accordingly, this article aims to analyse Bergson's duration theory in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, and Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* investigating the characters Mary Tyrone, Willy Loman, and the three members of the Wingfields; Amanda, Tom and Laura.

2. Bergson's Concept of Time

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Before beginning to analyse the reflections of Bergson's concept of duration on the plays, it would be better to mention his concept in general terms. Until the first decades of the twentieth century, time was believed to be linear, scientifically measurable, and therefore, objective. According to Bergson, this scientific notion of time was not enough to explain temporal experience. First of all, he believed that temporal experience was different from spatial one. For him, space was the combination of succeeding objects whose borders are definite; hence, space was homogenous, measurable and extrinsic. On the other hand, time didn't include such separable parts. Therefore, the former concept limited time by trying to divide it into moments in order to measure it (Salley, 2015). In the introduction of his *The Creative Mind*, Bergson explained the incompatibility between the real time which cannot be measured and the linear time which was broken into measurable parts with the following words,

I was indeed very much struck to see how real time, which plays the leading part in any philosophy of evolution, eludes mathematical treatment. Its essence being to flow, not one of its parts is still there when another part comes along. Superposition of one part on another with measurement in view is therefore impossible, unimaginable, inconceivable. There is no doubt but that an element of convention enters into any measurement, and it is seldom that two magnitudes, considered equal, are directly superposable one upon the other [...] The line one measures is immobile, time is mobility. The line is made, it is complete; time is what is happening, and more than that, it is what causes everything to happen. The measuring of time never deals with duration as duration; what is counted is only a certain number of extremities of intervals, or moments, in short virtual halts in time. (Bergson, 2007, p. 2-3).

As it is revealed in the quotation above, measuring time neglects temporal experience of the subject and it is insufficient to reflect real time which Bergson called 'duration'. Therefore, such a kind of clock-based measurement is misleading. He states in *Time and Free Will* that "we must not be led astray by the words 'between now and then,' for the interval of duration exists only for us and on account of the interpenetration of our conscious states" (Bergson, 1950, p. 116). As duration, the real time, was about subject's unique experience and perception, it was subjective and unmeasurable. Unlike the chronological time, the past, the present and the future in Bergson's duration are not different and distinct stages. Bergson himself explains this with following words,

When is the duration placed? Is it on the hither or on the further side of the mathematical point which I determine ideally when I think of the present instant? Quite evidently, it is both on this side and on that; and what I call 'my present' has one foot in my past and another in my future. In my past, first, because 'the moment in which I am speaking is already far from me'; in my future, next, because this moment is impending over the future: it is to future that I am tending, and could I fix this indivisible present, this infinitesimal element of the curve of time, it is the direction of the future that it would indicate. The psychical state, then, that I call 'my present' must be both a perception of the immediate past and a determination of the immediate future (as cited in Restrepo, 2015, p. 52-53)

As it can be understood from his words the past, the present and the future exist in duration simultaneously. Since the past is attached to the present, memories are important in terms of temporal experience. According to Bergson, there are two kinds of memory; the practical memory and the pure memory. The former is related to the practical needs of routine life, while the latter is the memory of the subject's true self which links the past and the present and connects the subject with the universe. Nevertheless, one cannot reach pure memory easily, for the subject has to disengage himself or herself to attain the pure memory (Gex, 2010). Also, the role of the past in character building is very significant as Bergson asserts that "the whole of our past psychical life conditions our present state, without being its necessary determinant; whole, also, it reveals itself in our character, although none of its past states manifests itself explicitly in character" (as cited in Tapınç, 2014, p. 168). Accordingly, the subject's relation with the past contributes to the present state of him or her. Those who stick to and constantly visualise their past are 'dreamers' for Bergson, whereas the ones who put the past aside and only prioritize the present are 'conscious automatons' and both cases are not normal (Tapınç, 2014, p. 173). Moreover, over-attachment to the past causes sorrowfulness, thus, affects the subject's psychology negatively (Gex 2010). Bergson's duration theory can also be seen as a defiance against the American dream. Messner and Rosenfeld (20013) define the term as follows; "the American Dream refers to a commitment to the goal of material success, to be pursued by everyone in society, under conditions of open, individual competition." (p. 71). It can be understood from their definition that it is a way of progressing towards a brighter future thanks to the hard work in the present no matter how unfortunate the past is. In other words, the American Dream suggests a linear time strictly divided into phases, which

is unacceptable for Bergson. The great works of the American drama mirror Bergson's theory of time through 'dreamer' characters who combine the past and the present with their memories.

3. Time in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*: Combining The Past and The Present

Eugene O'Neill's autobiographical work "*Long Day's Journey Into Night*" demonstrates many aspects of Bergson's duration theory through the character Mary Tyrone. She is the one who brings the past and the present together in the play and even her appearance described in the stage direction reminds the reader of this characteristic of her; "her most appealing quality is the simple, unaffected charm of a shy convent girl youthfulness she has never lost—an innate unworldly innocence" (O'Neill, 1989, p. 13). Similarly, she regularly recalls her old memories throughout the play since she prefers to be occupied with the past. Mary is disturbed by the present because of her loneliness in her family and of the sickness of her son Edmund. In the second act, she tells her husband that "It was never a home. You've always preferred the Club or barroom. And for me it's always been as lonely as a dirty room in a one-night stand hotel." (p. 74). To cope with this feeling of isolation, Mary remembers her good old days when she lived with her parents and had dreams about becoming a nun, or a pianist. However, as she focuses on her past too much, she inevitably resurfaces her disturbing memories, too. Especially the foghorn and her old hands emerge in the play as the reminders of the past; "It's the foghorn I hate. It won't let you alone. It keeps reminding you, and warning you, and calling you back", says Mary (p. 101). As for the hands she adds, "they're worse than the foghorn for reminding me—" (p. 106). In addition, Edmund's sickness has an injurious impact on her mental state, and she cannot help recalling the guilt she felt when she bore Edmund in pain after the death of her other son Eugene. She believes that Edmund's current illness is the punishment of her past mistakes; "I swore after Eugene died I would never have another baby. I was to blame for his death." says her to her husband (p. 90). These words reflect Bergson's duration theory in two ways: Firstly, the idea of punishment shows how the past controls the present state of the subject. Secondly, by mentioning Eugene, she tries to keep him alive at least in her mind, thus, the past is connected to the present. At the end of the play, the past becomes more than just recalled memories and co-exists with the present when Mary totally goes back to her youth under the effect of morphine. After a very long journey from present to past, and vice versa, Mary becomes a girl in the convent again and "experience seems ironed out of" her behaviour (p. 173). As she is so obsessed with the past, she is a 'dreamer' from the Bergsonian perspective. Above all, she sums up Bergson's "duration theory" with the following words; "the past is the present, isn't it? It's the future, too. We all try to lie out of that but life won't let us" (p. 90). As is seen, Mary repudiates the linearity of time and she connects the past with the present and the future through her words as well as through recalling her memories and demonstrating their effects on her present condition.

4. Time in *Death of a Salesman*: Living in the Past

Another masterpiece of American drama which includes Bergson's ideas on time is Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. The protagonist Willy Loman is an exhausted man who has worked throughout his life to bring home the bacon. Due to his exhaustion, Willy cannot differentiate the past from the present. Especially when he is stressed and nervous, he loses his connection with the present and he suddenly turns back to the crucial moments in his past. At the beginning of the play, Willy mentions his abrupt transition from the present to the past which occurred while he was driving his car; "I opened the windshield and just let the warm air bathe over me. And then all of a sudden I'm goin' off the road! I'm tellin'ya, I absolutely forgot I was driving. If I'd've gone the other way over the white line I might've killed somebody. So I went on again — and five minutes later I'm dreamin' again" (Miller, 1961, p. 9). The reason why he experiences such changes is that he is disappointed with the present conditions, just like Mary Tyrone, as he is unsuccessful not only in his work but also in his relationship with his sons. These problems disturb his perception of the present and he unconsciously recalls his memories. In this respect, he combines today and yesterday unwillingly. The dialogue between him and his neighbour Charley exemplifies this overlapping of the past and the present. While they are playing a game, his dead brother Ben comes to his mind, and also to the stage as a character, and Willy responds him too as if he were present with them;

BEN: I must make a tram, William. There are several properties I'm looking at in Alaska.
 WILLY: Sure, sure! If I'd gone with him to Alaska that time, everything would've been totally different.
 CHARLEY: Go on, you'd froze to death up there.
 WILLY: What're you talking about?
 BEN: Opportunity is tremendous in Alaska, William. Surprised you're not up there.
 WILLY: Sure, tremendous.
 CHARLEY: Heh?
 WILLY: There was the only man I ever met who knew the answers.
 CHARLEY: Who? (p. 35)

This scene is a demonstration of Bergson's argument that there is no distinction between the past and the present. The wholeness of time is repeated throughout the play. For instance, Ben reappears when Willy's boss Howard rejects his proposal to work in New York. He unintentionally asks Ben, "Oh Ben, How did you do it? What's the answer?" (p. 66); thus, he tries to find a solution for his troublesome present in his past. His search supports Bergson's claim that past is influential on present. Later, his conversation with Ben turns into a full memory from his past when Ben visited the Lomans and proposed Willy to go with him to Alaska. Willy, who didn't accept his brother's proposal because of his wife Linda's rejection, still regrets his decision to stay in New York and continue his job. Therefore, he keeps recalling his moments with Ben whenever his present upsets him. Here, it is possible to find another connection between Mary Tyrone and Willy since both of them take refuge in their memories. Although both of them are 'dreamers', their relation with the past is different. As Mary willingly remembers the old times, Willy unconsciously brings the events and the characters in his past to the present.

5. Time in *Death of a Salesman*: Living in the Past

Finally, Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, too, can be analysed in terms of Bergson's theory. Unlike the other plays analysed above, this play has a narrator who portrays his past to the reader and the audience. Tom Wingfield, the narrator, states at the beginning of the play that "I turn back time. I reverse it to that quaint period, the thirties, when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind." (Williams, 2011, p. 58). He also emphasises the importance of the past in his play by saying that "the play is memory" (p. 59). Indeed, the past experiences of Tom with his family dominate his present state and Tom's narration clearly demonstrates this situation. Narrating his memories and giving some information in between them, Tom displays forward and backward transition of a subject in time. In this respect, it can be said that the play itself is formed in accordance with 'duration' in which the past, the present and the future exist synchronically. Moreover, *The Glass Menagerie* embraces another Bergsonian idea; the subjectivity of temporal experience. Tom, his mother Amanda and his sister Laura live together in the same apartment and they share same moments, but the way how they perceive those moments are different. As for Amanda, almost everything that surrounds her in the present awakens her own memories. For instance, her plan to find a gentleman caller for Laura reminds her of the suitors she had in her girlhood as she says, "One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain — your mother received — seventeen! — gentlemen callers! Why, sometimes there weren't chairs enough to accommodate them all. We had to send the nigger over to bring in folding chairs from the parish house" (p. 61). Still, her recalling the good old days in Blue Mountain very frequently does not prevent her from neglecting neither the present nor the past. She is worried about Laura's being lonely, so she asks Tom to bring one of his friends to dinner (p. 87). She also has some concerns about future. When she learns that Laura quits Rubicam's Business College, Amanda utters her concern; "What are we going to do, what is going to become of us, what is the future?" (p. 66) On the contrary, Tom as a character in the play focuses on the future and he tries to detach himself from the present as much as he can. Living with his mother and working in a company he hates, he is not happy with the present, so he dreams about tomorrow in order to escape from the present. He mentions this situation to Jim by saying that "I'm right at the point of committing myself to a future that doesn't include the warehouse and Mr. Mendoza or even a night-school course in public speaking" (p. 111) However, when his narratorship is taken into consideration, it is seen that no matter how he tries to ignore it, the past is with him in his present. His last words in the play reveal the impact of his past on his life;

I pass the lighted window of a shop where perfume is sold. The window is filled with pieces of colored glass, tiny transparent bottles in delicate colors, like bits of a shattered rainbow. Then all at once my

sister touches my shoulder. I turn around and look into her eyes. Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! (p. 145-146)

Just like Tom, Laura is under the influence of her memories. Especially one of them, which is about her high school days, affects her social relationships negatively. She believed that other students despised her because of her crippled leg and as Lauren Moore states that "this memory develops an inflated importance in her mind, and eventually becomes such a formative memory that it virtually destroys her self-esteem and renders her stagnant in the present." (Moore, 2013, p. 3). In this respect, Tom and Laura also demonstrate how the past regulates a subject's present situation.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the traditional concept of time has been altered by the French philosopher Henri Bergson who rejected the linearity of time and the continuation of the past, the present and the future. According to Bergson, the past, the present and the future cannot be separated as they are interwoven. Also, the past has a great impact on the present condition of people their memories and experiences shape their present. Since every person has a different background and a different past, each individual experiences time in his pr her own unique way. Bergson's groundbreaking theories on time were very influential on both people and the literary works of the first half of the twentieth century. The American playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams reflect Bergson's ideas in their works not only through their characters' subjective relation with time but also through combining the past and the present in their plays. In these works, it is also possible to find some 'dreamer' characters who are living in the past. Furthermore, none of the characters in these plays are able to achieve the American Dream since their time is 'duration' which integrates the past, present and future instead of the clock time which is a misleading linear construct.

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