

The Psychological Labyrinth of Alienation and Loneliness: An Analysis of the Social Critique of the Drama *The Insanity*

Ruiyan Wang*

Liberal Arts Colleges, Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

Abstract. Alienation and loneliness in modern society have received widespread attention, but existing research has mostly focused on a single psychological or sociological level, and there is still a lack of systematic exploration of the interplay between dramatic works and social critique. This essay takes the play *The Insanity* as the research object, and analyzes the symbolism of multiple personalities, the narrative function of closed space, and the directing technique in the play from the theoretical basis of alienation and loneliness. The analysis shows that the drama deconstructs the boundary between "normal" and "madness" through absurdity, criticizes the hypocritical interpersonal relationship in modern society, satirizes group loneliness through black humor, and suggests the possibility of self-redemption for individuals after facing the predicament of alienation with the ending of personality fusion. The ending with the fusion of personalities suggests the possibility of self-redemption after facing the predicament of alienation. Based on this, this essay proposes that future artistic creations should explore psychological complexity in greater depth, link artistic methods to social reality, and promote public reflection on self-identity and social belonging in a diversified form.

1 Introduction

In contemporary society, where urbanization and modernization are advancing rapidly, alienation and loneliness have gradually become psychological syndromes that modern people can hardly avoid. The concept of alienation was first derived from the Latin *alienatio*, which was gradually developed in modern Western philosophy since the Renaissance, meaning division, estrangement, opposition, etc. [1]. With the progress and development of modern society, alienation has come to be understood as the alienation of the individual from his or her relationship with self and others in modern society, or Erich Fromm's theory of alienation. According to him, alienation is not only an economic phenomenon, but also a psychological and cultural phenomenon, in which the individual feels separated from his inner nature and is unable to truly understand and realize himself, and at the social level feels separated from others, the community and society and lacks a true sense of belonging and identity. At the same time, despite the objective increase in human social power and

* Corresponding author: wangruiyan67@gmail.com

interdependence, the virtualization of social media and the utilitarianism of interpersonal relationships further exacerbate the spread of powerlessness and loneliness [2]. This social background provides a new research direction for literature and artistic creation, and the drama *The Insanity* precisely faces the spiritual dilemma of modern people and becomes a typical text for analyzing alienation and loneliness.

Through simple but exaggerated stage design and performance of the actors, the play profoundly reveals the theme of alienation and loneliness in modern society. It uses the closed space of a mental hospital as a metaphor to develop a sharp deconstruction of the structure of modern society. The schizophrenic personality symptoms of Icy, the main character of the play, are both a visualization of psychological defense mechanisms and an allusion to the alienated state of different social classes. Existing studies mostly start from the psychological perspective of split personality or the structure of suspenseful narratives, but there is still a lack of systematic exploration of how the drama reveals the deep connection between alienation and loneliness through the linkage of stage art, characterization, and social critique. This essay aims to analyze the symbolism of multiple personalities and the narrative function of closed space in the play, to reveal how alienation spreads from individual psychology to social structure, to explore how the drama deconstructs the boundary between "normal" and "madness" by means of absurdity, and to criticize the hypocritical interpersonal relationship in modern society, and promotes more reflection on issues such as mental health and social belonging.

2 Individual alienation and inner loneliness behind the role

In drama performance, language is used in the process of performing stage actions that correspond positively to the control of mental rhythms, which is a positive style technique that combines mental rhythms with stage actions. Adopting this technique requires the actor to have a high degree of consistency in mental rhythm with the performance behavior [3]. The subject matter of a drama such as *The Insanity*, which revolves around the subjective psychological activities of people, requires a high degree of psychological pacing for each actor's character. In the play, they emphasize that they are normal people; they are all independent individuals, each of them has a separate background and personality, so they need to find ways to prove that they are normal. And in the process of proving it, it gradually exposes the director's design of alienation and loneliness within each character.

2.1 Conscious loneliness in dissociative identity disorder

The conflicting nature of multiple identities in the drama demonstrates the deep loneliness of the protagonist due to social alienation and emotional absence. The heroine Icy's different personalities are full of conflict and non-integration, and each of them is suspicious of the others, persecuting and isolating others, and gradually revealing the alienated state of human nature's "evil" in the process of being isolated. Each of these personalities corresponds to a key person at different stages of her life - the doctor who buys her gifts, the girlfriends with whom she shares her happiness, etc. It is the longing for affection or the lack of love in social interaction that causes Icy to split into the remaining six personalities to alleviate the loneliness of the individual's sense of self-consciousness. The imbalance of the personalities, fueled by long-suppressed desires, leads to the creation of other personalities to alleviate the lack of emotion. The split and antagonism between her personalities exacerbate her self-alienation in the internalization of her personality, as Icy states, "They're the only ones who are there for me, and if they die, what's the point even if I become normal." This ambivalence reveals the subject's existential dilemma of relying on illusory relationships to escape reality,

and the existence of a split personality is both a psychological defense mechanism and a metaphor for social alienation [4].

2.2 Conscious belonging in personality coexistence

The coexistence of split personalities, though illusory, provides Icy with a brief moment of emotional belonging and security. Though the squabbling of the other six personalities throws Icy into turmoil, as the master personality, she always acquiesces to their existence. From a medical perspective, people with schizophrenia are negatively affected and develop a sense of shame due to social rejection, which leads to escapism [5]. In this drama, Icy's dependence on her split personality is a form of self-protection, and by constructing an illusory network of people, she can maintain her sense of belonging in the closed space of the mental hospital. The "companionship" of the split personality ostensibly compensates for Icy's need for social relationships, but it is essentially a substitute for social relationships. This deformed sense of belonging not only reflects the loner's desire for interpersonal connection but also exposes the fragility of real emotional ties in modern society.

2.3 Self-redemption in personality disputes

The conflicts and sacrifices between the personalities eventually push Icy to face her true self and complete her psychological redemption. In the process of other personality quarrels, Icy is very painful, for her other six personalities do not get along with each other harmoniously, so that she is always in a chaotic scene. From God's perspective, this is an unavoidable part of treating mental illness, and during the course of treatment, the six-personality bickering gradually dismantles Icy's inner psychological defenses. Through the hospital director's interrogation and the revelation of memories, the "evil" of the split personalities is completely exposed, forcing Icy to admit that "you've all changed". This twist marks the apex of alienation - the distortion of personality under social pressure. However, the director does not stop at criticizing; the sacrifice of the six personalities fulfills Icy's return, helping her to be her original self and leave the madhouse. In the ending, the "goodness" of the fusion of personalities and Icy's monologue "I'm crazy" dissolve the boundary between "normal" and "crazy", suggesting that the only way to achieve self-redemption is to accept alienation and loneliness.

2.4 Etiology and group symbolization

Through the symbolization of "mental patient", the director sublimates the individual causes of illness into a collective criticism of social alienation, attributing the tragedy of the characters to loneliness, lack, psychological trauma, etc. These causes of illness become the symbols of the film, and the exploration and recourse to the causes of illness are directly elevated to the theme of the film. In the drama, each of Icy's personalities is given the symbolism of social class, and the etiology of her schizophrenia is blamed on social alienation and group loneliness. Each of Icy's personalities is a true expression of her inner longing. To attribute the cause of her schizophrenia to socially induced alienation and isolation is to symbolize the cause of the illness. As the other personalities say to Icy, "While you abandoned us, you were banished from yourself", which insinuates that the main personality is already potentially acquiescing to the loneliness that arises from being eliminated from society for his reasons. So here she will appear to subconsciously imply that she is no longer accepted by mainstream society, the group that, from its initial innocence and goodness, is gradually cloaked in a mask of selfishness and hypocrisy.

3 Stage performance and directing techniques

3.1 Stage design: narrative techniques in confined spaces

The *Insanity* was produced in two separate versions, a drama and a movie. Susan Sontag mentioned that "if there is a certain simplest difference between film and drama, it is the difference in the way they utilize space" [6]. The movie takes those scenes from the drama, as well as the costumes, props, lines, and other things, and makes them more vivid, while the drama makes them as vivid as possible. Because it is subject to the integrated nature of the location, the drama fully maximizes the spatiality and integration, and the content is more lyrical and expressed by the actors with their emotions rather than through the scene.

In contrast, the three-surrounded spatial set realized in the theatrical version of *The Insanity* is more powerful. The auditorium is completely integrated with the stage and is made into a confined space. The confined space is easy to focus the audience's attention, creating a subtle change between the audience and the stage, so that the audience can feel the oppressive feeling of the madhouse that comes to them as soon as they enter the theater. It also corresponds at the same time to the heroine's closed and dark inner world outside society [7]. In such a closed space, all the actions and character activities are concentrated together, and friction and conflict will inevitably arise between the characters, which directly brings countless possibilities of generating dramatic conflicts. At the same time, the recurrence of the six personalities, their departure, and change of dominance is a cyclical process. The heroine has been experiencing such a world during her treatment. The "mental hospital" is a microcosm of a cruel society, and the heroine is unable to face her true self during her growing-up process, which leads to alienation and loneliness, and she imprisons herself, but ultimately, she has to face the real human nature.

The stage design with height difference allows the actors to express their emotions with more richness and tension. For example, speeches by journalists or the subsequent rotation of a few figures occupying leadership positions in the wards up the stairs to demonstrate "high authority"; The overall dark color scheme, the design of the stage and even the barbed wire around the auditorium, as well as the final curtain call of the actors behind the barbed wire, all contribute to the closed and depressing atmosphere.

Based on the space of the small theater stage, *The Insanity* doesn't take the banal, funny, and hilarious as its selling point, but rather takes a very bland attitude and pushes the story forward layer by layer. As an example of a brain-burning, suspenseful psychological drama, it doesn't pretend to be anything other than what it is, but rather slowly displays the plot to the audience with the help of the actors' close-range, layer-by-layer unfolding of their acting skills. This may be the real charm of drama - let the complexity of human nature up close and personal, so that the showy choreography of the stage set up to hide behind, through the audience and the actors of the distance-free mingling, return to the drama to highlight the essence of the core of the human being.

3.2 Directing technique: psychological externalization of characters in scene dispatch

As the public knows, stage drama is "zero focus" because it cannot easily dominate the audience's focus through scene switching and camera expression as in movies. So, to break the monotony of a single space, the drama can only highlight the sense of alienation and loneliness of the subject's position through the hints of light and music and the exaggerated performance of the actors [8].

As a drama with psychological themes, the director of *The Insanity* breaks through the traditional realism mode in terms of scenes, and makes a lot of use of symbols and metaphors

to pursue the externalized and subconscious expression of the human inner world. The director firstly gives hints from the aspect of clothing, the characters look unified outside the psychiatric hospital gown, but inside, different shirts, T-shirts, and so on, all enhance the characters with occupation as the core of the recognition. This both distinguishes the characteristics of the different personalities and, amid the confusion, maintains the only veneer of "sameness" that emphasizes that this is the spiritual world of the same person. In terms of stage scheduling, the first half of the drama focuses the lights on one individual, with the others fixed and immobile. And while one of them narrates, the rest of the cast begins to stage a dispatch, smoothly transitioning and connecting from scene to scene. There is also the background sound of the characters' noisy language in the darkness in the opening scene, after which there is only the sound of water dripping from the faucet in the ward, which renders the silence before the absurdity and suspense. From the city to the ward, the heroine completes a transformation from the "outside" to the "inside", leaving behind the spiritual world of a single "human being".

The director uses this approach to externalize the inner activities, unlike the usual form of character monologue. Since this play chose to materialize the non-existent personality from the very beginning, the different voices of the inner monologue can be told using materialized character actors, breaking the conventional way of presentation and visualizing the psychological activities on the stage. The director highlights the alienation and loneliness of the characters through the contrast between collective performances and individual monologues. In the collective scenes, the characters appear out of place and isolated despite being in the same space, while in the individual monologues, the characters face the audience head-on, revealing their inner loneliness and struggles.

4 Plot structure and social criticism

4.1 The use of suspense and reversal

The *Insanity* is similar to *'Identity'* and *'Mad Detective'*, which use multiple personalities as the entry point of the story, in terms of plot structure. They are all based on the treatment of schizophrenic patients' mental illnesses as the main line, firstly unfolding with the stories of seemingly unrelated strangers, gradually finding common ground in the contradictions and conflicts, and finally revealing the truth of "schizophrenia" [9]. And this type of suspense is set up in a way that the most unassuming character in the general beginning is often the protagonist of this type of work, a setup and reversal that will bring the drama to a climax, accompanied by the end.

The play centers around the question of "who is the madman?", which drives the audience into the play, but the beginning of the play already sets the stage, as there is only one pill and only one hospital bed - suggesting that there is only one person in the room from the beginning to the end of the drama. Compared to *Identity*, this play's reversal, though clever, is not as impactful as the other works. Perhaps it's the limitations of the theater stage, but setting the "madmen" in a "madhouse" at the beginning of the play seriously undercuts the level of suspense. Because there is no detail on how the people enter the hospital, the audience has to anticipate the truth when it is revealed, which is a drawback in the plot. The biggest reversal is that the real madhouse is not the ward, but society itself. When Icy yells "I'm crazy", the other personalities disappear, the main suspense is revealed, and the border between normalcy and insanity is completely dissolved, suggesting that every individual is lost in the alienation of society.

4.2 Criticism of social phenomena

The whole process of watching the play is like peeling an onion, each layer of which contains a large number of metaphors and symbols. It can be said that this is a realist drama that satirizes the hypocrisy of the social reality and the degradation of people in society. In reality, people who are too clean and proud of themselves are often respected by the common people, but this drama is going in the opposite direction, under the guise of a "madman", criticizing those who are "practiced in human affairs" and "at ease" in reality. As can be inferred from the actors' lines, the characters represent the financial, judicial, educational, transportation, media, and medical sectors. The director wanted to create a microcosm of society, using humor and witty language to satirize the weaknesses and social phenomena behind each profession. At the end of the drama Icy explains in her monologue that because the archetypes of these characters have all crossed her path in life, those shining human lights in them are the reason why she fantasizes about these out personalities, but what is exposed in the argument is more of their human selfishness, hypocrisy, cruelty, and guile. The sheer contrast between the before and after is where the irony lies.

What the finale's reference to the Bible's "The Scapegoat" is trying to convey is the conflict, loneliness, and attempt at redemption on the part of the multiple personality protagonist and society. The only way Abraham could prove his loyalty to God's faith was to have the determination to sacrifice his youngest son, Isaac. It is a good thing that God did not demand Isaac's sacrifice, but only tested Abraham's resolve, and so the scapegoat ram eventually appeared [10]. The play poetically presents the "scapegoat" episode, in which the six personalities surround Icy, and together they imagine the beach, the cabin, and other scenes from the asylum. It depicts the inner world of Icy after the fusion of personalities, which is peaceful, beautiful, and full of hope. This is the director's other way of resolving "loneliness", and also his beautiful vision of people who enter society again and complete the real liberation in their hearts.

5 Conclusion

Through its complex and varied plot and profound characterization, *The Insanity* skillfully demonstrates the psychological manifestation of individual alienation and loneliness in modern society, which not only reveals the psychological state and inner conflicts of different classes in society, but also reflects the inner struggles of individuals in the face of pressure and loneliness through the multiple personalities of the characters, and compels people to think about interpersonal relationships and self-knowledge in modern society. The absurdity and contradiction of the characters in the play are gradually exposed in the process of proving "normalcy". This is both a critique of utilitarian human relationships and a metaphor for group loneliness. The protagonist's ultimate self-redemption through the fusion of personalities symbolizes the possibility of an individual regaining his or her true nature after confronting the dilemma of alienation. In the future, as the problem of social alienation intensifies, artistic creation will probably explore the complexity of the psyche in greater depth, promote the public's thinking about self-identity and social belonging in more creative forms, and provide more diversified revelations for the spiritual redemption of individuals.

References

1. T. Zhang, K. Liu, Cognitive Alienation: New Alienation of Human-Nature Relationship and Reflection on Its Countermeasures - Based on the Analytical Perspective of Social Acceleration, *J. China Univ. Geosci. (Soc. Sci. Ed.)* **23(06)**, 1 (2023)

2. E. Øversveen, Capitalism and alienation: Towards a Marxist theory of alienation for the 21st century, *Eur. J. Soc. Theory* **25(3)**, 440 (2021)
3. F. Miao, Talking about the combination skill of psychological rhythm and stage action of drama actors--Taking Artemisia in the drama Thunderstorm as an example, *Pop. Lit. Art* **(08)**, 174 (2016)
4. A. Coşman, A. Pană, I. Rădulescu, Interferences between psychology and psychiatry - vulnerability versus mental fragility in schizophrenia and delusional disorder, *J. Educ. Sci. Psychol.* **11(1)**, 178 (2021)
5. Y. Liao, M. Chen, F. Qu, et al., Application of psychological care in schizophrenic patients under role theory, *China Urban Rural Enterp. Health* **39(04)**, 184 (2024)
6. S. Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House (2007)
7. X. Chen, Character Analysis of Domestic Psycho-themed Films under Psychoanalytic Perspective - Taking The Great Hypnotist, The Insanity as an Example, *New Chron.* **(25)**, 55 (2021)
8. Y. Xia, Discussion on the psychological performance of drama actors and the emotional resonance of the audience, *Drama House* **(30)**, 43 (2024)
9. N. Chen, The Insanity - A Unique Interpretation on Split Personality, *Drama House* **(19)**, 117 (2015)
10. Y. Marcus, The Scapegoat Ritual: Between Biblical and Tannaitic Law, *Rev. Rabbinic Judaism* **25(2)**, 195 (2022)