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A Study on the Dramatic  
Features of Neil Simon

## 尼尔·赛门的戏剧特征

杨武道 / 著



北京交通大学出版社  
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## A Study on the Dramatic Features of Neil Simon

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· 北京 ·

## 内 容 简 介

本书以文本细读的方式，从社会历史学的视角，研究了尼尔·赛门的戏剧特征，主要包括其作品的主题、冲突模式，以及作品中人物的犹太身份等问题。最后，本书得出结论：尽管尼尔·赛门的所有戏剧作品均为喜剧，并且大都获得了商业上的极大成功，但这与他在进行作品创作时的严肃态度却不相矛盾。本书拟化身号角，为尼尔·赛门的戏剧严肃性三正其名。

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# 前 言

尼尔·赛门（1927—）不仅是美国商业上最成功的戏剧家，也是普利策戏剧奖、三次托尼奖的获得者，名列美国戏剧名人堂；他还是世界范围内剧本演出次数最多的剧作家之一。

本书以文本细读的方式，从社会历史学的视角，研究了尼尔·赛门的戏剧特征，主要包括其作品的主题、冲突模式，以及作品中人物的犹太身份等问题。最后，本书得出结论：尽管尼尔·赛门的所有戏剧作品均为喜剧，并且大都获得了商业上的极大成功，但这与他在进行作品创作时的严肃态度却不相矛盾。尼尔·赛门笔涉美国当代社会的中心议题、焦点冲突，以犹太裔作家特有的方式，滑稽流走、举重若轻。他在嘻笑谈讽中暗藏悲悯，在癫狂混闹中宣泄愤怒。这种独特的形式与内容的杂糅使得尼尔·赛门为许多如布鲁姆一样以传统眼光看问题的批评家所轻贱，然而却为其他批评家与观众们所喜爱。因此，本书拟化身号角，为尼尔·赛门的戏剧严肃性三正其名。

在尼尔·赛门的剧作中，有三种主题最为常见：美国梦与中产阶级、家庭中的权力与情谊、现代人患得患失的精神状态。

尽管在当时还没有“美国梦”这个词，但美国的先民们一直怀揣这样的梦想：在他们生活的土地上，每个人的生活都会变得更好、更富足、更充实；每个人都有机会发挥自己的能力和取得自己的成就。这不仅仅是一个关于豪车、高薪的梦想，更是一个关于一种社会秩序的想象。在这样的一个社会里，每一个人，不论性别，不论出身贵贱，不论处在社会的哪个阶层，都能够展现自己的天赋，都能够得到承认，实现自我。美国梦绝不仅指物质生活的富足，也包括精神世界的充实。但第二次世界大战后，美国梦却逐渐变质。随着美国在1945年取得全

球性的胜利，美国人开始充分满足其先被 20 世纪 30 年代的经济大萧条、后被世界大战打断的消费需求。基于一个战后重生的世界的需要和各国经济大发展的激励，美国的极速繁荣催生了一个人数庞大、被神圣化了的的中产阶级群体。当桎梏被打破，消费自由真的降临时，他们开始狂热地向自己的“美国梦”冲去：所谓的“美国梦”，这时已经退化为仅有物质层面的中产阶级身份。他们锦衣玉食，宝马轻裘，却目光迷离，心神恍惚。尼尔·赛门的作品《吹响你的号角》《第二大道的囚徒》《俗丽妇人》《最后一个狂恋者》《布莱顿海滩回忆录》《进军百老汇》等都明确地表达了这一主题。

尼尔·赛门剧作的第二大主题是家庭中权力与情谊的博弈。从作为系列剧写手时期开始，他就着力刻画只发生在爱人之间的独特战争，可以说这种争斗构成了他所有剧本的基础。

尼尔·赛门对于两性战争的描述最具特色之处在于他的“战士们”总是势均力敌。与谢泼德、梅米特和华瑟斯廷等不同，尼尔·赛门很少在作品中将力量的天平向任何一方倾斜。他笔下的女人们与男人们一样，时刻准备着战斗，也因为战斗而伤痕累累。他对于两性关系的看法——对面而立，势均力敌，为爱痴狂。

尼尔·赛门还特别擅长描绘的一个主题是人的心理状态的失衡——现代人失去信仰、失去梦想、在一片迷惘中不知何去何从时焦虑的心理状态。《第二大道的囚徒》中的梅尔有偏执倾向，《作家的女人们》中的作家杰克沉浸于幻想，《最后一个狂恋者》中的热奈特抑郁，《俗丽妇人》中的爱薇嗜酒，《他们在播放我们写的歌儿》中的沃能和《我要演电影》中的赫伯都毫无自信，《好医生》中的车德雅科夫反反复复，《广场酒店》中躲在酒店的厕所中不肯参加自己婚礼的梅姆丝对未来充满恐惧，《傻瓜》中的村民们都是傻瓜，……这些人物所代表的现代人都有着这样或那样的心理问题。

从古希腊以米南德为代表的新喜剧开始，喜剧的主要冲突以新旧文化的冲突为主（多为古板守旧的父亲不能接受儿子的爱情的模式）。

尼尔·赛门的第一部戏剧作品《吹响你的号角》中也有这样一个古板守旧的父亲，也有两个与其意见相左的儿子，但在那之后，尼尔·赛门作品的冲突就脱离了这种模式。尼尔·赛门作品中第一种常见的冲突是人物的个性冲突。《赤脚走在公园里》中的小夫妻科蕊和保罗，一个冲动、浪漫，一个谨慎、现实。《古怪的一对儿》中“同居”的奥斯卡与弗莱克斯，一个大大咧咧、不修边幅，一个谨小慎微、细腻敏感。《吹响你的号角》中的哥俩儿艾伦与巴蒂，一个风流不羁，一个羞涩单纯。《最后一个狂恋者》中的主人公巴尼与三个外遇对象在个性上都有较大冲突。《第二章》中的乔治与詹妮一个沉湎过去，一个向往未来。《快乐的伙伴》中的搭档威利与艾尔，一个雄心不老，一个安于现状。每个人物都个性鲜明；鲜明的个性碰撞在一起时每每火花四溅。

尼尔·赛门作品的第二种冲突是多元文化冲突。《星条妞》中的冲突是主流文化与非主流文化的矛盾；《从军布鲁斯》中不同民族文化之间冲突剧烈；《广场酒店》中“好莱坞来客”篇的冲突是以杰西为代表的好莱坞文化与以梅瑞尔为代表的中产阶级的郊区文化的冲突；在《加州旅馆》中的“纽约来客”篇里，哈娜与贝尔的冲突是世故、复杂的纽约客与单纯、直率的加州人之间的冲突。换言之，多元文化冲突是尼尔·赛门剧作中一种常见的冲突。

婚姻中的权力争夺是尼尔·赛门作品中的第三种冲突。尼尔·赛门笔下的主要人物大多是婚姻中的人，所以婚姻中两性有意识或无意识的权力争夺也是其作品中常见的冲突。在亲密关系的浪漫阶段里，为了要维持彼此的关系，婚姻中的两人都会尽量去配合对方的“浪漫”，从对方的信息中捕捉资料。可是浪漫会逐渐与现实生活联系在一起，当两人恋爱进入一定阶段后就会走向婚姻的殿堂。

在婚姻生活里，两人渐渐回到现实中，面对生活的负担。这时他们会失望，会进入权力斗争阶段，意即彼此都期望对方改变而自己不想改变。有权力斗争就会产生冲突与不愉快，甚至产生危机，可是这也可能成为婚姻的一大助力。因为在斗争中，人们会发现，对方在自

己的坚持下有些许的改变，或自己做了某些调适，这样就为两人的关系创造了新的可能。在尼尔·赛门的戏剧中，这种两性之间的权力冲突更多地表现为女性的觉醒，以及为了自我的实现而与其他家庭成员或亲密爱人的博弈：《承诺，承诺》中的弗兰，《广场酒店》中的凯伦，《最后一个狂恋者》中的伊莱娜，《俗丽妇人》中的爱薇，《加州旅馆》中的黛安娜，《第二章》中的菲，《布莱顿海滩回忆录》中的布朗琪，《迷失扬克斯》中的贝拉，以及《作家的女人们》中的麦琪都属于这种敢爱敢斗的女性。经过斗争之后，她们掌握了生活的主动权，或者找到了真爱，或者找到了真相，或者什么都没有找到，只剩一身伤痕，又或者将会一直寻找。但不管怎样，她们都曾经为了自己的幸福努力过，争取过，而不只是被动地等待。

犹太身份在尼尔·赛门的早期作品中内隐，而在他的后期作品中呈显象。这与犹太裔美国人在 20 世纪早期努力融入主流文化，而后期则更为认同自己的文化特色的历史潮流是分不开的。在《吹响你的号角》中，犹太母亲的角色暗藏在内，尽管剧本中明确指出贝克一家并非犹太人，而有洁癖、爱烹饪、善省钱，并且总是摆出一副受难者脸孔的弗莱克斯也如奥斯卡的犹太母亲一般。除此之外，犹太式幽默、犹太倒霉蛋形象、犹太人强烈的家庭观念等犹太身份细节常常在观众看戏或读剧本的每一次凝神时浮现。在他的后期作品中，人物的犹太身份已经毋庸置疑，尼尔·赛门所做的是将这种身份背后隐含的意义挖掘出来，最明显的例子是他在《迷失扬克斯》中对德国纳粹迫害的影射。

尼尔·赛门开始喜剧创作的 20 世纪 60 年代的美国是一个思潮云涌的时代，如存在主义哲学，解构主义理论，民权、女权思想等。这些思潮对当时与之后的很多戏剧作品都有非常明显的影响，如荒诞派戏剧，阿尔比、谢泼德、梅米特、奥古斯都·威尔逊和华瑟斯廷的剧作。这其中的许多作品也都可以被称为喜剧，但这些戏剧的喜剧性却多来自于其内隐的存在主义哲学（荒诞派戏剧与阿尔比的作品）或解构主义理论（谢泼德与梅米特的作品）。存在主义哲学认为，人与世界处

于一种敌对状态，人的存在方式是荒诞的，人被一种无可名状的异己力量所左右，却无力改变自己的处境，人与人、人与世界无法沟通，人在一个毫无意义的世界上存在着。所以，当人们通过包含这种哲学思想的戏剧作品反观自己的存在方式时，会无奈地苦笑。“解构”旨在表明，逻各斯中心化的统一结构本身，就是一个自相矛盾、自我颠覆的悖论之源。解构批评的基本策略是在文本内部抽绎出互不相容的指意取向，将其置于自我背反性的矛盾之中和意义无法确定的两难之境。而就喜剧的对象来看，喜剧性矛盾的基本特征也在于它的自我背反性，由此可以看出解构批评与喜剧之间深刻的内在联系。解构的笑是极富智慧的嘲笑。而尼尔·赛门虽人在此“山”中，却“白云深处有人家”——他的喜剧也受到了这些思潮的影响，但他却淡化了它们形而上的、思辨的部分，代之以具象的、世俗的内容。所以，他的喜剧是大众的，是贴近普通人的，也更符合亚氏对喜剧的最初定义：“喜剧是对于一个可笑的、有缺点的、有相当长度的行动的模仿，用美化的语言，各种美化分别见于剧本的各部分；借人物的动作来直接表达，而不采用叙述来传达；借引起快感与笑来宣泄这些情感。”尼尔·赛门的喜剧更纯粹——看过他的喜剧后，人们的情绪不是苦笑或嘲笑后的更加郁结，而是得到了宣泄。他的喜剧上承古希腊的新喜剧传统，情同契诃夫的悲悯，深植于美国中产阶级的生活。他与同时代喜剧作家的关系相仿 20 世纪初时弗洛斯特之于意象派诗人的关系，即受到同样的思潮影响，却以更传统、更易于接受的方式来表达。

作者

2017 年 11 月



## Preface

As one of the most reliable hitmakers in Broadway history, and also one of the most performed playwrights in the world, Neil Simon became synonymous with popularity and financial success from the mid-sixties to the mid-nineties of the past century. He is also the winner of the Pulitzer Prize and three Tony Awards.

From a social-historical point of view, and with a close reading, the dramatic features of Simon's plays are studied in this book from the respects of his themes, his conflicts, and the Jewish identity shown in his plays. Even though all of Simon's plays are comedies, and most of them have earned him huge amount of money, he does write them sincerely and seriously. He focuses on the central problems and conflicts of the modern American society with hidden or obvious Jewish representations. He sympathizes with his characters and is furious with their living conditions, and the emotion and fury are communicated with hilarious comedy. This idiosyncratic way of presentation is not appreciated by critics with a traditional angle, such as Harold Bloom, but is admired and enjoyed by other critics and the audience.

Most of Simon's plays are about the life of American middle class—their laughter and tears on the road of seeking their American Dreams, their wrestles for love and power in family, and the mental stress they undergo during all this. Their life is a miniature of American society after World War II since the middle class composes the major part of the American population.

Following its global victory in 1945, the United States embarked on fulfilling the consumer expectations that had been suddenly and brutally cut short first by the Great Depression and then by the demands of the global war. Once there was freedom from the deprivations of both circumstances, there ensued a frenzied rush to attain the American Dream: an ensured middle-class status buttressed by material goods and entitled services. Then with a suddenness that was as swift as it was jolting, the nation was besieged by a torrent of economic problems. Across the national landscape tumultuous events one after another—the ongoing Vietnam War, the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and the Watergate scandal—led to an anguished period rivaling any in the century since the 1920s. For those who had envisioned a radically restructured society there was exhaustion, exasperation, and recoil. Under these circumstances, on the road to the American Dream, some felt fulfilled and laughed to themselves; some achieved their aim and only found out that the American Dream had lost its spiritual layer and been on sale in the vanity fair; and for some, it floated into the air and burst like a balloon. The laughter and tears as consequences are one of the subject matters of Simon's plays. *Come Blow Your Horn*, *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, *The Gingerbread Lady*, *The Last of the Red Hot Lovers*, *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, and *Broadway Bound* are all plays conveying the theme.

The second theme of Simon is the love and power relationship in a family. From the beginning of his writing career, Simon has been digging into the war between lovers. Simon's characteristic description of the war shapes brave fighting women. They are crazy for love and are ever ready to fight for their happiness just as their men.

The unbalanced psychological state of modern people is another theme of Simon. They have no belief, no dream, and absolutely no idea

concerning where to go for happiness. Mel in *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* is paranoiac, Jake in *Jake's Women* can only go on with his life in imagination, Jeanette in *The Last of the Red Hot Lovers* is deeply depressed, Evy in *The Gingerbread Lady* is an alcoholic, Vernon and Herb in *They are Playing Our Song* and *I Ought to Be in Pictures* have no self-confidence at all, Cherdyakov in *Good Doctors* is hesitant, Mimsey in *Plaza Suite* is fearful, and the villagers in *Fools* are fools. People represented by them all have their own mental problems.

Since Menander's New Comedy tradition, the main conflicts of comedy are from the contradiction of the new and old cultures, exemplified by the stubborn father's disapproval of his son's or daughter's marriage. The first play of Simon, *Come Blow Your Horn*, has the same conflict. However, after that, Simon's works are different. Conflicts derived from contradictory personalities as in *The Odd Couple*, from prejudice among plural cultures as in *Biloxi Blues*, and from the entanglement between love and power in a family as in *Lost in Yonkers*.

The Jewish identity of Simon's characters is underlain in his early plays and presented more explicitly in the later ones. This process corresponds to the general course of Jewish Americans' earlier identification with the dominant culture (WASPs) and later rejection of assimilation. For example, in *Come Blow Your Horn*, the Bakers are denied of their Jewish identity, but the mother's extreme love for cleanliness, cooking, and stinginess resonates with a stereotypical Jewish mother. After his autobiographical trilogy, however, Simon depicts the Jewish families openly.

While Simon is writing his plays, there is a climax of the development of many philosophical thoughts and theories like existentialism, deconstructionism, and feminism. The thoughts and theories have an obvious impact on many theatre experiments with Theatre of the Absurd

and Feminist drama as examples. Simon's plays are different. They are extremely funny and they contain no metaphysical or intellectual speculation. They belong to the most common middle class Americans. Simon connects with them through his plays and supplies them with a lot of laugh and some hope.

This book is a close reading of these dramatic features of Simon, and how his dramatic features relate to the distinguished culture then. The first chapter is an introduction. The second, third, and fourth chapter are about the themes, conflicts, and identity issues of Simon's works respectively. The conclusion is that Neil Simon, the most celebrated comedy writer in American literary history, has his distinctive dramatic features and is very serious with his plays. This book serves as a horn-blowing for Simon.

**The Author**

2017-11

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# 1

## Chapter 1

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### Introduction

[Chekhov] talked about the theme of his life's work. He said it was just trying to show people how absurdly they live their lives. That is what I try to do. I do it through the medium of comedy, but I don't do it just to evoke a laugh from an audience. I do it also to show them how absurdly we all live our lives.

—Neil Simon

In February 1991, as *Lost in Yonkers* was about to open in New York, Neil Simon said to Critic David Richards, "I'm telling you now, John Guare is going to win the Pulitzer Prize. Even if my play is successful, I will never win the Pulitzer. There are regional theaters that won't do my work just because I'm Neil Simon."

Two months later *Lost in Yonkers* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama over Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation* and *Prelude to a Kiss* by Craig Lucas. In reporting the drama jury's recommendations to the Pulitzer Advisory



Board, Douglas Watt spoke for his four colleagues when he wrote that *Lost in Yonkers* was the only play nominated by all five, and that they judged it “a mature work by an enduring (and often undervalued) American playwright” (Konas, 1997)<sup>1</sup>.

To be sure, “mature,” “enduring,” and “American” all apply to Simon, but “undervalued” is the key word. As most of the comedy writers in literary history, Simon has been undervalued as a serious dramatist. It is natural, though, to doubt whether a writer who has enjoyed so much commercial success could really be a world-class one. We should realize, however, that enduring quality need not be incompatible with popularity.

Simon is a most pragmatic artist. He once said, “Every time I come up with a philosophy of life, I find that my circumstances in life change and I have to come up with a new philosophy. Therefore, I have decided to drop the philosophy and to continue with my life” (Moorhead, 1988). This statement is typical of Simon. His characters, too, tend to “drop the philosophy” and continue with their lives, finding ways to adapt to difficult conditions. Instead of wallowing in existential angst, they choose to move on.

## 1.1 A Brief Biography

Born in the Bronx on July 4, 1927, Marvin Neil Simon grew up in Manhattan and for a short time attended New York University and the University of Denver.

He was thrown out of movie theaters for laughing too loud when he was a young boy. Simon's early years were unhappy ones, though. He had to live through the traumatic experience of seeing his father walk out on the rest of the family not just once, but several times. Undoubtedly these crises nurtured Simon's strong belief, stressed in many of his plays, in the primary



importance of marriage and the family unit.

His first goal as a playwright was “to make a whole audience fall onto the floor, writhing and laughing so hard that some of them pass out” (Johnson, 1983)<sup>1</sup>.

His most significant writing job came in the early 1950s when he joined the staff of *Your Show of Shows*, a landmark live television comedy series. Sid Caesar’s hilariously cutting-edge program had some of the best comic minds in television working for it, including Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, Larry Gelbart, and Carl Reiner. “I knew,” said Simon, “when I walked into *Your Show of Shows*, that this was the most talented group of writers that up until that time had ever been assembled together” (Simon, 1996)<sup>58</sup>. By the 1960s, Simon had begun to concentrate on writing plays for Broadway. His first hit came in 1961 with *Come Blow Your Horn*, which opened at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre, where it ran for 678 performances. Six weeks after its closing, his second production, the musical *Little Me* opened to mixed reviews. Although it failed to attract a large audience, it earned Simon his first Tony Award nomination. Overall, he has garnered seventeen Tony Award nominations and won three.

In 1966 Simon had four shows running on Broadway at the same time: *Sweet Charity*, *Star Spangled Girl*, *The Odd Couple*, and *Barefoot in the Park*. He won the Sam S. Shubert Award for 1967-1968 and then produced *Plaza Suite* followed by *Last of the Red Hot Lovers* in 1969. These last two plays are more philosophical as compared to Simon’s previous works. Following his new inclination, he wrote *The Gingerbread Lady*, depicting a recovering alcoholic who falls weak and returns to her old habits.

The years from 1971 to 1977 were very productive for Simon, beginning with *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, which “shows Simon’s deep concern for the growing indifference in modern society” (Geitner, 1981)<sup>258</sup>.

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