
TRENDS IN AMERICAN DRAMA
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Abstract: The dramatic history of the United States is in many respects, even briefer than the history of the youthful nation itself. With appropriate respect for the few significant plays produced between the late 18th and early 20th centuries, American Drama can accurately be said to have originated with the emergence of Eugene O'Neill, less than ninety years ago. The twentieth-century American dramatic canon begins with Eugene O'Neill and continues as a straight line through his "heirs," including Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller, Lillian Hellman, etc. Despite the enormous number of plays, pageants, burlesques, theatrical entertainments, and minstrel shows that have enlivened the American stage from the beginning, the traditionally constituted canon of American drama, a very small body of plays, proves to be a perpetually shifting conflation of American essentialism and an accurate reflector of what was transpiring in dramatic literature.

To understand the evolution of American Drama it is essential to divide it into different phases. In the years before World War-I the Little Theatre Movement gave rise to a generation of American playwrights who experimented with European regionalism showing resistance to new forms and literary culture. Clyde Fitch was one of the most popular playwrights in American history who experimented on Comedy of Manners. His plays like 'The Girl with the Green Eyes' (1902) and 'The Woman in Case' (1905) were episodic dramas of vice, blackmail and violence with happy endings. His plays explored the urban life, the pathologies of modern culture and the new social structure of the industrializing age. The melodramas of Edward Sheldon are more explicitly ideological, exploring urban life, corruption and racism. His famous plays are 'Salvation Nell' and 'The Nigger' that combine melodrama and social critique. 'The Boss' is Sheldon's realistic melodrama portraying the rising power of ethnic 'bosses' in Eastern cities and recalls the period of widespread labor movement that happened during the turn of the century.. David Belasco was an innovative dramatist of the nineties whose 'Madame Butterfly' and 'The Darling of the Gods' are romantic melodramas. Rachel Crothers's 'First success' was the frontier melodrama. His other plays were 'A Man's World' and 'He and She'. 'He and She' is a realist drama of the middle-class life in the U.S, is similar to the work of Ibsen and Chekhov, however the play was not very popular as during the 1920s a new form of drama had emerged in the US. The modern drama was ushered in by Eugene O' Neill's Expressionist phenomenon, 'The Hairy Ape' the exemplar of American expressionism, the country's first modern drama. Expressionism in the theatre or visual art is generally defined as the external manifestation of an internal condition. It was derived from the German Playwright who borrowed it from painting. American playwrights working in the expressionistic mode were largely responsible for establishing a space in America for dramatic modernism. . These playwrights

attempted to reject representation of the surface reality in favour of a depiction of inner, subjective states of emotion and experience. Music and sound effects helped communicate the varying emotional states of the plays' characters. In the field of expressionistic drama O'Neill became the representative of almost all of the European trends like the domesticated Greek classical tragedies, Strindbergian domestic dramas, Ibsenesque social plays, Irish dramatic tone poems and expressionist melodramas. O'Neill's 'Emperor Jones', 'The Hairy Ape' , 'All God's Chillun Got Wings' and 'Desire Under the Elms' are some of his famous American tragedies exemplifying the way in which theatre so often is invoked by characters both as an image and as a fact from reality. Everything about the 'The Hairy Ape'- the heavy dialects, the filth of the stokehold, the whiteness of Mildred's dress, the brutal strength of the gorilla , support Yank's subjective view of the world as a dangerous place. Through the contrast of Mildred and Yank, O'Neill demonstrated the problems created by the class system in the lives of both the working class and the leisure class. O'Neill's interests are emotional, even spiritual and less political. 'The Hairy Ape' combines social problems, recognizable human beings, a search for truth and theatrical poetry. The basic formula for American expressionism was then explored successfully by other plays like 'The Adding Machine' by Elmer Rice. 'Zero' is Rice's modern American Everyman: "A waste product . . . the animal's instinct, but none of his strength and skill" (138). John Howard Lawson's 'Roger Bloomer' an expressionist play of psychology and masculinity, likewise examines modern American ruthless underbelly. American expressionism was not estranged from the real world; its goal was to be immersed so deeply in the problems of modernity that it could transcend the mask of physical reality. During the Harlem Renaissance, the new forms of drama were added, including those based on social issues such as birth control and lynching and plays dealing with history. Harlem

Renaissance drama was written by playwrights under extensive pressure to provide full bodied portrayals of black life to black and white audiences. During Harlem Renaissance – the most well-known pageant from the pre-renaissance period such as ‘The Star of Ethiopia’ written by Du Bois was presented. A precursor to Black Nationalist Movement, Ethiopianism looked to Africa for cultural roots and to Christianity for a connection between African Americans and African. The use of the folk play emerged from the larger America folk drama movement. Willis Richardson’s four plays – ‘The Chip Woman’s Fortune’, ‘The Broken Banjo’ (1925), ‘Compromise’ (1925) and ‘The IdleHead’ (1929) are based on black folk drama. The social issue plays of the Harlem Renaissance dramatize debates and protests generated in the African American community. Generally the plays portrayed the ill effects of poverty of the working class, the rural people and the problems of racism. Popular plays of Harlem Renaissance were Williams Richardson’s – ‘The Deacon’s awakening’ (1920), ‘A pillar of the Church’ (1929) and ‘The Peacock’s Feather’ (1925), Mary Burril’s ‘They that Sit in Darkness’ and ‘Aftermath’; Myrtle Smith Livingston’s ‘For Unborn Children’ (1926) and Lorraine Hansberry’s ‘A Raisin in the Sun’ (1959). American modernism started at the turn of the century and rose to prominence during mid-century (1910-1945). The American playwrights sought to overturn 19th century’s formal constraints, victorian melodramas and outdated styles of performance. They started examining human relationships with ruthless candor. Inspired by Strindberg’s theatre of psychological nuance and dream-like symbolism, O’Neill and other playwrights forged a new kind of drama. O’Neill’s plays focused on human relations, a commitment to deeply personal and emotional experiences, reflecting an emergent urban life. ‘The Emperor Jones’ by O’Neill is the first foray into expressionistic drama which traced the mental deterioration of Brutus Jones. ‘The Hairy Ape’ is a beautiful blend of expressionism and naturalism which echoes yank’s existential question, “Where do I fit in? that runs like a motif in his play. ‘Desire under the Elms’ also explores the extremity of passion, sin and redemption. In ‘The Iceman Cometh’ the large cast of characters creates a complex relationship that makes it very poignant. ‘The Long Day’s Journey into the Night’ is a melodrama in Nietzschean fashion which leaves us in a tragic world that can be endured but never overcome. In 1950s Miller’s plays projected the individual’s relationship with the self and the society. His famous plays were ‘All my Sons’, ‘The Death of a Salesman’, ‘A View from the Bridge’, ‘After the Fall’. During 1960s Tennessee Williams wrote plays which juxtaposed the

expressionistic convention with those of realism in more startling ways than was ever done before. With the 1960s the playwrights changed their perspective on familiar subjects; they began to view honesty in politics, good race relations and traditional family roles with increasing cynicism. Plays became satirical in nature. Three playwrights influenced the development of theatre and drama. Alan Kaprow, Michael Kirby and Richard Koslelanetz. Kaprow introduced the concept of the “happening”, Kirby examined the influence of surrealism while Kostelanetz synthesized experimental theatre. The 1960s also featured many experimental theatre pieces including adaptations of classical works. In 1960s the most famous American playwright was Edward Albee whose ‘The Zoo’ and ‘Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf’ that presented the anxieties of the modern world in the hybrid form of realism and expressionism. Albee’s America provides the context in which the contradiction between absurdism and the urge towards narrative revelation are juxtaposed together. The closing decade of the century changed the dramatic trend from serious plays to the musical renderings, big-cast full-orchestra with audiences not only from New York but also from the city’s thriving tourists. There were revival of plays of Williams, Miller and Albee. Cambridge American Repertory Theatre, Chicago’s Goodman Theatre, Yale Repertory and an array of regional theatres across the country became the players in a thriving national theatre. Reviewing the different phases of its development it is clear that American drama has always mirrored the American social, political, and historical issues in traditional as well as challenging forms and experimental styles. It has been the forum for a plurality of American voices. As a reflexive cultural barometer, American drama has always responded to national and regional problems. In the American context ‘Dream’ which is the traditional form of quest for a lost Eden has special significance. It is “strive for the security here and now in the current terms that are assumed to provide it: money, property, things, pleasures (Heilman) The American dream was the other name for pursuit of success which was a search for new frontiers in terms of experiences and adventures. American drama depicts such a quest that led more towards despair rather than hope. Almost all of the 20th century American literature portrays this negative aspect of the dream, born of disillusionment and dissatisfaction with lofty ideals inherent in the American dream. George O’Neil’s “American Dream” is a metaphor of the American Adams’ hopeless quest for Paradise. A similar quest is shown in Robert Sherwood’s “The Petrified Forest”. Alan Squires’ disappointment with Europe brings him to the place of his longing and his search for an

Eldorado in the heart of America brings him to the Petrified Forest, a wasteland which is a scene of greed, brutality and murder. Clifford Odets' character engages in a quest for paradise which is identical with economic success of the former plays and the elusive happiness of the later plays. The characters in "Waiting for Lofty", "Awake and Sing", "Paradise Lost" seek a paradise which is either at the end of a Marxist Revolution or the aftermath of financial success that generates from a ruthless competition. The later plays of Odets clearly depict the big gap between levels of reality and dreams of happiness. In Arthur Miller's plays, the quest becomes a search for identity which coupled with a sense of guilt results in the recognition that the dream of perfection is a futile exercise. The strongest emphasis on the pursuit of dreams is in 'Death of a Salesman' which is a play about dreams—the dreams which end in the self-realization of Willy's own failures. Set against post war America, the play examines the assumptions which ultimately lead Willy and his family to their state of desperation. Willy Loman's failure is the failure of American myth of success. The play offers a postwar American reading of personal tragedy in the tradition of Sophocles' Oedipus Cycle. Miller charges America with selling a false myth constructed around a capitalist materialism nurtured by the postwar economy, a materialism that obscured the personal truth and moral vision of the original American Dream described by the country's founders. Through this play Miller fashioned a particularly American version of the European existentialist stance, incorporating and playing off idealistic notions of success and individuality specific to the United States. Tennessee Williams' plays also portray the 'theme of quest'—which takes the form of a romantic escape from the harsh reality. In Williams plays the dream for the unknown drives the dreamer to deliberate rootlessness. Tom Wingfield in 'The Glass Menagerie' like his father, is pursued by the haunting memories of the unfinished past. In the plays of O'Neill the 'quest' takes the form of a 'cult'. Almost every one of his major character displays a craving for the ideal which is cut off from the reality. The early plays of O'Neill project dream to be vague and romantic—where the protagonists try to run away from the harsh reality. As for instance, "The Moon of the Caribbees" and "Bound East for Cardiff" depicts the romantic quests which don't lead them to their goals. In "Long Day's Journey into Night" Edmund Tyrone's dream does not come true, instead he leads a dog's life, drinks 'rotgut' and always returns back. Each of O'Neill's major characters carries the burden of a 'dream' and O'Neill's projects the irony and tragedy implicit in the tension prevailing between the dreams and the flawed reality in which one lives.

O'Neill in his plays records the total fakery of the 'American Dream' "Stuff gives me a pain---I didn't know what they mean" and portrays the general American tendency of restlessness and dissatisfaction with the given life whose origin may be traced back to the Biblical search for the Garden of Eden. The Rise of Realism began as only an insinuation in the tremendous abundance of melodramatic plays. But the insinuation developed to a dominant trend and realism as a background for romantic melodrama finally changed to become a major concern of the playwright. Just as realism may be traced through the various writers of fiction during this period, an accumulative emphasis upon realism may be found in the drama starting with the plays written soon after the Civil War and moving on to the production of Herne's Margaret Fleming in 1890. The three emerging and powerful playwrights of Realism were Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams. In 'Death of A salesman', 'The Iceman Cometh' and 'Desire under the Elms' – each has a salesman in its principal figure, representing the American Everyman who do not sell stuff but sell illusions. Their Reality is an imaginary one and is as treacherous as are the illusions. If we see Miller we find that in his plays there exist relationships of the individual to the society. Neither of it can co-exist individually but both are seen belonging to a continuous and inseparable process. Arthur Miller projected social realism of the contemporary themes in all his plays like success ethics, issue of morality, capitalism, salesmanship etc. In the development of the American drama, the female tradition has a major contribution. In this context the name of Lorraine Hansberry has a great relevance. Hansberry was passionately concerned with the problems of blacks, and she portrayed these problems within the context of American society as a whole. In all of her plays, she has presented her vision of humanity, the affirmation of the human spirit. Lorraine Hansberry was the first black woman to have a play staged on Broadway. With 'A Raisin in the Sun' (1959), she became the fifth woman and the only black writer ever to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for the best play of the Year. The other playwrights - Glaspell, Crothers, Hellman and have contributed significant works to American drama by establishing the female tradition in the American theatre. An analysis of the selected plays illuminates some of the feminist concerns embedded in this tradition. Unlike Glaspell's characters, the woman in Crothers' plays live through the intense conflicts which accompany the development of new sex roles. In addition to Glaspell and Crothers, playwrights such as Zoe Akins, Zona Gale, Clare Kummer and Lulu Vollmer, also portrayed women's issues from the point of view of

the "New Woman". According to Banner the new woman was the "epitome of youth, adventure and healthy sex" (1984:154). These new women were independent, energetic and conscious individuals and provided a context against which the American suffrage movement could thrive and prosper. Susan Glaspell portrayed the various aspects of feminine consciousness and the specifically female experience out of which that consciousness evolved. Free of the constraints of the conventional theatre, Glaspell explored forms such as realism and expressionism,

which were conducive to portraying the psychology of women. Thus the trends in American Drama has come a long way and has always maintained a concomitant relation with the American People and the American Society. Different types of experimentations with respect to style, structure, techniques, forms and experiences in the American plays have depicted the inner, subjective patterns of emotion and have contributed to large critical discourses.

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