



Twentieth century American drama: Analysis

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Abstract

The American drama has witnessed tremendous changes altogether through these years. Initially, American drama imitated English and European theatre until well into the twentieth century. Mostly, plays from England were translated from European languages. While in nineteenth century, melodramas with exemplary democratic figures and clear contrasts between good and evil were popular. Plays about social issues like slavery also drew large audiences; sometimes these plays were mirror images of novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Not until the twentieth century would serious plays attempt aesthetic invention. Minstrel shows, based on African-American music and style - performed by white artists using makeup "blackface" - also developed original forms and expressions. The large change of mindset and Modernism, which gradually evolved in Europe and the United States in the early years of the 20th century, administered a way of Modernization through art as a steep break from the past, also as from Western civilization's classical traditions. Often American plays of the 18th and 19th centuries are strongly influenced by British art and style. In fact, every New York City theatre season presented more British plays than American plays until 1910. Although the British plays dominated the American stage for therefore long, from 1828 to 1836, American drama had begun to move aside from British drama by the time of Andrew Jackson's presidency.

Keywords: modernization, civilization, expressions, 20th century

Introduction

American plays, that usually mirrored the attitudes and manners of the higher classes, were by then in conflict with more egalitarian American values. Despite these growing variations, British repertory, actors, theater managers, and plays continued to cross the Atlantic Ocean with regularity, and most American plays imitated British models till the first twentieth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, American drama was moving with the steady pace towards realism, illuminating the rough or squalid aspects of life and making a lot of realistic characters. Realism remained the dominant trend of the twentieth century in each comedies and tragedies genre. American drama reached international height and achieved recognition with the psychological realism of plays by Eugene O'Neill and their deep investigation of characters inner lives.

The prominence of musical may have been due in part of the fact that the early movies had no sound, and could thus not compete, until *The Jazz Singer* of 1927, which consolidated both talking and music in a moving picture. More unpredictable and complex dramas blossomed in this time span, and acting styles turned out to be more curbed. Indeed, even by 1915, actors were being tricked away from theater and to the cinema, and Vaudeville was starting to confront hardened competition. While revues comprising of generally detached songs, portrays, comedy routines, and inadequately clad moving young ladies ruled for the initial twenty years of twentieth century, musical theatre would eventually develop beyond this. By the start of the century, a solid feeling of patriotism in expressions of the human experience was getting apparent all through the Western world. American craftsmen were intentionally endeavoring to build up a national style. American writing kept on following realistic patterns set by writers when the new century rolled over.

The American dream is the main thing to be referenced in any discussion of American writing. Especially, twentieth century met world level changes that scrutinized the presence of the dream. Eugene O'Neill is a notable playwright of the century who has an incredible social concern. His view on the negative effect of the idea of American dream is wonderfully introduced in the play *The Hairy Ape*.

A latecomer to literary history, American drama had its beginnings in the two preceding centuries, during which it slowly developed from plays modeled on foreign subjects and on the prevailing English and European styles of sentimental comedy and tragedy to those derived from native experience and characterized by a realism and literary quality that gained respectability domestically and internationally. (e Notes)

On Broadway, indigenous musicals have appreciated the money related triumphs denied much of the time to "serious" dramatization. Periodic sensational imports, for example, those brought over by the Royal Shakespeare Company of London have appreciated accomplishment with their constrained runs. Serious plays by O'Neill, Williams, Miller, Albee, and others have delighted in some monetary achievement, yet these are the exemption instead of the rule. Particular moments in American dramatic history when theater and dramatization combine to deliver luminous moments on the stage must remember Pauline Lord's appearance for Sidney Howard's *They Knew What They Wanted* (1924) and O'Neill's *Anna Christie* (1921); Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne in Robert E. Sherwood's *Idiot's Delight* (1936); Laurette Taylor as Amanda Wingfield in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944); Lee J. Cobb as Willy Loman in the 1949 creation of Miller's *Death*

of a Salesman; Jessica Tandy as Blanche Dubois in Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947); and Colleen Dewhurst and Jason Robards in the 1973 production of *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1947).

The study of American dramatization, fascinating and compensating in itself turns out to be more significant whenever made with context to a awareness of the nation's chronicled and legendary structures. These structures have given shape and substance to America's way of life and customs. Social marvels like nostalgia, environmentalism, duality and anxiety in the American mind and validation in different types of battle and achievement owe their reality to the American drama. Any endeavor to elucidate twentieth-century American drama will surely become into an exercise in compromise only. It needs to cover an enormous number of dramatic creations, developments, and a comprehensive rundown of dramatists. The first playwright to accomplish an overall notoriety is Eugene O'Neill, who had not started writing plays until 1913. Prior to that, live professional dramatization had been created in America.

All through the early part of the century, no American writer had as much effect on the improvement of show as Eugene O'Neill. He spent quite a bit of his childhood on trains and behind the stage at theaters, before building up his ability with the Provincetown Players in New York City. Somewhere in the range of 1916 and 1920, he composed a few plays for the organization before appearing his first critical hit *Beyond the Horizon* in 1920, which proceeded to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. He followed that with critical and commercial triumphs, including *The Emperor Jones*, *Anna Christie* (Pulitzer Prize 1922), *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), *Strange Interlude* (Pulitzer Prize 1928), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), *The Iceman Cometh* (1939) and his notable comedy, *Ah, Wilderness!*. After his demise, his magnum opus *Long Day's Journey into Night* was published and is frequently respected to be one of the best American plays of the twentieth century.

After World War I, the United States of America had a lot of crude materials, and an incredible number of plants were turning out each sort of items; the electrical business additionally grew rapidly and brought light into enormous of homes around the nation.

The national income was higher than that of other countries in Europe, be it in Great Britain, France, or Japan. Ordinary Americans could buy huge quantities of products. Millions among them earned high salaries. Automobiles, refrigerators, or radios invaded the homes of America. Businessmen like Henry Ford aroused to become national heroes. President Calvin Coolidge, 1923-1928, admired them when he said that, "*The man who builds a factory builds a temple.*" (92) However, roaring twenties had had many disadvantages. While the rich became richer, workers, farmers, aged people, single women, and African-Americans did not take profit from the national prosperity. These times were wild because girls danced Charleston and gangsters took hold of the streets in many big cities, so the old moral values were again tremendously ignored by young people in the 1920s. "The new woman was associated with the iconic image of the flapper, a figure ridiculed by conservative critics as frivolous but that suggested the enlarged cultural possibilities that women were beginning to claim." (Franklin 13)

The economic depression was not really prevented by the Thirties. People have suffered from bankruptcies, factory closures, and industrial paralysis. Rural America has been plagued by low farm rates, droughts, and floods. There were millions of unemployed individuals. Industrialization, immigration, World War I, the advent of Communism, the Roaring Twenties, and the Great Depression have significantly and undoubtedly altered Americans' serene view of their future. Both of these phenomena helped revolutionise the ways in which American people perceived themselves and their place in the world. Who, as an artistic and literary movement, was also the start of modernism. During the first decades of the twentieth century, the American way of thinking about the nineteenth century was entirely revamped.

In the modern world, thinkers were giving up "the old belief that things could be seen 'steadily and whole' from some privileged viewpoint at a particular moment" and embracing a "non logical, nonobjective, and essentially causeless mental universe. (Franklin 64)

In 1924, Virginia Woolf proposed that the exact moment of progress from individuals' perspective could be followed back to the year 1910. An adjustment in religion, politics issues, writing, economy, and culture achieved shifts in the connection between parents and kids, bosses and workers, married couples, and governments and their people. Therefore, playwrights like William Faulkner and Eugene O'Neill searched for approaches to investigate new literary methodologies, which were all firmly related to the unpredictable social and cultural changes the United States knew. They utilized the historical background as reference and as flight point for deciphering the cognizant and subliminal domains of their characters' sad/brave destinies. By sensationalizing Americans' fears of miscegenation, they came to embody and express, in most expounded artistic ways, the tragic sense and disappointment of the American individual during the first half of 20th century. Have these constitutional standards blinkered some other identity beliefs for individuals of the coming ages in the America? This issue has been a wellspring of discussion in William Faulkner's and Eugene O'Neill's artistic worlds.

Factors that have altered the social, cultural and literary life of the nation have been the growing urbanisation and population concentration in suburban areas, the introduction of automobiles, TV, theatres and rural America's electrification. This scene is one of great complexity and diversity at the turn of the twentieth century. In the literature of the period, this complexity and diversity is completely reflected, more so as it is the era of the common man and in literature the desires of the masses find growing expression. With the passage of time, due to different factors, including influences from the other side of the Atlantic, this complexity and complexity continues to increase, with the modern psychology of Sigmund Freud, Jung and Bergson and the teaching of Karl Marx and his followers being the chief of such influences. Rapid industrialization and urbanisation carry their own challenges and difficulties that tint the new century's literature with them. In literature, the anxiety, ennui, boredom, the sense of isolation and neurosis induced by these developments find a place of their own.

This chapter of the thesis *Twentieth century American drama* review endeavors an examination of wide extent of American show by zeroing in on the same number of 20th and thirties

century occasions and analyses of twenties. 20th century saw worldwide level changes, for example, World Wars, the spread of Communism and the ascent and fall of Fascism, and such America's public occasions as the Great Dust Bowl debacle to Mid-West-Agriculture, the Great Depression of the thirties, and the denial trial of the twenties. The expanding Urbanization and the convergence of populace in rural zones, the coming of vehicle, the radio, theaters and the charge of provincial America have been factors altering the social, social and abstract existence of the nation. This scene at the turn of the 20th century is one of incredible unpredictability and variety. This intricacy and variety is completely reflected in the writing of the age, all the more so as it is the period of the everyday person and the yearnings of the majority find expanding articulation in writing. With the progression of time this unpredictability and multifaceted design keeps on expanding attributable to different causes, which incorporate impacts from the opposite side of the Atlantic, head of such impacts being the new brain science of Sigmund Freud, Jung and Bergson and educating of Karl Marx and his devotees. Fast industrialization and urbanization carry with them their own issues and troubles which shading the writing of the new century. The tension, apathy, fatigue, the feeling of depression and despondency, brought about by these improvements locate their own place in writing.

The Dust Bowl and the Great Depression brought the American economy into a stranglehold that would not end for almost a decade, one of the worst periods in American history. The nation started to lose self-complacency after these incidents. The decade saw the Great Depression and the tragedy of the Great Dust Bowl, but there was a gradual disintegration of social values. The disastrous failure of the American economy took place at one of the most important times in the history of the United States of America. It sent a shockwave through all the country's nerves. Not a single human activity area has been left untouched. The breakdown of the structures of production, distribution and marketing was followed by a sharp fall in share prices. The endless series of failures at every level started with the stock market that had dominated the American economy, impacting the life of the average man, threatening his very survival. Unemployment has risen to astounding heights. To prevent large-scale hunger fatalities in the region, the government had to press all its machinery into running. This case, as irony would have it, had an indirect salutary effect on society. It inflicted a deathblow on the American's smug complacency and shook him quite rudely into a world of fact. Introspection on his part became imperative. It was at this point that literature representing society's pulse badly played its particular role. Drama is the only one among the popular literary forms which has direct access to the audience. It was only natural, therefore, that there was a sudden spurt of theatrical production, throwing out all imaginable varieties of drama. Since the decade started with unprecedented economic dislocation and ended with the global war, the endurance trial was huge. Also, it was a time of hope. A sudden jolt took place in the political and social spheres.

In the words of Gassner

Then on October 29, 1929, amidst a flurry of ticker-taper and a rain of suicides from office windows, the bubble of our financial structure burst with a deafening explosion. Its fragments littered the landscape of the richest country in the world with apple-stands and bread lines. (33)

Sensitive minds reacted to the situation. Drama in particular became the mirror of the society. Intellectuals began to think about the relationships of Man with Nature and Man with Man. During the twentieth and thirties centuries, the plays of Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill were influenced by of America's national events as the Great Dust Bowl disaster to Mid-West- Agriculture and Great Depression of the thirties. The plays of the twentieth century were characterized by sincere straightforwardness, current realities, and a liberal attitude toward moral questions. Though commonly described as the years of depression, the twenties were in a general sense optimistic and idealistic. The young generation of this time wanted to have the age in which they lived labelled "the jazz age".

The United States faced a terrible ecological catastrophe later on in this time. The United States was facing the Dust Bowl during the 1930s, often called the Dirty Thirties. The Dust Bowl began in 1930 and lasted for about a decade, also known as the Dirty Thirties, but its long-term economic effect on the region lasted much longer. Extreme dust storms, also called "black blizzards", swept the Great Plains during the Dust Bowl era. The United States has been planting too much and harvesting too quickly for too long to feed a rising population, but also to raise a rapid profit overseas. The Midwest of the United States and the soil of the American Plains were both exhausted before long. The nutrients had been sapped from the soil and the soil had been left sandy and infertile. Winds ripped through the dry land and kicked up vast clouds of dust that eroded the soil and carried the soil across the country. There was incalculable damage from this calamity. As the dust would cover everything or they would just break through a house and ruin it entirely, the dust storms would make vast swathes of land uninhabitable. Since their crops were destroyed, farmers were also unable to provide for themselves. Then because they were unable to turn a foreclosed benefit bank on their farms and they were turned out of their homes. As farmers moved around the United States in search of a way to feed themselves and their families, major migrations took place.

The compounding effects of the Dust Bowl and a declining dollar have led many to conclude that the United States can no longer guarantee the stability of its currency. In order to get their optimum value, this began with investors selling all their stock for money. This cascaded and resulted in more people selling their stock and withdrawing their money from banks. When more and more individuals withdraw their money from banks, the banks were unable to keep up and eventually there wasn't enough money left for people in these banks. Overnight, citizens lost all their money and many firms were left bankrupt. The American economy had collapsed and no end appeared to be in sight. Many leaders, beginning with President Hoover, sought to pull the economy back to its former powerhouse status, but it was not until the New Deal of President Franklin Roosevelt that Americans started to feel as if there was a light at the end of the tunnel. Many unemployed individuals have been compensated by the federal government to construct public buildings, bridges, and work on literacy programmes.

Then the United States was seized by the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. Farmers were driven out of their homes and an exodus took place with families going anywhere they could find food to feed themselves that had been foreclosed. But American individualism and dignity remained high in these dark times, and some key figures refused to take all of

this down. President Theodore Roosevelt started dismantling the power of these, beginning with Power-starving businesses. He advocated for consumer and general American interests by safeguarding food and medicine from poor practices in the industry. Disfranchised women, seeing the American Civil War triumph, and seeing their chance to fight against their marginalization after World War I. The U.S. Constitution and Independence Declaration guaranteed their freedom and they would no longer be stripped of them. The strain of the Great Depression was eventually taken over by President Franklin Roosevelt. During that time, he saw how America struggled and did his best to alleviate his troubled country. It was only with the outbreak of war in Europe that America once again began to recover.

In the history of the United States, one of the worst days was the Great Depression. It started in September 1929, when investors in the stock market began selling their stocks. This may seem natural, but a domino effect was triggered by this rush to sell their stock at high prices. Other investors saw what they were doing and started selling stocks of their own. On October 24 and October 29, named Black Thursday and Black Tuesday respectively, the worst of this was accomplished. By 1930, the United States had been overtaken by the Great Depression and the stock market started a slump that would not end until the start of World War II.

Since the amalgamation of different schools, Modern Drama is a result of gradual evolution that has achieved its glory. Individual dramatists like Tennessee Williams, Miller and O'Neill have contributed to the growth of modern American drama in different ways. There were several plays performed between 1915 and the time of Arthur Miller that could hardly find a place in the commercial theatre. After 1916, the most significant aspect of the American Theatre was its constant experiments. The name of Eugene O'Neill can be listed in the list of experiments in dramatic form. For the revival of the expressionistic play, he is well known.

From Europe, expressionism was introduced to America. This affected all the fields of art, especially drama. Since it had a small reach and was grossly concerned with surface truth, the expressionists opposed naturalism. They tried to project a state of mind, an inner turmoil, a psychological disorder, into outer symbols. Expressionism led positively to the development of the American theatrical spirit. A remarkable variety of experiments were encouraged, large and small. Particularly useful were some of its exaggerations and arrangements of abstractions in motion.

A period of rapid social and political transition was the 1920s. More Americans lived in towns for the first time than on farms. Between 1920 and 1929, the overall income of the country more than doubled, and this economic development swept many Americans into a prosperous yet unknown "consumer society." Citizens purchased the same items from coast to coast, listened to the same music, did the same dances and even used the same slang! Many Americans were dissatisfied with this modern, urban, often racy "mass culture"; in reality, the 1920s brought more tension than celebration for many, even most citizens in the United States. For a small handful of young people in the major cities of the country, however, the 1920s were still roaring.

Realism, naturalism, and symbolism continued to inform the play throughout the century. In early twentieth century theatre, an important trend was expressionism. The minimal scenery, telegraphic dialogue, talking machines, and

characters depicted as types rather than individuals, expressionist playwrights attempted to communicate the dehumanising aspects of twentieth century technological society. Eugene O'Neill wrote dramas about expressionism. In America, Eugene O'Neill, Bertolt Brecht, and the Italian Luigi Pirandello are three major playwrights in the twentieth century drama. Eugene O'Neill started various forms of drama like, Naturalistic, expressionist, symbolic, psychological, earned him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1936 and signalled the coming-of-age of American drama. Brecht wrote paradigm dramas, typically promulgating the ideology of socialism or Marxism.

Conclusion

A widespread sense of the absolute meaninglessness of human life was created by World War II and its related horrors. In the body of plays which have come to be collectively known as the theatre of the absurd, this sense is beautifully articulated. By abandoning conventional narrative devices, including realistic plot creation, coherent dialogue, and intelligible characters, absurdist playwrights tried to express the feelings of bewilderment, isolation, and desperation of modern society, the feeling that reality is unreal itself. In their plays, human beings are frequently depicted as dupes, clowns who are at the hands of powers that are inscrutable, but not without dignity. Eugene Ionesco's *Bald Soprano* (1950) and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* are perhaps the most famous plays of the absurd theatre (1953).

John Jacob writes in *History of American Literature* that,

The sources of the theater of the absurd are diverse; they can be found in the tenets of Surrealism, Dadaism and Existentialism; the traditions of the music hall, Vaudeville, and Burlesque and in the films of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Playwrights who belong to the theater of the absurd are Jean Genet (French), Max Frisch and Friedrich Durrenmatt (Swiss), Fernando Arrabal (Spanish), and the early plays of Edward Albee (American). (Jacob 8)

American theatre reached its maturity in the late thirties and was to reach greater heights in post World War II America. As America moved closer to the late thirties and forties, the horrors of the Fascism and the impending World War II created an existential dilemma. As a result of it, dramatists became more concerned with the projections of inner turmoil and the need to strike a harmony between the private and public life. Signs were already evident for this dislocation quite early in the twenties, when the playwrights started to note "the corruption and moral deprivation in the American social fabric." (17)

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