



ELEMENTS IN MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

This paper works to examine the elements that have emerged in Modern American Drama, with particular reference to Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, against the background of a historical study of American Theatre through ages. The history of the theatres in America is studied, and the discussion extends to delineate particular movements and changes in the trajectory. Ranging from the period of colonization to the World Wars to the Great Depression period to the modern times, an analysis of the evolution of the American theatre is made. The paper focuses on a reading of the American theatre in noticeable depth in order to understand the changes that have happened gradually and the reasons behind these changes. Two of America's famous playwrights and some of their works are explained in order to understand the progress of American Drama and how actually these two playwrights contributed a whole new insight into comprehending drama in a new perspective. Williams and Miller have contributed to the growth of American theatre, and it is probably through them that more of autobiographical stances and incidents emerge in American fiction-drama. A reader, precisely an American reader, could easily relate to situations which the two playwrights have created in their works; and this is because the reader too has witnessed the same situations in reality. Further, the paper also examines various techniques used in the theatre and the changes that have come about with external influences such as colonialism, religion, wars and economy.

Key words: Realism, Plastic Theatre, Folk-Drama, Regionalism, Poetic-Drama, Mobile-Concurrence

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American drama dates back even before the first English colony was established in 1607, there were the Native American tribes who performed theatrical events. The professional theatre may have begun with the Lewis Hallam troupe in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1752. Theatres began in Williamsburg and Charles Town, South Carolina; popular plays in London at that time, like *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *The Recruiting Officer* and *The*

Merchant of Venice, were brought to America and enacted. However, most plays encountered oppositions from religious organizations – this led to the opening of a theatre in New York, by Lewis Hallam, and this theatre professionally mounted American play.

The early years of the 20th century, before the First World War, drama saw 'realism' as the main development. At the start of 1900, there was a

revival of poetic drama in States, and the distinguished trend was the *Biblical Trilogy* of William Vaughn Moody. This play contributed to the religious-themed dramas. Such plays paved way to the modern American drama; they had in them the emphasis on the emotional conflicts that lie at the heart of contemporary social conflicts. The other key playwrights of this period include Edward Sheldon, Charles Rann Kennedy and Rachel Crothers.

During the period between the World Wars, the works of Eugene O'Neill and of the Provincetown Players contributed largely to the American drama. O'Neill's experiments with theatrical form and his combination of Naturalist and Expressionist techniques inspired other playwrights to use greater freedom in their works. Other distinct movements during this period include folk-drama, regionalism and even the return of the poetic drama. At the same time, the economic crisis of the Great Depression led to the growth of protest drama; Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* is an example for the protest drama.

The post-World War II period gave good stand to the American drama, with the works of O'Neill came the works of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. This period also gave rise to musical theatre form and the important figures who contributed to this theatre were Rodgers and Hammerstein, Betty Comden, Adolph Green, Richard Adler and Jerry Ross. Other key dramatists of the 50s were Jack Richardson, Arthur Kopit, Jack Gelber and Edward Albee. The 60s showed the maturation of the black drama through Lorraine Hansberry, James Baldwin and Amiri Baraka.

Earlier styles of theatre have disappeared from the landscape, yet theatre remains a popular American art form. Theatre has served a platform for expression, and a venue for identity exploration for under-represented, minority communities, who have formed their own companies and created their own genres of works – the notable group was the *East West Players* founded in 1965 as the first Asian American theatre group. Some of the well-known contemporary American playwrights are Edward Albee, August Wilson, Tony Kushner, John Guare and Wendy Wasserstein.

i. Tennessee Williams

Tennessee Williams is accepted today as one of America's most essential and influential dramatists. His works, even to the present day, lead to resemble the characters of the American culture. Arthur Sanier, a noted playwright, describes Williams' works as something that "has taken up permanent residence in our culture". Tennessee Williams, has indeed, emerged swiftly from obscurity, and placed himself among the great playwrights of American History.

Williams' family remained a sincere influencer throughout his life and works. He says that, "the strongest influences in my life and my work always whomever I love: whomever I love and aim with most of the time, or whomever I remember most vividly". When Williams' works are observed closely, we find his familial relations firmly implemented into his stories. Williams' latter part of life has a displaced feeling given to him and he seems to have developed a reaction toward disillusionment and injustice, and these emotions often appear to serve as the engines of his artwork. Elia Kazan, who later directed William's work both on stage and on film, described how Williams used his own experience to generate artistic masterpieces: "Everything in his life is in his plays, and everything in his plays is in his life."

Williams employs 'plastic theatre' to heighten awareness of certain events or characterizations. Plastic theatre is the use of props or staging to impress upon the audience more abstract ideas. Though it seems unrealistic, it still adds to the drama of the scene. For instance, an audience watching the play only has a few seconds to pick up on metaphorical connections, whereas whilst reading the play one can examine Williams' stage directions in detail. *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) is a memory-play that employs plastic-theatre. The play has strong autobiographical elements, featuring characters based on Williams himself, his histrionic mother, and his mentally fragile sister Rose.

Williams established himself as a recognized playwright in the wake of World War II. In late 1947, Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire* premiered, securing his position as a major American playwright. It won Williams a Pulitzer Prize

for Drama in 1948. The play served as a monumental contribution to the American theater. It followed a Modernistic trend, where it questioned the laws and conventions of literature. This play reflected the American habits and motivations.

Williams abandoned the strict form; instead he tried to depict that familiar American into which he was born. Philip C. Kolin states that Williams' devotion to a thoroughly American portrait caused his play to be "one of the two or three most significant American plays on the world stage".

ii. Arthur Miller

American playwright Arthur Miller, author of well-known dramas such as *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible* (1953) and *A Memory of Two Mondays* (1955); outlasted many of his critics. Miller was unquestionably a major figure in post war artistic life in the US; his death (at age 89, February 10) is necessarily the occasion for a consideration not only of his plays, but the era and social environment that help produce them.

Miller was liberal-minded and well-meaning man, with severe limitations as an artist. The American liberal intelligentsia took a drastic turn for the worse in the middle of the twentieth century, making a bargain with the most dastardly elements in the American society. Political and intellectual life still suffers today from the consequences of that devil's pact. However, Miller resisted the labels of cowardice, egoism and selfishness and refused to "name names" to the others. "My conscience will not permit me to use the name of another person", said Miller to his persecutors in 1956.

Miller, however, did not remain untouched by the political climate, instead he maintained a critical attitude toward American society. He supported and participated in the civil rights struggle. His plays focus on the middle class 'dreams of successes', how they dream of becoming rich and thus, comes the complementing line *from rags to riches*. He was shaped by the Great Depression – *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, are the two plays that portrayed the then American situation. *All My Sons* was a drama about a manufacturer of faulty war materials and the consequences that led thereafter; while, *Death of a Salesman* is the tragedy of a small man destroyed by false values that are in

large part the values of society; and Miller received a Pulitzer Prize for this play.

Most of Miller's plays showcased the failure of relationships and this constitutes to the documentation of dissipation of the American families to becoming nuclear families. He also explored the theme of guilt and responsibility to oneself and to others by examining the strained relationship between the characters in his plays. Like Tennessee Williams, Miller too has shared autobiographical elements in his play *The Price* (1968). The drama centers on the relationship of two brothers, one who stayed at home with his depressed father as he had experienced an immense loss in his business, while the other one became a glamorous and successful doctor. The play is more on a self-critical line and it echoed the experience of Miller and his brother Kermit and their father. Miller has used 'mobile-concurrency' as one of the techniques in *Death of a Salesman*, this technique was an innovative one, and it allowed two or more actions to happen on stage simultaneously. An illustration from the same play for mobile-concurrency is the constant fluctuation between reality and dream.

Miller's later works, such as, *The American Clock* (1980), *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* (1991) and *Broken Glass* (1994), reveal that the playwright maintained the consistency in the standards of art work that was produced by him. Nevertheless, Miller's works can stand as a platform and make way for many more artistic plays to come.

The history of Modern American Drama is indeed characterized by elements autobiographical, and it reflects the then situation of America in a realistic manner. One cannot simply turn a blind eye to the difficult times that emerged in America; instead the individual has to be aware of the country's history; and literature such makes its way through to a sensitive mind.

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