

New Perspectives in American Drama: Shift towards Social Pressures and Public Issues

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Abstract:

The dramatic history of the United States is considered brief in many aspects and it is even briefer than the history of the youthful nation itself. However, considering the respect American Drama garnered in this period for the few significant plays produced between the late 18th and early 20th centuries, it can precisely be said to have originated with the emergence of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee and Eugene O'Neill, less than 100 years. The twentieth century American drama achieved much popularity with Eugene O'Neill and continues to enjoy success through his 'heirs', including Arthur Miller, Clifford Odets, Lillian Hellman, etc. In spite of the limitless number of burlesques, pageants, plays, theatrical entertainments, and minstrel shows that have entertained the American stage from the beginning, the traditionally approved canon of American drama, a very small body of play, proves to be a constantly shifting and emerging combination of American essentialism and contemplation.

Key Words: American Drama, Entertainments, Features, Canon, Perpetually, Significant, Trends

1. Introduction

American drama is significantly known for its many isms in dramatic form. American Drama would not be known as it is now for its different characters, themes, styles and sets. Without any deviation from its regular and routine aspects, apart from the last decades of the 19th century American theatre, it has been largely given over to melodramas with naturalistic

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acting styles. However, in the earlier decades of the 20th century, Modern American Playwrights drew their influences from European drama, such as that of Chekov; purposefully drawing attention to the representation of life within a drama in a more realistic style. A continuation in the name of Modern Realism, it represented everyday reality in a manner that would seem accustomed to the audiences who came to see these new plays. This style was adopted throughout the Canon, and especially when its popularity grew further in the backdrop of social and cultural changes such as the escalation of immigration and poverty, the crisis in religion, depression, women's rights, the 'machinal' development of America and the everlasting struggle towards the 'American Dream'. Realism had a greater influence on the American stage during this period, but understandably in terms of extended realistic sets.

2. Significance of the Study

Any study is significant as long as it covers the relevance and scope of the selected topic or text. This paper tries to introduce the need to understand various aspects of American Drama before focusing on the new perspectives or trends of it. To understand the emergence of American Drama, it is important to disjoin it into multiple phases from the beginning to the contemporary period. In the years preceding World War 1 the 'Little Theatre Movement' gave rise to a generation of American playwrights who tried out with European regionalism showing defiance to new forms and literary culture. Clyde Fitch was one of the most popular playwrights in American history who wrote for Broadway stage on Comedy of Manners. His plays like *The Girl with Green Eyes* (1902) and *The Woman in a case* (1905) were episodic dramas of social satire and character study. He wrote nearly sixty plays in which he explored the pathologies of modern culture, urban life, 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* (1908), *The Nigger* (1909), and *Romance* (1913) that combine melodrama and social critique. 'The Boss' in Sheldon's realistic melodrama portrays the rising power of ethnic group heads in Eastern cities of the country and discusses the period of predominant labor movement that happened during the turn of the century. The sustainable nature of Sheldon's work is further demonstrated by his

play *The Song of Songs* (1914), a dramatization of the novel by Hermann Sudermann. It was subsequently made into the motion pictures *The Song of Songs* (1918), *Lily of the Dust* (1924), and *The Song of Songs* (1933), again starring Marlene Dietrich. In the web article for 'The Sheldon Chronicles', Ken Sheldon shares that

His controversial melodrama, *The Nigger*, explored the relationship between blacks and whites in a political setting. The play was first performed on Broadway, New York, at the New Theatre on December 4, 1909. It became a 1915 motion picture, with its title becoming *The New Governor* in some markets. (Ken)

David Belasco is one of the most successful playwrights of the nineties and the early nineteen hundreds. His *Madame Butterfly* and *The Darling of the Gods* are romantic melodramas. Rachel Crothers is known for her well-crafted plays, often discussing feminist themes. She is generally recognized as "the most successful and prolific woman dramatist writing in the first part of the twentieth century" by the theatre historians (Wikipedia). Her other plays are *A Man's World* (1910) and *He and She* (1911). Her *He and She* is a realist drama representing the middle-class life in the U.S and is similar to the works of Norwegian playwright Ibsen and Russian playwright Chekhov. However, the play was not much popular during the 1920's as a new form of drama had emerged in the United States. The naturalistic approach of Belasco got much appreciation and Dream of his time not only covered realism but also naturalism. Herbert Bergman in his article "David Belasco's Dramatic Theory" reveals about the playwright's ability to present melodramas. He states that:

His dramatic theory reveals the characteristics of the drama and staging of this period, its merits and defects, and the qualities of Belasco's plays. Belasco's own words, often flamboyant, colorful, pretentious, or trait, and at times unintentionally humorous, suggest the flavor or measure the man and his work; they reveal his strength and his limitations. (Bergman 1957: 110-122)

2.1 Popular Expressionist Phenomenon

The modern drama was guided by Eugene O'Neill's 'Expressionist phenomenon', where *The Hairy Ape* (1922) was an exemplar of American expressionism and considered the country's first modern drama. Another prominent feature of American Drama is 'expressionism'. 'Expressionism' as an aspect of theatre or visual art is generally defined as 'the external manifestation of an internal condition'. It was obtained from the German Philosopher who

borrowed it from painting. American playwrights Elmer Rice, Lajos Agri, Sophie Treadwell are the others who preferred the expressionistic mode and largely responsible for establishing a space in America for new features of drama. These playwrights turned down the representation of the outer reality in pursuit of depicting the inner and subjective states of emotion and experience. However, the effects of music and sound helped greatly in this direction to communicate the different emotional states of the characters in a play.

Eugene O'Neill, although popularly known for his realistic dramas, is the first playwright in the United States to experience success with the selection of this feature for his plays. His *Hairy Ape* (1922) is the first fully expressionist play written by an American playwright. In the field of expressionistic drama O'Neil's became the pioneer and adopted the existent trends like domesticated Greek tragedies, Isbsenseque social plays, Irish dramatic tone, poems, Strindbergian domestic dramas, and expressionist melodramas. His *Emperor Jones*, *All Gods*, *Chillum*, *Got Wings* and *Desire under the Elms* are considered famous tragedies exemplifying the way in which theatre so often is invoked by characters, both as a fact and as an image of reality. Everything about *The Hairy Ape*: the heavy dialect, the filth of the stoke hold, the whiteness of Mildred's dress, the Yank's subjective view of the world as a dangerous place, discloses the skillful adoption of the playwright of this feature. All these are conveyed through the contrast of Mildred and Yank, O'Neil demonstrated. His interests are emotional, spiritual, and less political. *The Hairy Ape* combines recognizable human beings and their social problems, as part of its quest for truth and theatrical poetry.

The basic formula for American expressionism is explored successfully by other playwrights. Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923) highlights the downturn of human values due to the dominance of technology. The play, an example of expressionistic style, presents the suffering of the main character, Mr. Zero, for his replacement by an adding machine. Zero is Rice's model for modern American: "A product...the animal's instinct but one of his strengths and skills" (138). Another play by *Roger Bloomer: A Play in Three Acts* (1923) by John Howard Lawson is an expressionist play of psychology and masculinity which too got some recognition. American expressionism has never dissociated from the real world during any period of its canon. Its goal is to immerse so deeply in the problems brought by modernity that it could transcend the mask of physical and social reality M.H. Abram remarks that:

The central feature of Expressionism is a radical revolt against realism. Instead of representing the world as it objectively, the author undertakes to express the inner experience by representing the world as it appears to his state of mind. Often the work implies that the mental condition is representative of anxiety-ridden modern man in an industrial and technological society which is drifting toward chaos. (AGOLT)

During the Harlem Renaissance (an intellectual and cultural revival of African American music, dance, literature, theatre and politics centered in Harlem, Manhattan), new forms of drama are added, including the ones related to social issues like birth control and lynching in addition to plays dealing with history. The drama of this period is written by playwrights under extensive pressure to provide full-bodied portrayals of Afro-American life to both black and white audiences. One of the most well-known plays from the pre-renaissance period is *The Star of Ethiopia: A Pageant* (1914) by Du Bios covers the emerging Black Nationalism that depends on an ancient past. This play acted as a precursor to ‘Black Nationalist Movement’, with its cultural roots in Ethiopianism and with its connection to Christianity where African Americans and African are part of. The use of the pageant has its base in the larger America folk drama movement. Most prominent among the black folk drama playwrights is Willis Richardson, whose four plays: *The Chip Woman’s Fortune* (1923), *The Broken Banjo* (1925), *Compromise* (1925), and *The Idle head* (1929) are widely referred to any study. Sudarshan Sahoo in his work “African American Literary Tradition: A Study” opines that

The artists and intellectuals of Harlem Renaissance had faith in the future of ‘New Negro’, they believed in democratic reforms and in the power of art and literature to effect these changes. However, the Harlem Renaissance ended with the start of the Great Depression in the early 1930s, which questioned the importance and centrality of culture, unrelated to economic and social realities. (Sahoo, 31)

3. Review of the Related Studies

American modernism has its beginnings at the turn of the century and has achieved remarkable heights during mid-century (1910-1945). American playwrights are also expected to overturn the nineteenth century’s formal constraints, preceding the period’s melodramas and old-world style of performance. They have started examining human relationships with

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unsparing candor. O’Neil and other playwrights have got inspiration from Strindberg’s theatre of psychological nuance and dream-like symbolism in their efforts to forge a new kind of drama. Majority of the plays focused on human relations, rather than societal, an undertaking of deeply emotional and personal experiences, which reflected an emergent urban life. *The Emperor Jones* by O’Neil is the first attempt at expressionistic drama which uncovered the mental deterioration of Brutus Jones. *The Hairy Ape* is another one with a beautiful blend of expressionism and naturalism. This play echoes Yank’s existential question “Where do I fit in”? The question runs like a motif in his play. His *Desire under the Elms* also scrutinizes the extremities of passion, sin, and vindication. In *The Iceman Cometh*, the large number of characters, creates a tangled relationship that makes it very poignant. *The Long day Journey into the Night* is another melodrama in Nietzschean style which leaves the audience in a tragic world that can be faced up with but never overcome.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Arthur Miller plays carried themes that are related to the individual relationship with self and society. His famous plays are *All my sons* (1947), *The Death of a Salesman* (1949), *A View from the Bridge* (1955), *After the fall* (1964) out of 37 plays, and 13 radio plays. As a writer, his career spanned over seven decades, and he is regarded as the greatest playwright of twentieth century America. Tennessee Williams plays during 1960’s, juxtaposed the expressionistic conventions with that of realism in more astonishing ways than was ever done before. Most of the playwrights of his time changed their perspective on familiar subjects than the unknown. They began to express their cynical views on honesty in politics, good race relations, and traditional family roles and their plays became more satirical in nature. More playwrights influenced the advancement of theatre and drama as continuation to the work done by O’Neil and Miller.

Clifford Odets is another American playwright who is also into screenwriting and acting. He is considered as a potential successor to Nobel Prize-winning playwright Eugene O’Neill. During the 30’s and 40’s, Odets’ socially relevant dramas are seen as extremely influential, especially for the remainder of the ‘Great Depression’. His work motivated the next several generations of playwrights that include Paddy Chayefsky, Neil Simon, and David Mamet. His play *Awake and Sing!* (1935) was one of the first popular one among American family dramas. It was about Jewish families and their economic and political struggles. This forms as a model for a play like Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. The idea of making a semi-

autobiographical family story, the central theme of a play, becomes a notable tradition in American drama, and it starts with this Odets' play. Saroj Parihar in her article "A Brief Study of the Twentieth Century American Drama: The Impact of Rapid Industrialization and Urbanization" informs that

The twentieth century was a period of acquisition and possession. America saw the most important agricultural and industrial growth. The end of the century can be viewed as the culmination of a rural-urban society, although people aspired to move on to a metropolitan type of society. Youths, men, and women took new roles and sought more living comfort in cities. Hence, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the agricultural population declined while the industrial and urban population increased. At the same time, millions of people contributed to the development. (Parihar, 1494)

Eugene O'Neill and Edward Albee are considered as urban dramatists taking into account the reflection of urban life and its culture in their dramas. They have presented numerous urban images in their dramas which are an indication of their ability to cover the issues pertaining to urban life. These images, although personal, are meticulously used by these playwrights to reiterate the general predicament of modern civilization. They used these images to a new theme and structure of drama. The change in the structure and theme of their dramas had a specific purpose and contributed to a great extent in the progression of their career as playwrights.

4. Collaboration and Contribution of Native and non-Native Playwrights

Another interesting element of the new age drama is the collaboration and contributions of both Native and non-Native playwrights. Those who are into learning more on these changes can be clearly identified through the multiple critical works on American Indian theater that have emerged since the late 20th century. As a matter of fact, the presence of all these works not only contributes to the development, recognition and visibility of this vibrant genre, but also indicative of a certain point of confluence between Nativism and Eurocentrism (López Pérez, 2011). There seems to be a clear appreciation to the fact that both Native and non-Native authors are contributing greatly to the drama of new era. This is also true across the globe that such initiatives are contributing to a noticeable scholarship, especially in the genre of drama where provision of different angles, voices and perspectives, that seem to leave behind the ongoing confrontation between Native and Western cultures.

In addition, it would also be possible to discuss about this convergence through contemporary Native American theater itself as it brings varied themes from both the 'Native culture and the Western civilization'. Popular drama projects elements that are already in existence within Native American cultures, such as oral tradition and performance and elements which are present within the Euro-American style of theater, in terms of play writing. Therefore, American Indian theater could be considered as another contributor to new perspectives where a bridge, connection or convergence between the polarities is evident. Since the publication of David Mamet's work *American Buffalo* (1975) received many critical responses. Many critics view this drama from different perspectives. Pat Laffan describes about the American play. He writes: "American buffalo is an ensemble production of a good and original play. There are rugged rhythms and patterns a claustrophobic atmosphere and a deal of strong humor. There is hope. Donny, the owner of the junk shop represents a kind of stability, easy enough with the loss of dream and with trying rehabilitate. Bobby yet his world pretty well shaken up by Teach". (Laffan 40) Here Laffan observes American buffalo as the complete play having rugged rhythms and humor. He describes that the play has all the qualities with a deal of strong humor.

5. Conclusion

There is a host of writers who had achieved remarkable success that helped to bring the American drama an equal status with the British drama. These new age playwrights experimented with many tools of drama within their limits, as some are overtly conscious about the theatre groups they belong to. They tried new perspectives yet were aware of the much known 'American Dream'. Clyde Fitch and Langdon Mitchell are two famous playwrights whose plays demonstrated some elevation in literary sophistication, and few other serious writers, notably Augustus Thomas, Edward Sheldon, and William Vaughan Moody, who made a serious attempt to entertain themes having some relation to contemporary American life. But none of these playwrights are permanently important or long remembered, and their works have not achieved conspicuous excellence when judged in accordance with the standards set by the contemporary efforts of novelists and essayists, philosophers, and historians. They are more interested to work within the very narrow

theatrical tradition and that the tradition tolerates no audacious departure from long established stereotypes, both artistic and moral.

However, for some playwrights, the notion of the autonomous, self, secure, and morally unalterable, seemed suddenly more difficult to sustain. The enemy is no longer simple modernity, the hard-hearted scale, the mechanical rhythms to which Eugene O'Neill and Elmer Rice, Sidney Kingsley, and young Miller and Williams had protested strongly and persistently about. It is a foible in the sensibility that makes treachery seem a natural impulse and self-complicit in its own obliteration. It is no longer the case for the playwrights, pitching an integral self with anonymity and social melancholia, for now that self is portrayed as fragmented and insecure.

Whatever the stature that American drama has achieved between the wars is cemented by the post-World War II generation, with the greatest works of Eugene O'Neill and his generation being joined by such towering personalities as Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. These writers took the responsibility of presenting serious American dramas that mirrored the contemporary social life in America with its complications and social turmoil. O'Neill remained as a major literary figure of this period, held by critics of American literature, and it is irrefutable that he was the first American prolific writer. He introduced classicism in American drama at a time when it was caught up in sentimentalism. He portrayed the man as a tragic figure in most of his plays. Despite the fact that his plays are modern, he aspired to bring into his 'an effect in harmony with traditional tragedy'. Another great playwright, Arthur Miller, used to combine social awareness with a quest for his characters' inner lives.

American dramatist and theatrical producer Edward Albee is best remembered for his play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), which uncovers slashing insight and witty dialogue in its frightful portrayal of married life. His psychologically brilliant and discerning dramas explored the contentiousness of togetherness, the gap between self-delusion and truth beneath the guise of contemporary life. In Sam Shepard's plays like *True West* (1980), *Fool for Love* (1983), and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Buried Child* (1978), one finds the dismantling of the classic visual images of cowboys and homesteaders and comes across the landscapes of deserts and farmland. In Shepard's play, the only unquestionable truth is that of the mirage. From his early plays like *Chicago* (1965), written when he was in his 20s and to the late works like *Heartless* (2012), he presented a world in which nothing is fixed. He projected the

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view that any comforting notions of family, home, material success, and even individual identity are not going to stay longer in one's life. Mr. Shepard opined in an interview with The New York Times. "Some people might define it that way, saying, 'He has a very strong sense of himself.' But it's a complete lie." (NYT)

David Alan Mamet is another American playwright and screenwriter, whose plays are known for clever, terse, sometimes vulgar dialogues, and arcane stylized phrasing, as well as for his exploration of masculine instincts. His desperate working-class character, distinctive, colloquial, and frequently profane conversations fetched him much popularity in recent times. His earlier plays included *Duck Variations* (1972), in which two elderly Jewish men sit on a park bench and engage in communication with various subjects. In *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974), a couple's budding sexual and emotional relationship is shattered by their friends' involvement. His *American Buffalo* (1975) is about dishonest business practices. His lateral plays include *A Life in the Theatre* (1977), discloses the teacher-student relationship, and *Speed-the-Plow* (1988) uncovers a black comedy about miserly scriptwriters in Hollywood. His most successful play *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983), a drama of anguished real-estate salesmen, won him the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for drama. Although plenty of themes projected by the playwrights in the latter half of the twentieth century, the scope for including many more is still a possibility, and the new trends are ever refreshing to the audience as well as the readers.

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