

Development of Modern American Drama with Special Reference to Edward Albee

Dr. Manoj Kumar Singh
Assist. Professor of English
C. M. College, Darbhanga, Bihar, INDIA

Abstract

Modern American Drama is an amalgamation of various schools. Evolution of the Modern American Drama took place in a very slower pace. In the 19th century, American public was dying for entertainment rather than pure art or aesthetics. This passion for entertainment amidst the wake of rapid modernization in the 20th century added to the significant beginning of Modern American Drama. In the early twenties of the 20th century, the American Drama experimented a lot. One can note the front page dramatists like Eugene O'Neill, Maxwell Anderson, Robert Sherwood, Lillian Hellman, Clifford Odets, Philip Barry, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee. A brief analysis of the plays of different authors provides an overall understanding of the growth and development of the American Dramatic Literature with Edward Albee's role in it.

Keywords

Modern American Drama, American Drama, Band Box Theater, Washington Squares Players, New York Drama, First World War, Second World War, Cold War, American President

It is rather difficult to pigeonhole Modern American Drama. We can't assign it to one particular school. Modern American Drama is a kind of slow evolution which has taken place in the form of an amalgamation of various schools. It is a kind of chemical mixture formulated out of various elements. In February 1915, an enthusiastic group of young amateurs calling themselves the Washington Square Players waved a solemn manifesto in the face of New York Drama critics. They opened the Band Box Theatre near the corner of 57th Street and Third Avenue. Just a year and a half later, another group equally young and enthusiastic, took possession of a stable in Mac Dougal Street to be known thereafter as the Province town Theatre. The dramatists of the Washington Square Players were more influenced by Ibsen, Shaw and Maeterlinck whereas that of the Province-town group happened to accept Eugene O'Neill as their torch-bearer. It tried to present life more concretely through abstractions. In addition it also tried to moralize, satirise in terms of new manipulations of space and movement, new concepts of sequences of dialogue and new versions of characterization. It also experimented brilliantly in stagecraft so much so that in many cases the setting proved to be more expressive than the characters themselves. Thus, a relentless experimentation coupled with a desire to avoid clichés of plot, characterisation, dialogue, acting and staging is the most characteristic feature of the drama of the age.

Eugene O'Neill was the genuine force behind the change that came over in American Theatre. He wrote things of contemporary interest and gave American Drama its requisite genius, authority, dynamism and force. Expressionism, which was imported to America from Europe, was first made noticeably a part of his drama in *The Emperor Jones*.

This literary movement amply demonstrated the artist's dissatisfaction with Naturalism or Realism. The expressionists rejected naturalism as it had a limited scope and was grossly involved with surface reality. They wanted to project a state of mind, an inner crisis and for that matter a

psychological condition through outer symbols. This also involved expressions of the dream state. The other well-known works to O' Neill's credit are: *The Hairy Ape*, *The Great God Brown*, *Strange Interlude* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. O' Neill used naturalistic details with symbolist mood and suggestiveness. He deliberately violated what John Gassner calls "The Sacred right of a play-goer to discharge his obligations to the stage in two hours and a half of theatre attendance"(John Gassner, 411). His plays are of epic dimension. The isolated loneliness of man and his attempts to find out meaning in life are vivid and tragic in Eugene O' Neill as they are in the novels of Fitzgerald and Hemingway. The plays of the twenties treated the social problems only in a peripheral manner. The economic depression in the thirties preceded by the First World War and the Cold War turned the fortune of the people upside down leading them from prosperity to poverty. The plays of his decade are more specific and explicit in content. The economic and social disaster furnished "Conditions and emotional climate favourable to the production of drama of out-spoken criticism".(Luccock, 193)

If this trend had exercised a greater influence than Marx in the twenties, the following decade saw a marked shift from an interest in the psyche of the individual to the impact of the economic forces on the mass of men in consequence of the failure of economy. Long ago Karl Marx said: "The methods of production in material life determine the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of man that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness"(L.C. Knights, 13).

Economic pressures and imbalances work upon the mind and ultimately play an important role in shaping the entire outlook of the people. The social life and the political thought of the people are monitored by financial status. When there is financial crunch faced by the entire society, everyone tries to speak out what he feels or comes out with some solution. The writer, being the part and parcel of the society, owes certain duty to it. He cannot be merely a silent and indifferent spectator of the socio-economic and socio-political problems with which his rise and fall are linked.

For the first time in the thirties, the American dramatists realized that at a time of crisis they must discharge their obligations and, therefore, they should write plays to suit the social context of the day. They did try to offer solutions, as well: "the relevance of theatre lies not in its power to provide entertainment, escape, or wish fulfilment, important as they may be, but in its power to open our eyes, to answer our questions, to increase our understanding, and to still our torments(Wilson,2).The economic depression of the thirties brought a sudden and radical change in the general outlook of the dramatists of that period. it was a time when the fascist tendencies of Europe threatened the democratic way of life. President Hoover, who had the mandate by virtue of his popular election slogan: "a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage", took the oath as president in March 1929. it was rather a coincidence that within a few months the bubble of the financial structure burst with a deafening explosion and the great depression began. On October 29 which remains as one of the blackest days in American history, more than sixteen million shares of stock changed hands and thousands of Americans "who had purchased stock on margin saw their savings wiped out in a matter of days. Many felt the decade as definitely finished.(A *History of The United States*, 675)".

This great economic depression adversely affected the life of the people who suffered a crisis of identity under such a given situation. The stock-market crashed: the factories and mines were closed. The number of unemployed grew alarmingly. Banks and business failed. Dividends were not paid and the prices and wages fell. The foreign trade dwindled and the federal surpluses were turned into deficits. The buying power of the nation was paralysed: "For the American people who have never been subjected to havoc of invasion or bounding, the depression was unquestionably the most searching experience of the twentieth century. And those who survived through it were like the survivors of war"(The *American Writer and The Great Depression*,5).

The impact of the great depression was too severe to sustain as it came like “a volcanic eruption in Kansas or Nebraska, pouring red-hot lava from coast to coast and border to border”(Swados,11).The family relations and the general psychology of the people were affected to an alarming extent:

The depression, the worst of its kind, had its horrible repercussions on the general psychology of the people too. Men, in their prime, became victims of psychic disorders, which led to sexual impotence. Separations, suicides and wife murders were on the increase. For some weak minds constant worries and struggles caused frustrations and the end was insanity(Allen,132)

Housing problem also became acute during the depression. The people slept in the New York subways and city parks. Public morals went down and drunkenness both among men and women increased. Stealing was high. Agricultural unrest was also noticeable. Demonstrations, strikes, agitations and vociferous protests became the order of the day. Roosevelt took over the charge of the American President on March 4, 1933 when economic depression was at its peak. He plainly admitted the prevailing chaotic situation in his inaugural address:

Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the movement. what we have to fear is fear itself. I see one third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.... The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.(Allen,281)

The American Drama of the 1930’s and after is, in fact, a mirror that reflects the social reality very graphically and vividly. It gives an insight into the intellectual climate of one of the most critical periods in American history. It is rightly said that: “the essential life of a period is best understood through its literature, not because of what literature describes, but because of what it embodies”(Knights,149).The American playwrights strongly felt that the artists should be able to turn treachery and scorn into silver syllables and make a seamless coat out of the torn fragments of life. Notable among the Depression Playwrights were Maxwell Anderson, Robert E. Sherwood, S. N. Behrman, Philip Barry, Lillian Hellman and Clifford Odets.

The playwrights associated themselves with political liberalism. Maxwell Anderson concerned himself with the verse drama. Even his subjects are Elizabethan in an archaic dramatic form. He invariably converts his characters into modern personalities with modern psychology. His political liberalism and cutting irony mark him as a typical American writer of his generation. *What Price Glory*, *Elizabeth the Queen* and *Saturday Children* are some of the well-known works of Anderson. His plays are written in the form of modern naturalism with realistic dialogues often spiced with slangs and contemporary allusions. Robert Sherwood is an acknowledged master of the techniques of high comedy. He writes high comedy of a very special kind, “resembling the philosophical comedy of Bernard Shaw more than Noel’s comedy of manners”(American Literature After 1930,265).

Robert Sherwood, the author of Petrified Forest became active in the New Deal Politics and wrote some of FDR’s best speeches. *The Road to Rome* and *Idiot’s Delight* are other significant plays to his credit. The author of *The Foxes* and *Another Part of The Forest*, Lillian Hellman might well be classified as a regionalist. She enjoyed a genuine insight into southern manners and culture. Her *The Children Hour*, a drama built on abnormal psychology and set in an Eastern Girls’ School, is a superb creation to her credit. In the middle of the depression, the talent of Clifford Odets burst dramatically on the American theatrical scene. His plays won him the reputation of being an outstanding member of the Left Wing School of Young American dramatists.

Waiting for Lefty, Awake and Sing, Rocket to the Moon, Night Music and *Flowering Peach* are some of the well-known plays of Clifford Odets. To Barry, big business represents everything he abhors in modern life. The right to do as one pleases and the desire for leisurely hour are two basic points of consideration in most of his plays. They are the motives which successfully impel his character to turn their backs on success and prosperity and seek a more satisfying existence. The principal tenet of Philip Barry's Philosophy is the fact that without freedom of action outside and freedom of spirit inside life is unendurable.

The Post-war dramatic scene was dominated by Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Both the playwrights flourished before the Second World War and consistently contributed to American Drama for ever three decades. Tennessee Williams became a name after the enthusiastic reception of *The Glass Menagerie* in 1945. Williams has perceived and portrayed in his work a world of singular paradox. His characters and themes are built upon paradox. *The Glass Menagerie, A Street Car Named Desire, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Rose Tattoo,* and *Orpheus Descending* are some of his remarkable plays. Most of his plays have been cinematized. They are all the audience's delight even today.

Arthur Miller represents the best of the American theatre which had evolved and matured in a remarkably short period from 1920 to the mid-fifties. Closer to Ibsen in ideals, approaches and effects, Miller is a naturalist with his interest in the society and social problems. Miller's work represents an organic synthesis, an end product in which the diverse elements are not always apparent on the surface. Basically, a realist-naturalist, he concerns himself with the typically normal in American life. His style is straight forward and vernacular. He deliberately creates characters who are ordinary instead of extraordinary. Miller's heroes are normal American businessmen and husbands. Their tragedy provokes sympathy precisely because it is the tragedy of average American life. *All My Sons, Death of a Salesman, A View from The Bridge, The Crucible,* and *Strange Interlude* are some of his outstanding creations.

Edward Albee is America's chief writer within the general framework of the theatre of the absurd. He is a celebrity. His plays are attacked and praised with almost equal vigour. He took charge of the legacy of American plays from Williams and Miller and reigned supreme in the sixties in the realm of American Drama. *The Zoo Story, The Sandbox, Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Tiny Alice, The American Dream* and *All Over* are some of his superb creations. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is his greatest commercial success. This play is about the emptiness that surrounds and threatens to swallow our relationships. *Tiny Alice* is about the void lurking behind our deepest beliefs. The hollowness of American types has been epitomized in *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream*:

"It is an examination of the American scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity. It is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen."(*American Literature After 1930*,303).

The Zoo Story is a fascinating piece. It has only one scene comprising two characters. Man is animal with animalistic violence. The zoo symbolizes: "the caged isolation of mankind".(*American Literature After 1930*,332).The play depicts man's caged animality. *All Over* has centred largely on the process of dying. The setting, characters and actions of this play are haunted by death, both natural and violent. Ruby Cohn's comment deserves special mention here... "The shadow of death darkens all Albee's plays. In the presence of the death going on, the real self is made visible, for illusions are unmasked at this point. Human freedom may become aware of its limitations, and therefore, self-knowledge may be achieved."(Vos, 110).To become aware that dying is a process which involves one's self, is to gain self-knowledge. In order to have the wholesome view of Edward Albee, I think,

it is imperative on my part to devote a few pages to the man and his milieu. The development of his personality and the onward progression of his career as a dramatist can't be ignored as he is reckoned as one of the big four modern American playwrights, the others being Eugene O' Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Besides, he is classified early in his career as part of the Theatre of Absurd and The Angry Young Man Movement.

In the raw flesh of the American theatre, Albee's plays are depressing and cynical, indeed. Albee's world view got reflected in his thematic concerns clearly shows the fact that behind the obvious preoccupation with death lies an inner drama that discloses the playwright's compassion for his fellow human beings. His plays embody an affirmative vision of human experience.

Work Cited

Allen,L,Frederick.,*Since Yesterday* ,New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1940, p. 132.

Ibid. p. 281

Gassner, John.*Masters of the Drama* (New York,1954), p. 411.

Heiney,Honald and Lenthiel H. Downs, *Recent American Literature After 1930*, Vol.4; p.265.

Ibid., p. 303.

Ibid. p.332.

Knights L.C., *Drama and Society in the Age of Johnson*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1937, p. 149.

Knights, L.C., *Drama and Society in the Age of Johnson*,Penguin Books, 1937, p. 13

Luccock, Fatford, E.*The American Mirror* (New York: The Macmillan company, 1940), p.193.

Swados, Harvey, "Introduction", *Ibid.*, p. xi.

Vos, Nevin, *The Great Pendulum of Becoming*; Berdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1980), p. 110..

Wade,C ,Richard., Howard B. Wilder and Louise C. Wade, *A History of The United States*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.1966, p. 675.

Wilson,G.B., *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre*, Eaglewood Cliffs, N J. Prentice Hall,1973,p. 2.

Young ,Alfred and Leonard W. Levy, *The American Writer and The Great Depression*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co. 1966,p.V.