



Myths in Modern American Drama: From Eugene O'Neill to Tony Kushner

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“Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things” (Barthes, 55).

Myth is an interpretation of everyday activities placed in a socially acceptable frame; a verbal expression given to these experiences over a certain period of time gives it a definite meaning. The characteristic features of a myth differentiates it from legends or folk tales: folktales are placed in times past (like most myths) and are usually considered untrue whereas legends, which are factual reproductions of incidents in society, are comparatively modern. Unlike both these forms of story telling, myths have historical origins and are reproduced with minor alterations without changing the core meaning of it. At the same time myths are often associated with superstitions in a theological argument which is again a misconceived view of the relationship between past events, stories/conclusions, and events that follow.

In this paper, I would like to explore the recurrent myths in American society which are kept alive through various media like songs, literature, films, cartoons, theatre and other performances. American society which was founded on the basis of a Biblical myth became a receptacle for many more in the years that followed. According to Sacvan Bercovitch's account in 'Rites of the Ascent', the Puritans, revolted against the Old World and moved towards a new land of promises, using the aid of the Bible. 'The desert land they were claiming had its past in Bible promises: America was there so that in due time they could make it blossom...they used the biblical myth of exodus and conquest to justify imperialism...(8).

Elaborating on the myth of origin, I will divide this paper into five parts: 1. Land, 2. Material Success, 3. Marital Success/ Legacy, 4. Homosexuality, and 5. Identity. Through each of these categories, I will explore the myths associated with it and its regeneration in modern American society.

Land: America, the land of opportunity was first realised by Puritans of England who settled in the Northern regions of America and laid their foundation through means of land acquisition. This Edenic land offered promises of success whereby Puritan rulers could assert their power over native Indians. Even though the exodus from Europe was in order to create a new paradise, as misinterpreted through the bible, it resulted in an inverted picture of the scheme. With the passage of time America, which was renamed as 'New England', started following the steps of the European ideals of capitalism.

The Puritans, by the early seventeenth century carried forward the myth and declared every acre of land within their reach as their own. Roots of capitalism were being sown through the capturing of foreign land, originally owned by the “savage” Native Indians. The Europeans started expanding their land ownership towards the West by the seventeenth century. This was the beginning of the western frontier; much of the western frontier consisted of the west-side of the Mississippi River. However, by mid-seventeenth century, these borders were expanded to the other side of the river too as it offered richer agricultural promises. At the same time it also offered independence to the many who wanted to explore the vast land where they could cultivate their farms.

These historical details become important in the creation of myths which may have been buried in the minds of the Americans for some time, but were resurrected by the playwrights in the twentieth century. In an attempt to recreate the past in an age which was driven by the industrial forces around it, playwrights were looking for the lost land and the promises that it has seemed to offer earlier. Mark Evans Bryan notes in 'American Drama, 1900-1915',

Westward expansion had characterised the age but the rapid growth of the rail lines beyond the Mississippi River after the Civil War opened up millions of acres of new land and, by the close of the nineteenth century, the end of the frontier was in sight. Popular American literature and entertainment reflected close associations with the disappearing "wild" American West (9).

These romantic retellings of wilderness that the west offered are shown by Arthur Miller in, *The Misfits* (1957; film 1962). Roslyn (played by Marilyn Monroe), who has recently been divorced in the play, moves out of Nevada to explore the countryside which becomes a source of love and a new life for her. Like the earlier invaders, Roslyn too seems to find a sense of independence attached to this exploration. Initially though a misfit amongst the traditional cowboys, she soon colonizes their thoughts through her civilized sense of taming the horses. The struggle between man and animal becomes a tug-of-rights. However, the myth of the cowboy as a strong countryside gentleman is maintained through the chasing down of the wild mustangs on the vast open land of the west. The movie captures this scene through a long sequence of shots, where the role played by Clark Gable as Gay Langland, retells the story of colonization that took place centuries earlier. However, an intervention from the civilized side of the country pulls him away from the injustice done to the wild life.

The sexual politics and the myths attached to them in relation to the cowboys are also explored in the play, and even more through the movie by the stereotypical character of a white American woman from the city placed against western cowboys who must protect her. This sharp mythical battle of the sexes representing opposing ideologies was earlier explored by William Vaughn Moody in the play, *The Great Divide* (1906). However, none of these early plays explicitly show the clash and rather places it in a romantic setting/

Sam Shepard through his plays looks beyond romanticism into a realistic setting, while retaining the mythical background. Shepard unearths the history of the west through his plays and mirrors the distorted past of the Indians who had suffered at the hands of European colonisers. His plays question the independence and the America identity of "self-reliance" stressed by Emerson as he casts his eye on the west land (22-44). Shepard's plays are set in the nostalgic west and in *Silent Tongue* (screenplay 1993; film 1994) he gives an extended account of the colonization that took place through a man-woman relationship in a patriarchal society. The play explores the exploitation of the Kiowa tribe of Indians by the Europeans- Mac Cree for Velada says, "She is an Indian. They are born to suffer." (172). It raises the questions of belongingness and access to power as a way to legitimise land acquisition by tyrannizing the underprivileged in society.

This myth of power over a community through material gains takes a concrete form in the post-industrial society of America. This forms the beginning of the American Dream of the twentieth century.

Material Success: The myth of material success even as it goes back to the discovery of America was not realized in media, until the nineteenth century with the introduction of Horatio Alger's novels. His novels laid the foundation of rags-to-riches myth which developed a hope of success in the minds of Americans. This myth is explored by many playwrights in the modern society which was gradually coming to terms with rising capitalism. At the same time, what continued to exist in society was the false hope of material satisfaction which is symbolised by land acquisition, high salary and social acceptance.

The above mentioned theme of success bundled with social harmony is reflected in plays from Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920; film 1933) to Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1993; 1996). Though interspersed with other themes, these plays revolve around the crumbling American society driven by the Horatio Alger myth. *The Emperor Jones* explores this idea through the racial myths and memories associated with Brutus Jones who travels both literally and figuratively from the lower realms of white American society to the position of an emperor in a remote island of Africa stereotyped by their savage living. Brutus Jones becomes a self-proclaimed emperor, thus extending the image of the

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white coloniser to the Black figure of the White American Dream. Through an expressionistic technique that relies heavily on the use and exaggeration of memory (adopted from the German playwright, George Kaiser), O'Neill gives it an end through a tragic descent of the protagonist into wilderness.

A similar idea is explored in Arthur Miller's play, *Death of a Salesman* (1949; film: 1985), where the protagonist, Willy Lowman continuously searches for the secret of success as he moves to and fro from past to present in a dialogic confrontation with himself. The salesman by the end of the play has to sell himself in order to be able to buy the dreams that he saw. Harold Clurman in a review notes:

Death of a Salesman is a challenge to the American Dream...since the Civil War...the American dream has become distorted to the dream of business success...The original premise of our dream of success—popularly represented in the original boy parables of Horatio Alger—was that enterprise, courage and hard work were the keys to success...[Now] Instead of the ideals of hard work and courage, we have salesmanship. Salesmanship involves a certain element of fraud...The goal of salesman ship is to make a deal, to earn a profit... (212-213).

Unable to make a profit from salesmanship, Lowman desperately draws his cards of luck like the Alger hero. Dustin Hoffman as Willy Lowman who breaks down under the pressure to live the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*, gave another remarkable performance in David Mamet's *American Buffalo* (1975; film: 1996) as Teach in which he seeks profit through conspiracy with his friend, Don. The capitalist society in its need for profit explores the myths of oppression placed against earlier myths of the west which have been sealed in a coin (with a buffalo on it).

In each of these plays by Miller and Mamet, truth and responsibility are juxtaposed with the desire for material acquisition as a status symbol. Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959; film: 1961), follows league of the desire to live the white American Dream. Each member of the Younger family waits for the \$10,000 cheque to arrive, in order to realize their much postponed dreams of success. Besides themes of assimilation and lack of job opportunities for African-Americans, one major issue that comes to the surface is of land ownership. At the time when Hansberry was writing the play property laws in America did not give the right to land ownership to African Americans. Until 1968, when the Fourteenth Amendment was made in the Constitution of the United States, Black Americans could not claim their right over land through citizenship. In the play, this unequal share of rights is represented through Karl Linder, who though could not misbehave (according to the law), could apparently lure them with money to a different neighbourhood. However, Walter Younger decides to live the white American Dream of moving into a large house by the end of the play.

Other forms of media—songs like 'Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend' by Carol Channing in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1949) and 'Money Honey' by Jesse Stone in 1953—supports this myth beyond the literary sections of the society. What becomes even more interesting is how children are also cultivated in this culture through cartoon and comic series. Uncle Scrooge created by Carl Barks in 1947 was brought to the fore through comics and later through television. He represents the immigrant in America who works his way up the social ladder through hard work and luck. Besides him, Richie Rich 'The Poor Little Rich Boy' in Harvey Comics also injects the hope of a rich future in the young minds of the American society. The fact that Richie Rich inherits the wealth from his parents becomes an important factor for the American family which is based on the foundation for a need to pass on the legacy.

Marital Success: The Biblical myth of marriage and procreation becomes a recurrent theme in many of the plays in the Modern American Drama which questions this belief system through various modes like expressionism and use of Greek myths in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* (1924; film: 1958), retelling of history in Maxwell Anderson's *Anne of the Thousand Days* (1948; film: 1969) homosexual/homosocial tensions within marriage in Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955; film: 1958), or 'fun and games' with an illusory son in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962; film: 1966).

O'Neill's plays *Desire under the Elms*, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941-1956; film: 1962) and *Mourning becomes Electra* (1931; film: 1947) chose Greek myths of Oedipus and Electra with elements from his own life. Each of these plays are a foreboding of what will continue to exist in the society—failure of marriage at the expense of capitalism. The invasion by capitalism into the laws of

marriage is extended in a historical framework in Anderson's *Anne of the Thousand Days* where marriage becomes a means to acquire power over another person.

In a modern setting this marriage of compromise and acquisition of power/property is reflected in Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Although the play explores themes of closeted homosexuality, it bases its argument on the need for procreation in a marriage—a legacy that has to be transferred. Through the character of Brick Pollit, Williams emphasises on the possibility repressed homosexuality which the laws of marriage prefer to ignore. Ironically, the movie also ignores this aspect and gives it a socially acceptable ending in which Maggie and Brick re-unite with one another. Elizabeth Taylor, who played the role of Maggie in the play, performs a similar role in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. In Albee's play, a shift towards post-modernism is evident in the absurdist technique adapted to question the pressing need of procreation as a part of the American dream of a successful family. Through the presence of an imaginary child the myths of success—high paying job, happy marriage, children, social appearances—are inverted. Elizabeth Taylor, who in her real life too had undergone a number of failed marriages, gave a remarkable performance of the fear attached to a life without illusions in a modern society and the need for performativity.

In many other plays violence is used as a scheme to assert power in a marital relationship, expressive of colonialization of one at the hands of the other. In Williams' play, *A Street Car Named Desire* (1947; film: 1951), male power is realised through frequent use of slangs and other aggressive expressions. Blanche who represents the nostalgic Southern culture becomes an external threat to Stanley and Stella's marriage. In a failed attempt to remain in the past, Blanche uses make-up, dim light and ways of seduction. Stanley, who represents the harsh reality of the present, strips her of her illusions and asserts his masculinity by raping her.

Masculine power expressed through rape and its association with marriage is repeated in Shepard's *Silent Tongue*. At a symbolic level, rape represents the power relations between the oppressed and the oppressor. In fact, the legacy of the right to rape or possess a woman (land) through the use of power is carried forward by the next generation. Carla J. McDonough makes a remark in this context,

The relationship between colonizer and colonized is that between dominator and dominated, a relationship that mirrors the vision of male/female intercourse in a patriarchal society. Thus, the colonized subject is viewed as a feminized subject in the sexist sense of being weak and in need of subjugation, while the colonizer is presented as masculine in the sexist sense of being powerful and a natural leader (164).

At the same time, in Shepard's plays the authoritative position of the patriarch is overturned and his weakness is exposed as it develops. This disassociated power is also evident in an attempt by David Mamet who negates the presence of women in his plays—a desperate need to go back to the mythic past where men were placed superior to women, especially in the realms of business. In Mamet's *American Buffalo*, women are completely absent from the play: a misogynist world of business. In the play, *Edmond* (1982; film: 2006) by David Mamet, the female characters are present but are pushed to the margins of society: Edmond walks out on his wife, the only women outside his marriage are prostitutes, he threatens a woman on the subway and eventually murders the only woman who agrees to speak to him but could not participate in his search for an identity.

The inversion of the Biblical myth of marriage and procreation is further developed in the later plays of Tony Kushner who takes forward the hints of homosexuality in the plays of Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee and the utopian homosocial world of David Mamet.

Homosexuality: By the time we come across the plays by Tony Kushner, we see these male homosocial groups going back even further to a male homosexual society which was not explicit earlier. An open reference to homosexuality in modern literature can be seen as a return to Greek and Roman literature where homosexuality was variously dealt with in Homer's *Illiad* and Plato's *Symposium* (The relationship shared between Achilles and Patroclus is often considered homosexual. Also, Plato's *Symposium* discusses love in context of the sexual behavior, in the company of other philosophers). However, this utopian view of the society could not last for long, especially with the advent of Puritan ideologies in America and Victorian morality in England. Laws were introduced to place homosexuality

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under the banner of crime, thereby closeting homosexuality to confine people to the religious norms of heterosexual marriage. It is also a noted fact that in 1982, homosexuality was held responsible for AIDS because of the unusual characteristics associated with the disease. AIDS was therefore termed GRID (Gay-related Immune Deficiency Disease). Besides biological ailments, myths of psychological disturbances have also been cited as a cause of homosexual practices.

A close examination of the plays of Tennessee Williams reveals a shift from denial to acceptance about homosexual leanings in his personal life. Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie* (1945; film: 1973) hints at homosexuality through the narrator and a character in the play, Tom Wingfield, who feels claustrophobic in his own house in the presence of his mother and sister. Though the play does not concentrate directly upon the homosexual traits in Tom Wingfield, it may be put into this category only because it is called a memory play by the narrator who shares resemblances with Williams going through a similar phase in his life. However, by the time we come across later plays like *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams' fears associated with homosexuality comes to the surface. Brenda A. Murphy remarks, "As a playwright whose success and livelihood depended on public acceptance not only of his work but of him personally, or at least his public persona, Williams had little choice but to remain "closeted homosexual..." (184). It is in *Cat...* through the character of Brick Pollit, that Tennessee supports the public disgust for sodomy, while simultaneously supporting homosexuality through the character of Big Daddy.

Brick: It was too rare to be normal, and two things between two people is too rare to be normal. Oh, once in a while he put his hand on my shoulder or I'd put mine on his...

Big Daddy: Brick, nobody thinks that that's not normal!

Brick: Well, they're mistaken, it was! It was a pure an' true thing an' that's not normal. (Williams, 65)

Williams also fell prey to the myth of homosexuality as a psychological disturbance and referred a psychoanalyst Dr. Lawrence Kubie to "cure" him of his disease (Murphy, 184). Post treatment in *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1958; film: 1959) through the mythic figure of St. Sebastian, Williams gave a gothic background and a tragic close to his social aggression. The ritualistic sacrifice in the end of this play can be related to later plays of Albee (*The Zoo Story* (1958)) and Tony Kushner's (*Angels in America* (1993; film: 2003), especially the death of Roy Cohn).

Albee's play *The Zoo Story* in an absurdist setting establishes a relationship between Jerry (who declares himself as "queer") and Peter, who is not given a voice, preserving his sexuality ambiguous. The tragic close given to the play expresses a failure in communication at the most basic level. Contrary to this, Edmond in Mamet's play, Edmond is able to complete his ontological odyssey only when he communicates (homosexually) with a fellow prisoner, thus breaking the social and racial barriers.

Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* employs the plot of mystery plays to uproot the myth of biological degeneration related to the practice of homosexuality. Benilde Montgomery makes a remark in this context by comparing the body of Prior Walter to the wounded body of Christ from the *Corpus Christi* plays. The wounded body of Christ thus becomes a symbol of,

The woundedness of the social body, of the body politic, and of the individual physical body, the cycles teach that the destinies of these separate bodies are in fact interconnected. As each of these bodies (social, political and individual) suffers in its own way, it's suffering also participates in Christ's suffering... as Christ must die to rise again, so too must all else that is (77).

Kushner thus sees a relation between this and the collapse at the social level in a modern society infected with AIDS. By associating AIDS with homosexuality, Kushner is indeed questioning the existing beliefs. In *Angels*, Kushner redefines identities at the level of gender differences, religious beliefs and social practices in the age of post World War II. In his use of the mythical past, present is created not by shunning off the memory, like Roy Cohn does but in its acceptance (like Prior Walter).

Identity: The absence of lived experience can trap the playwright/audience into stereotyping the character. In plays like *The Emperor Jones* by O'Neill and *Voodoo Macbeth* (1936) by Orson Welles,

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even as an African-American is given the role of the protagonist, there is stereotype attached to each of them. Myths related to their cultural practices like voodoo are revived in both the plays, associating them with the past which did not exist in the modern American society. Brutus Jones (*The Emperor Jones*) and Yank (*The Hairy Ape* (1922)) both Black characters in O'Neill's plays are placed in the lowermost decks of the society—assuring the myth of poverty associated with African Americans. The social position of African Americans in twentieth century America may not be a successful one, but to push them to an economic level beyond normal is a mythic representation. In 1865 the African American performer Charles Hicks became one of the first black men to replace 'whites in blackface' (Shteir 20) and attested the fact that African Americans could participate in roles beyond that of 'momma'.

North American Native Indians share a similar fate—'For the most part plays with Indian characters have only created stereotypical Indians, dominated by the noble savage, the villainous red devil, and the Indian princess or the pathetic maiden...' (Wilmeth 150). Most of the roles given to the Indians are those played by the Americans, transforming the cultural myths to stereotypical representations. 'Perhaps the most egregious fault lies in the fact that these plays, as well as others, tend to depict American Indians in the past tense (as if they no longer exist) rather than as contemporary, living people with families, homes, jobs and dreams' (Haugo 335).

In contrast to the above arguments it is only through these references, culturally misinterpreted as they may be, that these plays revive that which has erstwhile remained unobserved. By recreating the identities at social, racial, and sexual levels, the canon of modern American plays participate in the myth of America as the melting pot. Kushner's play, *Lincoln* (screenplay 2012; film: 2012) documents the beginning of this Emancipation, while his other play, *Angels in America* travels through centuries to show that the mythical American Dream still exists.

Memories that are transferred from one generation to the other through oral recitations, scripts, songs, movies and performative practices keeps the myths alive even in present times. Though they are reproduced and retold according to the changes in the circumstances, the presence of myths helps to sustain a common belief. Levi Strauss in this context says, myth 'gives man, very importantly, the illusion that he can understand the universe and that he does understand the universe. It is, of course, only an illusion.' (6) This belief is not limited to the knowledge of a single man only, but is shared by the entire community—Jung describes this as 'collective unconscious' (128).

In a post-World War II, post-Industrial and post-9/11 society, where the most common beliefs are threatened, myths are the only means to sustenance. The ennui within and without needs to be replaced by the presence of myths in order to exist.

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