PREFACE

Modern American drama from Eugene O'Neill to Tennessee Williams has been scrutinized and evaluated in terms of the distinguishing features exhibited in the works of this country's foremost playwrights. A large number of these plays have been studied regarding each playwright's manipulation of distinct themes dealing with consciousness and nonbeing. These themes which have been identified in the critical literature have not prompted further investigations into the manner in which these subjects have been presented on the stage. Nor has any study to date systematically examined the themes identified in the critical literature to determine if the philosophical orientation of certain plays authored by Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams might converge to form one uniform world view. A close examination of the critical literature in which specific recurring themes are addressed in these playwright's works suggests that such uniformity exists among O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, and Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Each of these works has been associated with a philosophical perspective concentrating on consciousness and nonbeing, two primary components of existentialism.

An in-depth investigation of each play is warranted. This type of inquiry comparing dramatic constituents in each play with a philosophical perspective would reveal more about the nature of the dramatic works and the author's development of dramatic form. Such a study might also reduce the purported disparity in dramatic form employed by these playwrights. It would serve to gather and collate? These critical perceptions offered by dramatic theorists, critics, designers, and the playwrights themselves. This close study of *Long Day's Journey, Death of a Salesman, and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* might also verify that scholars have not been incorrect in their conclusions regarding these plays. These theorists have only been remiss in comparing their own observations to those views expressed by a number of their
contemporaries, and applying this identification of a dramatic design to an in-depth study of these particular plays. Theatre historians and dramatic critics have often focused their investigations on those unique approaches to theme which have separated the works of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams. For example, Jay Halio's "Eugene O'Neill: the Long Quest," documents the playwright's consistent emphasis upon death and a search for meaning in life, a spiritually fulfilled life. To Halio, O'Neill's habitual employment of a homecoming theme provides a primary dramatic impetus in O'Neill's plays:

But the quest remained central to O'Neill's work, and the earnestness of his seeking as much as his indefatigable experimentation with technique greatly contributed to the revitalization of the American theater in the early decades of his century—even as one illusion of "home" after another was examined and found for what it was—an illusion.

Orm Overland identifies a distinctly different catalyst in Arthur Miller's plays. In his "The Action and Its Significance: Arthur Miller's Struggle with Dramatic Form," Overland points to Miller's unification of family and social concerns as a dominant characteristic in Miller's works. As Overland states:

Indeed, for Miller synthesis has largely been a question of dramatic form, and the problem for the playwright has been to create a viable form that could bridge "the deep split between the private life of the man and his social life."

In "The Shoutout," Walter Kerr isolates a decisively different influence operative in the plays of Tennessee Williams. Kerr identifies a thematic trend in Williams' plays which is also emphasized symbolically, often in the playwright's development of dramatic action:

Is there a more characteristic Tennessee Williams effect than one that occurs, noisily, but helplessly, halfway through the second act of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof? In a vast plantation land. "This side of the Valley Nile" barely visible through billowing white lace curtains, a father and son are having a nervous, finally passionate, private conversation.

This type of "shootout" to which Kerr refers constitutes in this critic's mind Williams' concentration upon a central character's physical, mental and spiritual isolation. As Kerr explains, "For Brick has shut out everyone: father, mother, closest friend, wife Maggie."
An almost endless array of articles containing such references as these isolates the work of each of these three playwrights. Such an implied disparity in reference to O'Neill's, Miller's, and Williams' development of dramatic form infuses the critical writing and distorts it. While devoting their critical inquiries to studies of O'Neill's messianic drama, Miller's concern with man's social responsibility, or William's concentration upon the fragile outcast's inability to adapt to a harsh, impersonal world; dramatic theorists have predominantly neglected to document those specific instance when these playwrights have utilized the same themes, manipulated in the same manner, to realize an identical intent. Gerald Weales, in his "Arthur Miller: Man and His Image," initiates such a comparison, but confines his study to the generalized overview of Miller's and Williams' plays as "domestic dramas." In so doing, Weales restricts his study of the drama to an investigation of the subject matter employed. He does not proceed with a rigorous investigation of how these themes are translated into concrete dramatic form on the stage.

◊◊◊