CHAPTER I

MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA

American drama has its own place in English Literature. It has a long history. In the colonial period, drama was not approved by the puritans. So what was written, was little and poor. It lacked originality when it began in America. “Historical and Indian themes weighted it. It was imitative and awkward, sentimental and tear-jerking until about 1900.” (Goodman 10)

What is termed colonial period in American history extends from 1607 to 1765. During these years the literary output in America was scanty. A group of people who had their cultural lineage in Europe should have given so little thought to literary composition, seems rather strange till we look into the factors that conditioned life in these early American settlements.

To the pioneer settlers, survival was the first and most vital problem. To fight against the wilderness, to convert a rugged forest into cultivable land, to hold out against adverse forces, elemental and otherwise, were some of their gripping problems which shut out from their minds thoughts of literary composition. Lack of leisure, therefore, chiefly accounts for the lack of a literature of high order.
Moreover, as sharers of the cultural tradition of England, the colonists did not feel the urge to create a literature of their own that could vie with that of England and of Europe. They felt that they still belonged culturally to the old world and could still receive sustenance from their parent country. It was only much later, after the winning of political independence, that America felt the need for weaning herself culturally from England, and erects the edifice of her own literature.

Great literature is often the result of a sense of oneness, of a spirit of nationality which the heterogeneous settlers of America were yet to feel. This sense of nationality was not felt by the colonists who still thought of themselves as part of England or of Europe. The fusion in the ‘melting pot’ took place later and thus is seen unmistakably in the very fibre of American literature of the ‘Revolutionary Period’.

If the bustle and activity of the colonial period gave little time for the writer to write, it is equally true that it gave the public little leisure to read. No writer can thrive in an indifferent medium. Literary compositions of merit are made possible by the response and encouragement from the reading public. In colonial America, the reading of the people was confined to the Bible and the prayer book and the few other books that were brought from England. Facilities for printing were negligible and there was scant inducement for the early Americans to write. Whenever he wrote, he did so for the sake of the Englishmen, and his writings were to be published in England. Only three things
prompted the colonial writer to take up his pen. One was the desire to record important events and to provide their families and friends with an account of personal experiences. Second was the motive of propaganda. Glowing accounts of the land were written so that the English people might be lured in large numbers to America which held out a promise of material prosperity. The third factor behind the colonial urge to write was the Puritan’s inordinate appetite for religious writings. Sharing Milton’s desire to ‘justify the ways of God to man’, these writers produced a voluminous literature composed of sermons, diaries and biographies and poems of a religious nature. But the Puritan’s subordination of form to matter hindered the production of a literature of purely aesthetic nature.

The colonial period of American history of drama came to an end in 1767 with the performance of the first play written by a native American on the stage of the South Wark Theatre. The growth of American drama was delayed partly due to the literary dependence upon the mother country and partly due to a widespread prejudice against the theatre. The reasons for opposition were more temperamental than theological.

Permission was granted to Hallam’s company to act in 1754 on the clear understanding that ‘nothing indecent or immoral’ was to be performed. People were fond of horse-races and they covered long distances to see them and they did not mind paying for their entertainment. Thomas Godfrey, the writer of the first American drama, _The Prince of Parthia_ derived his inspiration from Old English dramatists. He studied the work of Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, Dryden, Ambrose, Philips and Nicolas Rowe.
thoroughly. The Play, *The Prince of Parthia*, rests heavily on Elizabethan poetic drama, both in its employment of blank verse and its use of passion and violence on the stage. Some of the dramatists and their creations in the colonial period are remarkable. These are Captain Marcos Farfan’s *Spanish Comedia* (1598), William Darby’s *YeBare and YeCubb* (1666), Addison’s *Cato* (1737), Robert Rogers’s *Paxton Bay* (1764) and *The Savages of America* (1764).

Hutchinson and Godfrey were immensely interested in drama and they attended the performances of Hallam’s company. The inspiration derived from these performances yielded fruits. They produced *The Masque of Alfred*, a dramatic piece at the college of Philadelphia. It was written by Thompson and revised by Mallaet. Thomas Godfrey’s *The Prince of Parthia* owes its inspiration to the performances of Hallam and *The Masque of Alfred*. The scene of this romantic tragedy is laid in Parthia, in a time about the beginning of the Christian era. The tragedy has nothing to do with historical events and facts and is purely Godfrey’s invention. It is based on human emotion. The tragedy should not be judged by modern standards. It should be remembered that it throws a flood of light on what was being done in the sphere of the dramatic art in contemporary England. Godfrey is remarkable for his belief in literature as an end in itself. To him it was not just a means for theological arguments or for edification.
The Prince of Parthia was the only play of American origin performed on a native stage before the revolution. A. H. Quinn has remarked on the play in his book, History of American Drama:

“It is fortunate that none of these dramas disputes with The Prince of Parthia the honour of being first American play. It is not only the relative superiority of Godfrey’s play both as a piece of literature and an acting drama that makes it fitting the honour of priority should belong to it.” (30)

The period 1765 to 1829 is remarkable in American history as the settlers of the different colonies, who had migrated from different parts of Europe, were now beginning to think of themselves as one people. The fusion of ‘melting pot’ took place during the period leading on to that sentiment which found expression in the significant phrase like, ‘We the people of the United States’. The united political power of the Americans was first made manifest with the Stamp Act Congress of 1769, and went on right upto the year 1829 in which the common man of America was vindicated with Andrew Jackson’s becoming the president of the United States. While the colonies were resisting together the tyrannical imposition of taxes by the British Government, an internal revolution was going on against the autocracy. Both these trends had great bearing on American literature especially on American drama.

This was an age of great complexities and problems and rapid changes. The entire western civilization was bearing the weight of certain clashes: Mercantilism versus Free
Trade, Imperialism versus Home Rule, Tory versus Whig and Federalism versus Republicanism. Since an integral part of American character is the belief in the rights of the individual for his fullest possible development within a free society, providing justice and equality for all, the literature of the period is of great interest and importance. Books written and speeches made during this period were repeated assertions of this belief.

This newly awakened national consciousness was of fierce nature. Americans were becoming extremely sensitive to criticism. The idea of inferiority to England was unthinkable. It was this spirit that made them aspire to the creation of distinctive literature of their own, that had an aesthetic and not merely a utilitarian interest.

An excellent literature of politics or an equally praiseworthy literature of religion was not enough. The nationalists felt the intense desire to establish a tradition of belles-lettres. If poetry, fiction and the drama were the marks of a great culture, America did not want to lag behind any other country in the possession of these. This was the spirit behind the literary attempts of such writings. It was the attitude that prompted Washington Irving and Cooper to look diligently for material for romance and legends in the annals of American history. It is the romantic period that we get the finest expression of this spirit.

The tide of national sentiment that swept over America produced in this wake a genuine interest in belles-lettres in literature that was not merely informational or utilitarian. The
writers were more self-conscious and the spread of education created an enlightened public who were ready for finer literature. Accounts of voyages, tracts, sermons, histories and biographies that dominated the literary scene so far, were retiring into the background though they continued to be written. Sermons still occupied a prominent place in the life of the colonies. But they became freer and more polished. These sermons helped to develop the art of oratory and had considerable influence on political oratory which now became important.

Just as Elizabethan England, the spirit of nationalism gave rise to a great interest in national history. The nationalistic temper of the American people of this period had an immediate impact upon history and biography. A flood of local histories appeared. The Revolution gave a great impetus to this type of writing. The great heroes of the revolution were immortalized and the events recorded with great pride and pleasure. *The Life of Washington* by John Marshall is an example of this. Cooper and Irving too made memorable contribution to this type of writing.

The political crisis that confronted America produced a spate of polemical writings. It was only natural that literature of persuasion should have flourished in an age of constant political discussion. Before the war of independence the writings were of the nature of literary debates, between the Tories and Whigs. Pamphlets, speeches, sermons and State papers appeared in profusion. Samuel Adams, James Olis, John Dickenson, Hamilton and Jefferson represented the Whig side whereas the Tory position was expounded by
Jomathan Bondour, Martin Howard, Samuel Seabury etc. The impassioned speech of Patrick Henry delivered with its incomparable conclusion ‘Give me liberty or give me death’ was meant to convince the reluctant colonies to come forward and fight. The patriots made their legal positions clear by a well-worked-out political philosophy which they drew from the writings of Thomas Hobbes, Sir Robert Filmer, John Locke, and many other English and European thinkers. The long tradition of theological disputation these Americans had behind them stood in good shape. The conflict was political. The literature that presented ideas in favour of revolution is remarkable for its clarity of thought and exposition.

When the ‘Revolution’ became a reality instead of a much discussed possibility, there arose a need for another type of writers. The fluctuation of war and the uncertainty of the issue were quite enough to make even those Americans who wanted war, lose morale. It was at this time that the propagandist had to step in, ready to appeal to the emotion of all kinds of people and keep the flame of national feeling glowing. The best among the writers of propagandist literature of this time was Thomas Paine. This time, there were plays which were satirical in their contents published anonymously for obvious reasons. But internal and external evidences are available to contribute to the establishment of their authorship beyond any shadow of doubt. The earliest of satires was written in New England simply because the revolution began there. The most eminent of writers of satires was Mrs. Mercy Otis Warren. She wrote many satires which show that she was thoroughly conversant with all the important events and happenings that took place during the revolution because she unfailingly corresponded with many. Her satires are
The Adulateur, The Group, The Sack of Rome and The Ladies of Castile. Two more of these early satires have been attributed to Mrs. Warren although there is no evidence to establish her authorship. One of these satires The Block Heads or The Affrighted Officers is a prose farce and is clearly inspired by General Burgoyne’s farce, The Blockade which was put on the stage in Boston in the winter of 1775-1776. Its attack was directed against the patriot army which was responsible for the blockade of the city.

Joseph Leacock’s play The Fall of British Tyranny or American Liberty Triumphant holds a position of considerable significance in the sphere of patriotic plays. In this play, the dialogues are good and interesting. The characters are well drawn and they do not talk alike. Leacock is undoubtedly a dramatist of some repute. Another famous name in the history of the development of American drama is H. H. Brackenridge (1748-1816). In his drama The Battle of Bunker’s Hills, the dramatist gives expression to his sentiment of love of the country. He wrote his second play The Death of General Montgomery in 1777. The author expressed his confidence, at a dark time in American history that the publication of the play might be helpful to the colonial cause. His plays are much better than other revolutionary dramas from the point of view of structure and expression. A. H. Quinn has remarked about the satires in his book, History of American Drama: “One of the most striking characteristics of the revolutionary satires is their intense partisanship. They were written by ardent patriots or ardent royalists.” (55) Another dramatist, Robert Munford represented the more neutral attitude in his plays The Candidates and The Patriots. Perhaps The Candidates was written before the revolution began because there is no reference to the war. It is a satire on the methods of conducting elections for the
Assembly. *The Patriots* is a much more important drama. Munford was a soldier and played a significant role in the revolution, yet the tone of the play is decidedly pacifist. The Tory view of the situation also finds its expression in the colonies in certain dramas. The next Tory satire that saw the light of day has been ascribed to Jonathan Sewal (1728-1796). The title of the drama is *The Americans Roused in a Cure for Spleen* or *Amusement for a Winter’s Evening* (1775). Another Royalist Force was *The Anonymous Battle of Brooklyn* published by Rivington who was a Tory of New York.

Viewed from an absolute standard the artistic qualities of these dramas of the revolution may not be high. It is noteworthy that the more closely they are studied in relation to their inner meaning, the greater their significance becomes. In them, not figments of the fancy but real people live and move. Being drama they represent the feeling of the time in its most intense moods, and the hopes, fears, and agonies of that great period are mirrored in a glass that is most interesting when it reflects the nature of human beings who are emotionally under stress.

During the last decade of 18th and the first of the 19th century, the dominating force in the American drama was William Dunlop. He had a pleasant time with a background of Shakespeare’s acting plays and contemporary comedies. He wrote *The Modern Soldier* or *Love in New York* a comedy. *The Father* was the second comedy and according to Dunlop it was received in the great applause by the citizens. *The Father* has combination of purpose to amuse and instruct the 19th century characteristic. Dunlop, to his credit,
does not overdo the moral lecture nor does he dish up contemporary scandal. Dunlop wrote an interlude *Darby Return* in 1789. Next, Dunlop turned to Gothic melodrama and after that probably under the influence of French Revolution he turned to the theme of liberty. Dunlop’s native tragedy, *Andre* was not a big success and showed Federalist point of view and was rewritten in 1803 as *Glory of Columbia* when there was demand for patriotic spectacle. He was a versatile genius beginning with the comedy in *The Father* and then experimented with romantic tragedy and gothic drama. He rose to the pinnacle of glory in his lifetime.

The first quarter of the 19th century witnessed a number of changes in the American literary scene. By this time literature finally emerged. The literature of the 17th century was primarily religious and that of the 18th century dedicated to politics. It was the 19th century that finally saw the emergence of a type of writing that could truly be called belles-lettres. This spirit of romanticism, though felt in stray instances previously, had now become unmistakably evident. Although no given set of conditions can be given to account for the rise of romanticism in America, it is possible to mention certain factors as representative of the many and complex channels through which this movement became influential in the literature of America.

During the period from 1805 to 1825, if we take the literary merit into consideration, it is observed that the romantic plays with a tragic impulse are the most significant. The earliest of these romantic plays is *The Widow of Malabar* by David Humphreys. The
Yankey in England by the same author is of special interest. William Charlee White who wrote Orlendo or Parental Persecution, The Clergyman’s Daughter and The Poor Lodger. His plays are full of comic and serious scenes produce that variety, which in a certain degree is universally pleasing. Among the writers of tragedy however the most important figure is John Daly Burk. He wrote Bunker Hill, Female Patriotism or Death of Joan D’arc, Bethelum Gabar, a wild melodrama, and Lord of Trasylvania. The earliest of playwrights to follow Tyler and Dunlop in dealing with national themes was Susana Horswall Rowson, Her plays are The Slaves in Algiurs or A Struggle for Freedom, The Volunteers, The Female Patriot and Americans in England. Some other remarkable plays of this time are John Howard Payne’s Fall of Algeurse, John Murdruck’s Triumphs of Love or Happy Reconciliation and Beau Metamorphized.

The political writers of the period found quicker response to their attack upon opponents in journals published from Philadelphia in Boston. One of the earliest and most entertaining of these political dramas is the Political Outwitted published in 1789. It is of interest as a picture of social life of the period. Robinson wrote Younker’s Stategem or Banana Wedding. A better farce, All in a Bustle or The New House was written by William Minse. The most industrious writer John Mainshul of New York who wrote Merry Dames or Poets in Petticoats, Rural Felicity (1801), Sprightly Widows or He Stoops to Conquer. The French Revolution and The Suicide were well known college dramas of the period giving an indication of the unconquerable interest in the dramatic form. Theatrical conditions were becoming more definitely settled in Philadelphia.
During the twenty years that elapsed from Dunlop’s retirement in 1805 to the end of the first quarter of 19th century two figures stand out prominently in drama and represent in striking way the influence of native and foreign inspiration. James Nelson Barker and John Howard Payne stand for these two opposite forces, and around them may be grouped the writers of less significance who contributed to the development of the types the two leaders represented. Barker’s work is significant more in terms of its quality than its quantity. Only five plays have survived in print out of ten plays written by him. His last play is so much better than his first one that it may be said to belong to other species. His choice of American theme was neither accidental nor parochial. He did his best to fill lack of native drama. Barker’s Spanish Rower was based on Cervantes but later he burnt it. In 1805, he wrote a brief one act piece, a masque America. Later he wrote The Indian Princes in 1808 performed at the Chestnut Street Theatre. In the same theatre his The Embergo or What News was also performed a play which expressed the American resentment at the British and French encroachment on their commerce. The Indian Princes is the first surviving play that became very popular and it was also produced at Drury Lane, London in 1820. Barker found his material in John Smith’s General History of Virginia in 1624.

Early in 1812, Barker dramatized Scott’s Marmion first played at Park Theatre New York on April 13, 1812 and ran for many years. It deserved its popularity and it was no straight imitation of Scott’s poem. In 1847, he wrote How to Fry a Lover. It is a quickly moving
comedy and Barker has taken his plot, characters and even some of the dialogues from his French source. His another play *Superstition* was, according to Wood received ‘with deserved applause’ but strangely enough it was not often performed.

As the representative of the play with the national and historical interest, probably the most important playwright of the period next to Barker was Mordecai Manuel Noah. His first play, *Palil and Alexis* or *The Orphan of the Rhine* was written in 1812. His other drama *She Would be a Soldier* is based on battle of Chippewna. *The Hero of the Lake George* is a drama of revolution, with a background of battle of Sortaged. Another one with the same national feeling was *The Seige of Tripoli*. Noah and many other playwrights followed Mrs. Rowson’s example in dramatizing the difficulties with Mediterranean pirates. Towards the end of this period many revolutionary plays were written. Samuel Woodworth’s *The Widson’s Son, Andre, Blue Laws, The Cannibal and Kings Bridge Cottage* are the best of the revolutionary plays of the period. These plays picture well bustle and confusion that marked irregular warfare and constant danger of revolutionary period.

John H. Payne represents himself as the actor, the playwright, the man of the theatre of that time. Payne wrote mostly on foreign themes. He spent many years of his life in London or in Paris. His plays were usually first performed in London. He becomes then, the representative of foreign influence. Payne was a precocious child and as a boy who wrote *Charles-II* under the joint authorship with Washington Irving. He also wrote *The
*Thespian Mirror* at about the same period, attracting the attention of Coleman, editor of ‘The Evening Post’ and Payne soon became a well known figure in social life of New York. He wrote *Julie* or *The Wanderer* when he was 14. It was a melodrama. He also acted in some of the plays. He also played in Philadelphia, Baltimore and Boston in 1811-12. It had long been his dream to go abroad to perfect his art. Payne established relations with Kinnaird, who sent him back to Paris to observe the plays there and to adopt the plays as quickly as possible the successful ones for Drury Lane. For years Payne had been performed with success in America. Though he was attached with Europe and America but his general attitude like Irving’s remained materially unchanged by the long residence in Europe. His themes were universal rather than parochial. During this period a number of playwrights working at home were seeking their inspiration in foreign themes, both ancient and modern. The native and the foreign elements of the drama in this period are not always easily distinguishable.

At the beginning of the second quarter of the 19th century, a change began in the nature of the drama. This change became more apparent after 1830. They were based partly on the condition of the theatres, partly on the advent of certain actors like Edvid Forrest and they were due partly to the general social political and economic condition of the country. Beginning in 1820, a number of great actors and actresses visited the American stage. A typical playwright was Richard Penn Smith. He wrote twenty plays of which fifteen were based on American history for material. Smith was a keen student of the English drama. The best of his play owes its inspiration to Thomas Dekker. His play *The Divorce* or *The
Mock Cavater revised as The Deformed or Woman’s Trial was performed on several occasions.

Robert Bird, the dramatist of the period, abandoned medical profession to write plays. A keen student of the Elizabethan and Restoration dramatists he wrote It was All for the Best a comedy imitative of Congreve. The change from imitation of farce comedy to romantic tragedy was fortunate. In 1830, his play Pelopedas was accepted by Edwin Forrest who had the genuine interest in encouraging native playwright. It is one of his best. The Gladiator was a great success having the virtues of the shortcomings of the romantic tragedy. It was widely appreciated by dramatic critics, as well. Encouraged by his success, Bird set to work on a new tragedy and the result was Oralloossa based upon the insurrection in Peruvia. Bird’s The Broker of Bagota is the best of his plays: “The great appeal of The Broker of Bagota lies in it’s fidelity to human nature.” (Quinn 240) In this play Bird made domestic drama heroic. Bird and Smith were the most significant writers but there were others who contributed to the rise of drama.

Undoubtedly, the romantic drama flourished in Philadelphia and in other places was most sporadic. Many writers of this period wrote romantic plays in verse meant more for the reader than for stage production. By the middle of the 19th century, the romantic play was firmly established. If we study these plays, the native flavor of this group of drama will become apparent. The Grecian revolution of 1829, the revolt of South American republics against Spain, the French revolution of 1830 and struggle of Poland for freedom
were the most burning topics of the day. However, the most vital inspiration was the triumph of democratic institutions at home. It was the general sympathy with those who opposed political oppression that caused these plays to be written and made them popular.

While the romantic tragedy and comedy were engaging the efforts of the most skillful of our dramatists, humorous and industrious playwrights sought to place upon the stage the scenes and characters of their native land. Disregarding opera and pantomime, the stage history records about 190 plays with a historical background between 1825 to 1860. Their general level of excellence fell below that of the romantic play, for several reasons. First, they were often written hurriedly for holidays and special occasions. Second, they frequently deal with wars or other well known events that lent themselves to exaggerations or else confined the playwright’s imagination. These plays have more significance because the roots of a later development of drama are found which carries great importance.

During the period, Indian plays were introduced. By 1827 the interest in the subject was so widespread that these plays began to multiply. The vogue of Indian plays began to lose its hold after sometime. Decline is attributed to same types of plots, an exaggeration of motive and a lack of reality in the treatment. Williams Penn, John Ker, Samuel Chapman and Cornelius Mathews chose the theme and colonial motive. One of favourite themes used to be the revolution. All the events of the revolution were used by the dramatists.
During this period, themes from contemporary events were also used for drama, expression the spirit of the times. The struggle between the political parties forms the subject matter of several plays. Some important plays of this period are: W. G. Simms’s *Michael Bonhan* or *The Fall of Bexar*, *Norman Movie*, *The Battle of Buena Viste*, Dr. Thomas Dunn English’s *The Mormons* or *Life at Salt Lake City* and *Empire of Haiti*, Mrs. Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Dred*, and George Jamiesn’s *The Old Plantation* or *The Real Uncle Tom*.

George Henry Boker’s first play *Calaynos*, appeared in 1848. It was at first evident that a new and potent force in American drama as arisen first produced in London. The theme of a tragedy is the aversion of Spaniards for Moorish blood. *Calaynos* is important not such for its plot but for the creation of lofty standards of race and conduct of an atmosphere of inevitable tragedy, clothed in a blank verse already possessed of that of distinction which is one of Bokers’ greatest claim consideration by posterity. Boker’s sympathy was exotic. His advice was that one should read Chaucer, Spencer, Milton, and Shakespeare for strength. His next play was *Anne Boleyn*. Boker’s *The Betrothal* was his third play As per as the structure is concerned it was a definite improvement over the previous ones. It is a delightful comedy where characters dominate the situation. Boker’s next drama *The World A Mark* is good as far as conversation and dramatic technique are concerned. It also shows that social satire was not the dramatists’ forte. Boker’s tragedy, *Leonarde Guzman* was first played in Walnut Street Theatre, Philadelphia. It is a tragedy laid in Castile and the theme is based upon a successor to the throne consequent upon the
death of King Alphonse XII. The characters of the drama are real historical figures, though Boker took liberties with history and the condition of Spain is depicted accurately.

Before Leonard Guzman had been put on the stage, Boker had started writing his masterpiece Francesco de Rimin. The story of Paolo and Francesco has been favourite theme. Boker was the first to write a play in English on this theme and he was the first to make the injured husband the central figure without lessening interest in the lovers. The Bankrupt, a verse melodrama was written in 1855. Konigsmark, a verse drama of interest was published in 1869. With this drama the first period of Boker’s activity came to an end. The period that followed saw him turning his attention to lyric poetry. Charles James Cannon’s play The Oath of Office is laid in Ireland and it strikes the note of fatherly love and sacrifice to duty. Oliver Bell’s Fate or The Prophecy is a romantic tragedy. The most important of these later plays were written by Julia Ward Howe. Leonara or The World’s Own was a romantic tragedy with firm character drawing containing noble passages of poetry.

The later part of the 19th century was a period of dearth in the history of British drama also. Good plays were not written and Henry James said that even the audience in London demanded nothing but melodrama. By the end of 19th century, the emergence of Strindberg and Ibsen brought about a sudden revival in drama and George Bernard Shaw, more than any playwright contributed to this revival. The American theatre was still unable to produce any drama of significance. However there were playwrights of some
ability like Clyde Fitch whose plays such as *The Truth*(1907) attracted attention. Another dramatist of importance was Langden Mitchell who wrote *New York Idea* in 1906. This drama with its depth satire provided entertainment. By the next decade some American dramatists became aware of the richness of American scene. Williams Vaughan Moody’s plays *The Great Divine* and *The Faith Healer* marked a milestone in the development of American drama. American writers began to use themes of interest, and contemporary significance. Edward Sheldon’s play *The Nigger* is based on this theme of racial tension and *The Boss* exploits the antagonism between labor and capital. Augustus Thomas dramatized regional peculiarities and in this way he introduced local colors into the drama. However all these writers were inclined towards sentimentality and they followed theatrical conventions. The little theatre movement was responsible for the liberation of drama from conventional shackles imposed by the commercial theatre and O’Neill provided leadership to provincial town players and playwrights.

The little theatre movement gave rise to modern American drama in the decade of the 20th century. According to J. W. Krutch, O’Neill has a great contribution in American drama what he has mentioned in his book, *The American Drama since 1918*.

“In February, 1915 an enthusiastic group of young amateurs calling them Washington Square Players waved a solemn manifesto in the face of New York drama critics and opened the Bandbox theatre near the corner of 57th Street and Third Avenue. Just a year and a half later another group equally young and enthusiastic, came home from a summer on Cape Cod to take
procession of a stable in Mac Dougal Street to be known there after as the Province Town Theatre. Eugene O’Neill acted a role in *Bound East for Cardiff*, the first playlet on it’s first bill and thus the New American Theatre which had been born once on Third Avenue, was born again in Mac Dougal Street.” (3)

Ibsen and Shaw held theirs away in European capitals, America felt their influence after a considerable time. During the four years of its existence, including six long dramas, *Ghosts* and *The Life of Man* were produced but playlets like Susan Glasspell’s *Rifles* and Philip Moelle’s *Helena’s Husband* were the most important achievements. The most important figure of the Province Town Theatre was George Cram Cook. All its early productions could be compared to those of Washington Square Players.

Modern Drama is a product of slow evolution which has achieved its glory after the amalgamation of various schools. Individual dramatists like Tennessee Williams, Miller and O’Neill have in various ways contributed to the development of modern American drama. Between 1915 and the time of Arthur Miller many plays have been performed which could hardly find a place in the commercial theatre. The most important characteristic of American Theatre after 1916 is its relentless experiments. In the list of experimentation in dramatic form the name of T. S. Eliot can be mentioned. Eliot is well known for the revival of the poetic play. Similarly we cannot ignore the works of Paul Green and Thorton Wilder in this field.
Expressionism was imported to America from Europe. It influenced all the fields of art, especially drama. The expressionists rejected the naturalism as it had a limited scope and was grossly involved with surface reality. They wanted to project in outer symbols a state of mind, an inner crisis, a psychological condition. Expressionism made positive contribution to the growth of the American theatrical spirit. It encouraged a remarkable variety of experiments, large and small. Some of its exaggerations and arrangements of abstractions in motion were especially useful. Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine* (1923) was the most remarkable illustration of expressionist comedy.

O’Neill was the great genius responsible for the change that came over American theatre between 1920 and 1930. He wrote plays of contemporary interest and he contributed to the dramatic handsomely. O’Neill was capable of so many new ideas for the theatre. In his plays, we see a beautiful admixture of realism and expressionism. We can see the expressionistic effect in *The Emperor Jones* in 1920. Afterwards in *The Hairy Ape*, one can find expressionist devices and setting mixed with strictly naturalistic details. He is also the author of *The Great God Brown, Lezarus Laughed, Strange Interlude* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. He exercised profound influence on the development of American drama. The major playwrights of this period (1930’s) are Maxwell Anderson, S. N. Behrman, Sherwood, Philip Bany, Clifford Odet and Lilian Hellman.

The postwar dramatic scene is dominated by Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Both of them appear on the dramatic stage before the Second World War. *The Glass
*Menagerie* by Williams and *All My Sons* by Miller depict family tensions in which the authors champion the right of youth to rebel against the muddled world of their parents. Miller and Williams may take up the same theme yet their techniques are different. Miller is much of a Scandinavian and Williams on the other hand is the Mediterranean, sensuous, funny, verbally, luxuriant prose to immersion in romantic tragedy. Williams is influenced by the contemporary concern with psychological problem. His important plays are *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Street Car Named Desire* and *The Cat on Hot Tin Roof*. Another American playwright who has gained importance at present is Edward Albee author of *Zoo Story*, *Death of Bessie Smith*, *The American Dream* and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

Williams has been an advocate and practitioner of poetic symbolist-realist technique realism. He contributed towards a new, plastic theatre in place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions and helped the American theatre to resume vitality as part of culture. Williams’s new conception of the theatre, basically a poetic concept, is not concerned with poetry as normally understood. Rather it has to do with an attempt to present the spiritual and emotional world of his characters. The poetic current in his plays is there not to disguise its reality but to accentuate or heighten the same by making it more intense and symbolic through contrast. Poetry in Williams’s plays helps us to confer humanity on the characters. Having come into a conflict, poetry and reality blend in Williams’ drama.
Williams believes in penetrating into the characters’ inner selves through their dreams, illusions and bizarre reactions normally coated over in sleep or internalized only. His revelation of inner truth then, is the result of a penetration beneath the surface to reveal aspects of character, emotion, or thought which the realistic theatre, by its nature, disguises. The representation of this inner essence of his character, which he achieves by rearranging reality sometimes, is his attempt at a closer approach to the real truth of his character as contrasted with realistic reproduction of life as seen through the fourth wall in the Ibsen-type drama.

Arthur Miller is a social dramatist. He is of the view that society is inside of man and man in inside of society. But he infuses the social and psychological issues in his dramas. Miller has restored social criticism to the drama and has written on contemporary themes as social accountability in business, success myth, personal relationship, intolerance etc. His dramas deal mainly with man’s relationship with his family and society. The relationship between a man’s identity and the image that society demands of is a recurring theme in his plays. Each of his heroes is involved, in one way or another, in a struggle that results from his acceptance or rejection of an image that is the product of his society’s values and prejudices. Harold Clurman says about Miller’s plays in his book, The Portable Arthur Miller:

“The basic health of Miller’s play, not to be categorized as edifying in something Europeans crave as much as a man in the desert craves water. While they appreciate and applaud Miller’s criticism of America, what
Miller, the social and moral realist moved towards a poetic form of theatre with *Death of a Salesman*. In Miller’s plays we come across a hybrid of the social, the tragic and the psychological. His purpose is to examine human nature. He makes a synthesis between the subjective and the objective, between surface of experience and cogent emotional life. He has brought realism back to the theatre. This is his great contribution. Being a social realist he woos in psychology on one side and rhetoric on the other. His drama revolves round the family to wear the robes of realism. About Arthur Miller’s position in American drama, Alan S. Downer has commented on Miller in his book, *The American Theatre*:

“Miller is still one of our most important playwrights with three good plays and one extremely fine one to his credit. To have written *Death of a Salesman* is an achievement of such significance that Arthur Miller can be allowed a slip or even a fall. (20)