Introduction

This study aims at exploring the repressed layers of semantic possibilities in the plays of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. The framework for analysis has a direct bearing on Fredric Jameson’s theory of the political unconscious as envisaged in his monumental work, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981). The enterprise involves a political interpretation of selected works of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. It is an attempt to historicize and rewrite the text, using, as a base, the three “horizons” delineated in Jameson’s hermeneutics.

All writing, whether an administrative document or a novel, is an ideological construction, a devious means of either conscious political persuasion or the symbolization of unconscious prejudices and desires, from which it is necessary to tease out its hidden politics. Fredric Jameson is not satisfied with the tendency of much contemporary theory to rewrite past texts in terms of their own aesthetic, or, in terms of the praxis of linguistics. While he envisages a similar
enterprise, he also proposes a strong (re)writing of the text, or rather a strong restructuring of the text.

The object of study, however, is the text itself rather than the interpretations through which attempts are made to confront and appropriate it. Interpretation is here construed as essentially an allegorical act, which consists in rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretative master code. The identification of the latter will then lead to an evaluation of such codes, or, “methods” or approaches prevalent today. It is here that Jameson stresses the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts. It conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method, nor as an optional auxiliary to other interpretative methods current today, but rather as the absolute horizon of reading. Jameson in clear, valid terms upholds the priority of the Marxist interpretative act, for its high “yield” and “density.” Marxism is here conceived as an “untranscendable horizon” that subsumes apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations.

In subsuming all other approaches within Marxism, Jameson’s theory parallels Hegel’s view of history as the unfolding of progressive stages in which new ideas and cultural forms develop by “sublating” older ones, that is, by simultaneously adopting
and transcending them, reconciling and preserving them. Jameson argues:

Only Marxism can give us an adequate account of the essential mystery of the cultural past, which, like Tiresias drinking the blood, is momentarily returned to life and warmth and allowed once more to speak, and to deliver its long forgotten message in surroundings utterly alien to it. . . . These matters can recover their original urgency for us only if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story; only if, in however disguised and symbolic a form, they are seen as sharing a fundamental theme. (PU 19)

A literary work, however “disguised and symbolic” in theme and form, has a fundamental theme, which is part of the history of mankind and the struggles between different groups. Thus literary works are “cardinal episodes in a single unfinished plot” (20). This fact necessitates the “strong” rewriting of the text. Only a rewriting can unveil the mystery of the intrinsic relation a text has with history. It can fit the text into its proper place in the total scheme of history and at the same time project it as an ultimate mechanism, the causality of which is history itself. This is to explore the aleatory potential of the text for which Jameson demands political interpretation.
The political interpretation of a literary text involves an exposure of the hidden role of the “political unconscious” – a concept, which Jameson describes as his “collective” or “political” adaptation of the Freudian unconscious, the part of the individual mind that is conceived as the repository of repressed desires (PU 63). In any literary product, the “rifts and discontinuities” in the text are symptoms of the repression by ideology of the contradictions of history into the depths of the political unconscious. In Jameson’s view what the Marxist critic does is to “rewrite” in the mode of “allegory” the literary text in such a way as to allow one to see it as the reconstruction of a prior historical or ideolog;cal subtext.

Though Jameson has been influenced by Althusser and favours aligning Marxism with contemporary theories of poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, he has strong connections with traditional Marxism since, for him, Marxism can subsume and incorporate within itself all other forms of thought. In contrast to the anti-interpretative tendency of structuralist and poststructuralist criticism, he supports an interpretative critical approach in which Marxism functions as the “master code.”

Marxist approaches to literature are attempts to articulate the relationship between literature and society. Values and
beliefs are often conflictual and are overdetermined by power relations. Gramsci has theorized the ways in which people collude in consent to prevailing ideological values. Althusser’s twist on Gramsci’s theory of ideology argues that our acceptance of capitalism is achieved at an unconscious level, and that there is a contradiction between the ways in which we think of our position within society and the ways in which we really live it. Althusser’s famous words in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” are worth mentioning in this context: “ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (294). This means that the identity of people is constituted within ideology, so that ideology is not only a matter of performing but also of living in ideology. According to Althusser,

ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or “transforms” the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation. (301)

Art is born from this ideology. However,

art makes us see, in a detached way, the ideology from which it is born, in which it
bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes. (301)

The ideology of “freedom” promotes the belief that all are entitled to enjoy freedom, whether one is a pauper or a prince. But it is a way of deceiving people. A dominant system of ideology is accepted as a common sense view of things by the dominated classes and thus the interests of the dominant class are secured.

As the ideology is worked out into a text, in spite of the earnest efforts of the author to produce a unified text, the contradictions and rifts pop up. This is inevitable, and the critic is to go in for the causes of these rifts and lapses, which will ultimately take him/her to the text’s unconscious. Jameson’s “political unconscious” takes from Freud the essential concept of “repression,” but raises it from the individual to the collective level. The function of ideology is to repress “revolution.”

Ideology and relations of production play a cardinal role in art as they do in community. The complexity of the modes of production creates a comparable complexity in the texts. Jameson is, here, answering the poststructuralists who do not give room for the distinction between text and reality by treating reality itself as mere text. He shows that the textual heterogeneity can
be understood only as it relates to the social and cultural heterogeneity outside the text. Here Jameson preserves a space for a Marxist analysis. Jameson has refuted the idea that the historical subtext is “extrinsic.” Formal patterns in the work are read as symbolic enactments of the social patterns. The initial stage of the work, which involves an immanent description of the formal aspects, undertakes to relate the formal contradictions to the historical subtext, which will enable political analysis in its widest sense.

Jameson has tried to synthesize diverse Marxist approaches. Here, structuralist Marxists like Althusser and Pierre Macherey are yoked together with Hegel. While Hegelian Marxism positions history as the dominant form of totalisation, structuralist Marxism decentres the idea of totality. Jameson combines these approaches with those of psychoanalysis, structuralism, and poststructuralism. In subsuming all other approaches within Marxism, Jameson’s theory parallels Hegel’s view of history as the unfolding of progressive stages in which new ideas and cultural forms develop by “sublating” older ones, that is by simultaneously adopting and transcending them, reconciling and preserving them.

The political interpretation of literary texts is the absolute horizon of all reading and interpretation. For this a
“genuine philosophy of history” is necessary. It can unveil the contradictions and conflicts, passions and struggles of the cultural past, however disguised they may be. These need be retold and recreated as part of a single story:

It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and the buried reality of this fundamental history that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and necessity. (PU 20)

The assertion of a political unconscious proposes that one undertakes just a final analysis and explores the multiple paths that lead to the unravelling of cultural artefacts as socially symbolic acts. It demands a different system and operation, which involves a rewriting or restructuring of the aesthetic act in question. It presupposes that the cultural artefacts are the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological subtext. This subtext is to be recreated or reconstructed after the fact. Jameson has clearly described the relationship between the subtext and the aesthetic act. The literary or the aesthetic act cannot draw reality into its form, rather it has to assimilate reality and act against reality in order to draw it into its being. It articulates its own
situation and textualizes it, thus creating the illusion of its independence from the subtext. It refuses to identify with the subtext and perpetuates the illusion that the situation did not exist before it.

The symbolic act, therefore, begins by generating and producing its own context in the same moment of emergence in which it steps back from it, taking its measure with a view toward its own project of transformation. (PU 81)

Jameson’s patterns regarding the “aesthetic” and “symbolic” acts invite comparison with Adorno’s arguments on similar lines. Adorno uses the notion of the “inherent functionality” to denote all the elements and forces operating within a work of art at different levels. According to Adorno, every work of art recoils from the world which is the substratum of its content, and adopts the principle of self preservation of that world turning it into the ideal of self identical art, i.e., it aims at being identical with itself only; and it is the aesthetic identity of art that assists art in its struggle against the identification compulsion that operates in the outside world (9). This compulsion operates within art’s domain as well. It is by this separation from empirical reality that art becomes a being of high order.
A work of art, Adorno says, is not a replica of the world. What a work of art does is that it offers the world what is being denied it (in the world). While doing this, a work of art rejects the external empirical mode of experiencing the world and it seems it accepts its own mode of experience (10). Jameson also shares these concepts. His concept of how the “aesthetic act” becomes a “symbolic act” corresponds with what Adorno says about the process of art’s taking “shape.” A work of art adopts a definite relation with reality by stepping out of reality, but occasionally and unconsciously “polemicizing” against the condition of society. The dialectic of art resembles the social dialectic without consciously imitating it. Moreover, aesthetic relations of production constitute sedimentation of social relations of production. It is through this relationship that a work of art “salvages” within it what was once a concrete reality to a community. Thus the tension in art has relations with the tension in the community. “The fundamental layers of artistic experience are akin to the objective world from which art recoils” (Adorno 8). Jameson contends that the elements within the social pose resistance to integration. The fractures caused by the resistance need to be identified, analysed, and retold while rewriting the text.
The repressed history is to be unearthed in order to fit the symbolic act into the great, unfinished plot of human history. For this the role of political interpretation cannot be exaggerated. It has to find out the traces of the uninterrupted history within the work, present as fractured, or glossed over which, in turn, is caused by the repression of ideology. The cultural artefact is, then, reconstructed and rewritten by assimilating the fractured and the repressed.

The political interpretation of a text gives room for a reading that uncovers the unconscious dimension of the text, the things that its overt textuality glosses over or fails to recognize. At times a text, read thus, might say something quite different from what it appears to be saying. The contradictions, shifts or breaks in the tone and viewpoint or the attitude of the text have to be considered against the contexts of these occurrences. As shifts and breaks of various kinds in the text are evidences of what is repressed or glossed over or passed over in silence by the text, these have to be related to the subtext. The enterprise of seeking the inner contradictions of the text, the underlying disunity of the text beneath an apparent unity is Derridian indeed, which Jameson makes no pretensions to hide. Jameson’s eclectic critical enterprise synthesizes methods and views of psychoanalysis, deconstruction,
structuralist criticism, as well as the different strains of Marxist criticism.

Any aesthetic work is a socially symbolic act. Drama is a socially symbolic act as it is part of the “vast unfinished plot” of human life. Its causality is this life, and the repression of ideology makes it repressed “history.” It is not an isolated artefact, nor an accidental one which has a life sui generis, cut off from life and consumed at leisure; on the other hand, it takes its life from the world and life around it; its essence has value in relation to life around it, and is consumed, willed or not, with regard to its relation to life. Getting formed, it might step back from life, which is the substratum of its essence, and accepts a form, which creates a false impression of its independence from life, but all the while it cannot escape the contradictions and conflicts of life getting into its inherent structure. Drama can create the illusion that it is an independent artefact but it cannot escape the fractures in it, which are caused by the contradictions of life. In the words of A. N. Jeffares, “drama is a communal act, the representation of crucial actions by living people on a stage in front of an audience”(3). These words bring out the basic function of drama. As it is a communal act it is legitimate to bring it within the symbolic fold. However the
print form is not the communal act meant here. The print form lacks the immediacy of the actual performance. Yet, in spite of the lack of the immediacy mentioned above, the print form is entitled to be considered as a symbolic act as it is a text. In order to analyse the text of a play scrutiny of its different aspects has to be done - the nature of its plot; the importance/unimportance of characters, incidents, turn of events and dialogues; the fates of characters; the recurring images and expressions; the dominant spirit; and the presence of the author in the stage directions.

The above analysis forms a part of the political interpretation envisaged. The major frame of the work is in line with the three “horizons” mentioned by Jameson. Each horizon produces a semantic enrichment of the literary work, which is the object of study, and construes and reconstructs a structure, which Jameson would call “the text.”

The three horizons that Jameson proposes as part of his interpretative method are the following:

First, of political history, in the narrow sense of punctual event and a chronicle like sequence of happenings in time; then of society, in the now already less diachronic and time-bound sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between
social classes, and, ultimately, of history now conceived in its vastest sense of the modes of production and the succession and destiny of the various human social formations, from prehistoric life to whatever far future history has in store for us. (PU 75)

What the first horizon, which is narrowly political or historical, construes, more or less coincides with the literary text. History is, here, limited to events, different phases in struggles, the rise and fall of political regimes, social fashions, customs, struggles between historical individuals, and the definitely perceived crises. Thus there takes place a semantic enrichment of the drama in terms of political and historical events. It is here, in this horizon, that drama is seen as a socially symbolic act. It is read as a symbolic mediation on the destiny of the community. This involves a radical transformation of the traditional interpretative methods. Jameson gives Claude Levi-Strauss’s readings of myth and aesthetic structure as a model for an interpretation, which undertakes to show that drama is a socially symbolic act. The method used by Levi-Strauss is codified in an essay, “The Structural Study of Myth.” Its basic analytical principle says:
The individual narrative, or the individual formal structure, is to be grasped as “the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction.” Such symbolic functions are, however, rarely found by an aimless enumeration of random formal and stylistic features; our discovery of a text’s symbolic efficacity must be oriented by a formal description which seeks to grasp it as a determinate structure of still properly formal contradictions. (77)

Levi-Strauss’s analysis of the unique facial decorations of the Caduveo Indians serves as an example. The formal contradictions are symbolic enactments of the social within the formal and the aesthetic. Levi-Strauss in his book, *Tristes Tropiques*, analyses the facial decorations of the members of the community.

Caduveo Indians have on their faces a design, which is symmetrical yet lies across an oblique axis. . . a complicated situation based upon two contradictory forms of duality, and resulting in a compromise brought about by a secondary opposition between the ideal axis of the object itself (the human face) and the ideal axis of the figure which it represents. (176)
Levi-Strauss’s interpretation can be summarized in the following manner: the Caduveo Indians could not resolve the contradictions in their society, but these were always within them:

an irritant which, as a result of the continuous troubling presence, acted or reacted to produce that fantasy production of a society seeking passionately to give symbolic expression to the institutions it might have had in reality, had not interest and superstition stood in the way. (179)

Thus the visual text of the Caduveo facial art constitutes a symbolic act, whereby real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal solution.

Jameson wants to show with the above illustration how the social and ideological environments are immanent in any aesthetic act. Drama is no exception. Drama is at once formed out of ideology, and acting against ideology. It is an artistic solution – to the unresolvable social contradictions of life – which, itself is ideological. Here, in the first horizon, Jameson does not approve of the traditional, sociological method of considering class motives or values in a play as a reflection of the social background. The interpretation is to be a strong
rewriting of the drama, involving a restructuration of a prior historical or ideological subtext.

The literary or aesthetic act therefore always entertains some active relationship with the real; yet in order to do so, it cannot simply allow “reality” to persevere inertly in its own being, outside the text and at some distance. It must rather draw the real into its own texture; and the ultimate paradoxes and false problems of linguistics, and most notably of semantics, are to be traced back to this process, whereby language manages to carry the real within itself as its own intrinsic or immanent text. (PU 81)

Drama interacts with the world and in the process the immanent content or the world submits itself to formal transformation. Form acts upon content and content acts upon form, thus changing each other and supplementing and supporting each other. Both the concepts, of the text without the subtext, and the subtext without text are equally unacceptable to Jameson. To overemphasize the text is as unreasonable as the overemphasizing of the subtext. The enterprise should chalk out a course of action in which the aesthetic act transforms the subtext by drawing it into its immanent form and perpetuates the
illusion that there never was a subtext. This dexterity of form is to be accounted for. However, Jameson admits that the contradictions “resolved” by the symbolic act cannot be reconstructed, but will remain an absent cause.

The second semantic horizon includes the social order and the individual drama is considered as a parole of “the great collective and class discourse” (85), which is the langue. For this, the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourse of social classes is to be identified. Jameson calls such units, ideologemes. The constitutive form of class relationships is always that between a ruling and a labouring class. The dominant class ideology will invent strategies to dominate the subjected class and also compel them to acquiesce into the dominant ideology. Social relations and classes are caused by the material necessity, by the modes of production and relations of production. The social relations among men are bound up with the way they produce their material life. As the modes of production and relations of production change, social relations and classes also change. While the dominant class tries to retain the power position, the less dominant ones will always work in a covert form against the dominant one.
In the second horizon the restructuring of contradictions once again pops up, but this time they come up as conflicting class demands and irreconcilable class antagonisms. The individual, cultural artefacts are to be reconstructed by assigning it the status of a parole of the vaster system, the langue of class discourse. Here also the individual item is a symbolic act in a field of surging class feud. The enterprise of interpretation begins with the identification of the voice, usually stifled and thwarted by the dominant voice, followed by the reconstructing or restoring of that voice, which is the voice of the marginalized, the silenced and the subaltern.

The reconstruction of popular cultures from the fragments of essentially peasant cultures like folk songs, folk tales and popular festivals also help to re-audition the lost, stifled voices of the marginalized and silenced. This is to be integrated and the individual act is to be re-written. However this restoration of the class horizon is carried out after identifying the ideologemes. Jameson describes an ideologeme as

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\text{An amphibious formation, whose essential structural characteristic may be described as its possibility to manifest itself either as a pseudo idea . . . or as a proto narrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the collective}
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characters, which are the classes in opposition. (PU 87)

Jameson gives an example to illustrate this. In the seventeenth century “English Revolution,” the various classes and class functions found themselves obliged to articulate their ideological struggles through the shared medium of a religious master code (88). Jameson suggests that within the apparent unity of the theological code, the fundamental differences of antagonistic class positions can be made to emerge.

Jameson calls the third semantic horizon, the “ultimate horizon.”

Even the passions and values of a particular social formation find themselves placed in a new and seemingly relativised perspective by the ultimate horizon of human history as a whole, and by their respective positions in the whole complex sequence of the modes of production, both the individual text and its ideologemes know a final transformation and must be read in terms of what I will call the ideology of form, that is, the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems, which are
themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production. (PU 76)

Jameson gives a sequential outline of the modes of production using Marxist terminology – primitive communism or tribal society (the horde), the glens or hierarchical kinship societies (Neolithic society), the Asiatic mode of production, the polis or an oligarchic slave holding society (the ancient mode of production), feudalism, capitalism, and communism. These conceptions of historical “stages” embrace the notion of a form of ideological coding specific to each mode of production – magic and mythic narrative, kinship, religion or the sacred, politics, relations of personal domination, commodity reification, and forms of collective or communal association.

The cultural artefacts emerge where there may be the presence of more than one contradictory mode of cultural production. As in the second horizon, it is proved that a study of one class cannot be done in isolation; in this semantic enlargement also the construing process cannot be limited to one mode of production though that may be the dominant one.

Within this final horizon the individual text or cultural artefact (with its appearance of autonomy which was dissolved in specific and original ways within the first two horizons as well) is here
restructured as a field in which the dynamics of sign systems of several distinct modes of production can be registered and apprehended. (PU 98)

The ideology of form assumes significance here as it comes up as a result of the dynamics mentioned above, which also includes the contradiction of the specific messages emitted by the varied sign systems that co-exist in a given artistic process as well as in its general social formation. Form is the sedimentation of content. It informs content, and is in turn informed by content. Hence any discussion of the ideology of form should pay attention to both the archaic structures of alienation (and the sign systems specific to them) and the more recent types of alienation (such as political domination and commodity reification). These are the dominants of late capitalism in which all earlier modes of production structurally co-exist.

For all the aforesaid horizons, Jameson argues, history is “the ultimate ground as well as the untranscendable limit of our understanding in general, and our textual interpretations in particular” (PU 100). But this history is not a textualised one; it can be apprehended only through its effects. The American history of the first half of the twentieth century is the subtext for the plays of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller.
In this study, Chapter 1 explores how the unresolvable social contradictions necessitate theatrical modes which are “symbolic acts” in Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Modes of production and relations of production in the American situation cause alienation and loneliness, which are accentuated by the absence of welfare measures. Symptomatic patterns like violence, sex, intoxication, insanity, castration, lynching, cannibalism, suicide, witch hunt, and spoilt occasions that recur in the plays are also analysed in this chapter. Chapter 2 identifies the ideologemes within the plays and outside them. The refugees of an invidious economic system and the outcasts of conventional morality have developed high individualism and resentment. The ideologeme of class struggle is indispensably interrelated with the above societal units. Chapter 3 is an attempt to see aesthetic acts as episodes in the “vast unfinished plot” of human history. The chapter also tries to unearth those aspects that are repressed by ideology.