INTRODUCTION

The introductory chapter provides the background material to the dissertation entitled *Fragments, Fortitude and Futurity – A Textual Study of David Mamet’s Last Five Plays*. The first section of this chapter is devoted to a general note on American Drama and the following section dwells upon the predecessors of David Mamet who had influenced the dramatist in various ways along with the literary trends and cultural memories in the contemporary age. The next section locates the due place Mamet occupies in the galaxy of American dramatists and their dramas in the histrionic arena with a focus on his thematic preoccupation.

(1)

American drama has struggled since its inception with a reputation of its inferior quality and status. In 1889, Brander Matthews, a drama critic, inveighed against the decline of American drama. He deplored that the American drama was “shabby in structure and shambling in action” and its practitioners had not “taken the trouble to ban their trade” (Matthews 930). Another drama critic, John Gassner, wrote that, despite the “seed of a vigorous democratic art,” the century preceding Eugene O’Neill found American playwrights “of no importance whatsoever to the world” (Gassner 632). Thus, American drama enjoyed a very low profile. Invariably everyone connected with theatre opines that the drama failed to grow splendidly. Hence, it did not attract the attention of critics and historians as an unwanted child. The deserted condition of the drama was further aggravated with
the uninterested publishing industry. A critic like Susan Harris Smith voices the
unacknowledged condition of the drama. Thus, various factors contributed to the
stunted growth of American drama. However, American drama, at present, is far
from being the “bastard child” (Smith 10) as it was once opined. Indeed, it
constantly undergoes radical changes depending upon the social, political, and
economic changes of the American society. All these vital forces transformed
American drama into a true representative of American art and culture.

Southwark Theatre (1766) was the first permanent theatre on the American
continent and it prolonged its existence until 1912. Thomas Godfrey, a native
author, produced his first professional play, *The Prince of Parthia* on 24 April
1767 in this theatre. This heroic tragedy written in blank verse was set in Parthia at
the beginning of the Christian era and thus in no way American in subject matter.
After the Revolution, in 1782, professionals began to return to America. Lewis
Hallam Jr. brought back the Old American Company from Jamaica in 1784. On
16th April 1787, the reinstated company offered the first professional production of
a Native American comedy on an American subject: Royal Tyler’s *The Contrast,*
which introduced Jonathan, the stage Yankee, the prototype of many subsequent
Yankees and the first native type to be developed.

The drama of the modern United States before World War I was in many
ways not modern drama at all. In the years before, the Little Theatre Movement
had given rise to a generation of American playwrights who experimented with
European realism and anti-realism. It had not undergone any striking changes since
the Civil War. Literary and theatrical modernism in Europe was a response to the
changing circumstances of modern life. Though the same cultural forces
transformed the American social and political landscape, the American drama of the first fifteen years of the twentieth century reflected a series of American responses to modernity. The spectacular 1899 premieres of Ben-Hur in New York typified the American drama of the turn of the twentieth century. Adapted by William Young from the bestselling novel by Lew Wallace, the six-act religious melodrama was a popular and critical success and the grandest stage spectacle that the New York audience has ever witnessed. Margaret Fleming (1890) by James A. Herne was the first modern American drama.

The transformation of the theatre industry reflected massive changes in American culture. The years before the turn of the century were characterized by rapid economic development and the growth of national industries. In the Progressive Era (1890 – 1900), the limited-liability corporations became the norm in American business and the Anti-Trust Legislation was passed to rein in the power of American enterprise. Scientific management transformed the practices of the urban factory. Market instability, immigration from Europe and agricultural crises in the Midwest and South produced a surplus of unskilled workers in American cities. Before 1890, the economy had depended largely on capital goods, but after the deflation of the 1880s, American capitalists directed their investments toward consumer goods such as ready-to-wear clothing, leisure items, household goods, etc. For the first time, the production of such goods became dominant, as the small trading store transformed, for example, into the department store, moving from proprietary to corporate capitalism.

American theatre business responded to the centralising and corporatising strategies of new American industry. The innovation of the combination
company, which allowed large-scale production to tour in their entirety on the nation’s growing rail routes, made the production of theatre a potentially profitable enterprise for national touring corporations. Large producing and booking agencies for drama and vaudeville emerged in the metropolitan Northeast. In this context, the playwright Clyde Fitch wrote that, “there will never be good American dramatists till there are good American producers” (Fitch 117). Though American dramatists produced new plays in large numbers from the 1880s to the 1920s and copyright protections increased, there was not a single noteworthy drama.

The career of Clyde Fitch exemplifies the changing role of the dramatist in the United States. Fitch’s popular melodramas such as *The Girl with Green Eyes* (1902) and *The Woman in Case* (1905) are “episodic dramas of vice, blackmail, and violence, with Syndicate-required happy endings” (Meserve 164). The plays of Clyde Fitch portray a modern world and explore urban life, the pathologies of modern culture and the new social structures of the industrialising age. His characters, if lacking depth, have detail. His dramas of contemporary society bridge the gap between the tradition of American romantic melodrama and social realism. In a 1904 speech, Fitch calls for a “real melodrama” that portrays the “truth” of the urban condition:

> The incidents, the events of everyday life in a big city are more melodramatic than anything that was ever put upon the stage . . . [It is] a daily life which is blood and iron mixed with soul and sentiment – melodrama of the ancients, pure and simple . . . . Realism is only simplicity and truth. (Fitch xli - xlii)
Fitch’s last play, however, illustrates the playwright’s ambiguous distinction between real melodrama and the false. *The City* (1910), “a modern play of American life,” is a traditional melodrama that appropriates the hallmarks of stage realism (Trachtenberg 443). Fitch’s career coincides with perhaps the most significant changes in the geopolitics of American society. The pastoral American past collides with industrial urban America and the rapid industrialisation has repercussions throughout American culture.

Many of the social melodramas during the career of Clyde Fitch explore the temptations, dangers and the possibilities of the new city. The American tradition of social satire as well as domestic comedy, however, is equally successful in portraying modern urban life. Changing social atmosphere and upper-class urban culture are at the centre of *The New York Idea* by Langdon Mitchell, who had grown up in the social world that he satirised. It is a Comedy of Manners, an indictment of upper-middle-class American culture, a drama of society and marriage. It is placed in the new context of the burgeoning American divorce culture. This play satirises upper-class moves but it also charts society and social space in the changing New York. The play reflects the increasing divisions in the United States in 1906: between the wealthy and the working, as well as the urban and the rural. *The New York Idea* – that “a woman should marry whenever she has a whim for a man” – indicates uneasiness in the conservative elite in an age where civil unions no longer guaranteed the inheritance of fortune and status (Trachtenberg 202).

The melodramas of Edward Sheldon are more explicitly ideological, exploring urban life, corruption and racism. His melodramas are in the nineteenth
century tradition about twentieth century social problems. *Salvation Nell* is a melodrama of the urban condition that follows Nell, a working class woman, as her life is nearly destroyed by her criminal lover. Nell, at root, is a traditionally melodramatic woman in distress but she is the central character of the play set in believably realistic working-class surroundings. In 1906, *The Great Divide*, Moody’s dark, metaphorical drama of American character, culture and region, became one of the most popular plays in the United States and his other plays were commercial failures.

The emergence of Ethnic Theatres in the American scenario played a significant role in the development of American drama. To be ethnic is to be American. Ethnic theatres existed from the late eighteenth century. New plays and genres in the ethnic theatre increased during Jacksonian America (1820s and 1830s) as Irish and German immigrants poured into New York and other locales. These immigrants differed from earlier generation because they formed part of a working class that demanded entertainment. These ethnic groups became a central force inspiring generations of American plays. They also provoked others to create mocking caricatures through ethnic stereotypes. Blackening-up was a technique whereby actors applied burnt cork to their faces and performed condescending imitations of African Americans. By 1920s, almost every great Jewish American comedian began blackening up in vaudeville and burlesque. The first ethnic type to appear in Jacksonian-era melodrama was the noble savage, an imitation of Native Americans. The male character died a tragic death at the hands of the white man. If female Native American characters appeared, they would be converted to Christianity. A turning point came in the play *Metamora* (1829) by John Augustus
Stone, the first to feature a Native American character as the hero. The play pitted Indians and Englishmen in a battle for supremacy. Stone created Metamora as kind, chivalric, brave and gentle. However, the character was, according to the prevailing sentiments of the time, inferior to the white man intellectually. At the play’s conclusion, Metamora lies dying while cursing the white man. Still, it is worth pointing out that Metamora is no simple-minded defence of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, a law justifying theft of Native American land and wholesale destruction of their civilisation. Stone makes it clear that Metamora is betrayed by the white man’s cruelty and greed rather than by his alleged savagery.

As waves of immigrants came to America during the antebellum years, ethnic theatres emerged for each group. They included Italian American, Swedish American, Irish American, Ukrainian American, Norwegian American, German American and Mexican American, especially in the American West and Southwest, and Chinese Americans in California. Indeed ethnic theatre was regional. As each culture entered the United States, it brought its own folk-flavoured dramas, performing plays that appealed to its sensibilities, concerns and dilemmas. Still, nationwide, the Irish ethnic group dominated theatre practice.

In the beginning of 1840, Irish immigrants came in large numbers to America. Their departure from Ireland was largely owing to potato famine. This group provided a clear picture of how definitions of ethnicity and race become conflated in the American theatre. While conflicting definitions of who could be American – which class and ethnicity – appeared in minstrelsy and melodrama, offstage a series of riots made it clear how important these definitions were. In 1849, the Astor Place Riot dramatised a fight between two actors: the American
Edwin Forrest and the British William Macready. Forrest believed Macready had slandered him. As a result, he enlisted the “Bowery B’hoy” – slang for Irish American roughnecks – to disrupt the British actor’s performance at the Astor Place Opera House. The National Guard was called in and twenty-two people were killed. The riot dramatised the tension between two opposing factions: one, elite and the British, the other, native and vox populi. The Astor Place Riot revealed the fact that a class division had existed in America. As a result, theatre historian David Grimsted put it, “one theatre was no longer enough to appeal to all classes” (Grimsted 219). Many theatres of mid-nineteenth century especially those in comic tradition used diction or dialect to divide ethnic identity from American identity. While the white characters spoke elevated English, the slaves replied in slave dialectic.

After the Civil War, the rising immigration created an emphasis on realism. The immigrant actors brought with them greater understanding of their lives to the stage. New plays portrayed new circumstances of immigrant life. Stage villains based on ethnic caricature still existed such as the Jew in plays like John Brougham’s *Lottery* (1868) or Charles Townsend’s *The Jail Bird* (1893). Harrigan, in *The Mulligan Guard Bell*, influenced by Emile Zola’s efforts to create naturalistic drama in France, tried to provide Americans with an indigenous drama that reflected their everyday experiences. According to one critic, “What Dickens was to London . . . and Zola to Paris, Mr. Harrigan is to New York” (qtd. in Moody 535). At the end of the nineteenth century, Irish and German plays burlesqued their own ethnic experiences. Ultimately, during this era and in the twentieth century, different ethnic theatres and stereotypes were being assimilated into the forms of
popular entertainment. Still, many ethnic theatres also continued to reveal anxiety about the immigrants’ role in America. Charles M. Hoyt’s *A Trip to Chinatown* (1892) relays a fantasy of excluding various ethnicities from the mainstream. The plot features upper-class San Francisco characters slumming in Chinatown.

The rise of vaudeville both diluted and popularised the Irish, German and blackface caricatures created during the nineteenth century. In his book *The Voice of the City*, Robert Snyder observes that vaudeville offered something for everyone. This hardly meant that vaudeville presented every ethnicity equally. In fact, many of the old stereotypes remained. Rather, performers dropped some of their ethnic “markers” as Snyder puts it, creating instead the path from “ethnic origins to national stardom that would become so important in vaudeville” (Snyder 49).

The tradition of mixing trash and high art, what is termed in Yiddish as *Shund*, became a Yiddish, and then an American tradition. *Shund* threw together pieces of every theatrical genre for maximum effect. It drew from melodrama, song and popular culture. Critics describe playwrights of this generation as “baking” or “building” plays. The two important playwrights of this generation were Joseph Latteimer (1853-1935) and Moyshe Hurvitz (1814-1910). The latter’s most famous play *David’s Violin* (1897) is a love story that conveys the message, “Music has the power to heal.” During the height of the Yiddish theatre, music helped to create its distinct flavour and uniqueness. Poet and lyricist, the Russian-born Abraham Goldfaden (1840-1908), known as “The Father of Modern Yiddish Drama,” ushered Yiddish drama into the halls of literature. After founding his theatre company in Romania in 1876, Goldfaden immigrated to America, where he
struggled to prove that Yiddish theatre could be universally appealing and also it could spring from specific folkloric sources as well. He saw his plays as farce comedies returning to the same old world theme: the Hasidim (an extremely devout religious sect) and their narrow-mindedness where romance is concerned. In his *Grandmother and the Granddaughter* or *Basye the do-gooder* (1877), the grandmother makes an arranged match but her granddaughter loves someone else. A supernatural power promises the ailing grandmother that she will see the granddaughter before she dies. In *Shmendrick* (1880), the girl agitates against the tyranny of arranged marriages. In this play also, the clever bride manages to dupe the antagonist so that she can marry her sweetheart.

During the late nineteenth and twentieth century, the institution of Yiddish theatre had begun to change, not only in its dramaturgy but also in its approach to acting. In its early days, male actors played all the roles of both men and women. By the 1870s, women joined all the theatres but the profession of actress continued to be a taboo. Jacob Gordin (1853-1909) was as influential as Goldfaden and stood as his competitor in many ways. He wrote between thirty and sixty plays. He was both a critic and a reformer nourishing artistic ambitions for the Yiddish stage. While Goldfaden had focused on creating a Yiddish theatre, he sought to turn the Yiddish theatre into an “art” theatre equivalent to European and modernist traditions. Gordin attempted this transformation in several ways. He followed Shakespeare more than any other Yiddish writer did.

Gordin played a pivotal role in fighting a constant battle against *Shund*. Although some of his plays do employ clownish characters and operatic intrusions, Gordin’s first artistic success, *Siberia* (1891), was a realistic drama that used the
American “rags to riches” story and catered to the specific brand of immigrant nostalgia for the old country. In this play, a refugee escapes from prison, starts a new life, becomes wealthy and flourishes until a business associate tells the police his identity, forcing him into exile again. This may have been the first play of the Yiddish theatre to eschew music and dancing. The focus on the Jewish family in America caught on with his audience: The Jewish King Lear (1892) and The Jewish Queen Lear: Mirele Efros (1898) describe the tension between children’s assimilation and parent’s alienation in many ways and the audiences found the theme meaningful. The Jewish King Lear has been described as a play about the binding of “antagonistic” generations (Prager 506). In the play, which was premiered in October 1892 at the Union Theatre, Lear is David Masheles, a wealthy Jewish businessman who has decided to divide his estate among three grown-up daughters and move with his wife to Palestine. In Act II, Masheles’ daughters abuse him. But, Act III ends happily as parents and children reconcile. The happy conclusion was required because it related to the social upheaval that naturally emerged as Jewish children were put into the parental position of guiding their own parents into the ways of the new world. During the 1890s and 1900s, Shakespeare’s adaptations surged, making the Yiddish adaptations a part of mainstream fashion.

Another playwright of this generation, Leon Kobrin (1872-1946) wrote melodramatic realistic plays including The Big Jew (1911), The Blind Musician, a Yiddish Othello (1912), The Lady Next Door (1915), and a dramatisation of his novel, The Child Nature. More than focusing on the tension between the old and the new, Kobrin wrote about themes that obsessed dramatists of his generation: the
tension in intermarriage, the loneliness and spiritual and romantic emptiness experienced by Jews living in Russian shtetls. Thus, Yiddish writers of this era wrote folk comedies and symbolic dramas about Jewish suffering in the new world. By the early 1930s, the Yiddish theatre, like many other ethnic theatres, continued to decline. In 1935, under Works Project Administration (WPA), the Federal Theatre Project resuscitated some ethnic theatres in order to employ actors and generate theatre. The WPA included a German Theatre, a Yiddish Theatre and an African American Theatre.

Ostensibly, the New World witnesses the growth of Feminism and Modernism under the influence of two modernist playwrights, Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell. This period connects Susan Glaspell to the experimental theatre tradition and Sophie Treadwell to the commercial stage. Susan Glaspell’s lifetime (1876-1948) like Sophie Treadwell’s (1885-1970) coincides closely with the rise of modernism in Europe and its arrival and development in the United States. Their biographies epitomise the personal and professional tensions within American society that mark the transition from Victorian notions of women’s roles to early twentieth century efforts to reject the “separate spheres” ideology that lingered so tenaciously, prompting domestic, social and political revolts in the modern period. Glaspell’s dramas expand the concerns of her early fiction by developing stronger connections between her characters’ lives and their political convictions. The plays also document a wider geographical understanding of American regionalism as well as the dynamic relationship between community identity and personal behaviour.
One of the hallmarks of Glaspell’s dramaturgy is her ability to represent truthfully the perspectives of all of her characters or the pluralistic voices. While every play she wrote informs her commitment to feminism, she is also careful to construct a balanced dramatic environment through which one can understand fully the women’s lives she depicts and the contexts for their choices and actions. Her *Trifles* exemplifies this dramatic strategy through its juxtaposition of male and female processes of ratiocination. It dramatises the aftermath of the death of John Wright and the arrest of his wife Minnie on suspicion of his murder. A small group of characters arrives at Wright’s home: three women whose goal is to reconstruct the crime and discover the evidence needed for the prosecution and two women who are to gather some personal items to bring to Mrs. Wright in jail. Glaspell sets up a series of oppositions between men and women to illustrate her prescient understanding of a number of phenomena later codified by feminist theory, including the social construction of gender, women’s bonding, identification against the patriarchy and legal inequities between men and women in patriarchal society. As the male sheriff, the county prosecutor and the neighbour who discovered Wright’s body focus their investigation on the offstage bedroom where the crime occurred and the surrounding area, the wives of the sheriff and the neighbour remain in the onstage kitchen. They come to know about the absent Minnie through empathic association of the hardships of her daily life with their own. The men dismiss the significance of this domestic environment as “Nothing here but kitchen things” (Glaspell 87) and criticise Minnie’s work therein, which prompts the neighbour’s wife to even stronger identification. In the men’s absence, the women discover evidence they believe could be used to establish Minnie’s guilt
– one of the “trifles” that the men have overlooked because of their preconceptions about the inconsequentiality of women’s lives and actions. *Trifles* and its short-story counterpart later became foundational texts in the development of Anglo-American feminist theory. Scholars saw in Glaspell’s work not only her resistance to traditional notions of gender identity but also her calculated reversal of viewpoints. Her audience sees events through the women’s eyes instead of the traditional male perspective. By placing women characters at the centre of her play and displacing the men, by focusing on women’s daily activities rather than men’s work and by setting her action in the kitchen rather than in a male-dominated environment, Glaspell disrupts long held notions of what constitutes a good drama. Moreover, these choices reveal her conscious participation in the evolution of a modern American theatre – one that appropriated conventions from Europe such as naturalism, realism, expressionism and symbolism, but combined and deployed them to create a unique American stage. Writing in the postwar, post-crash United States climate, Glaspell analyses the national values around family and community that were quickly becoming part of a nostalgic sense of our recent past; yet the ideology reflected in these codes may also have seemed precarious to those contemplating the country’s future. Glaspell’s faith in the importance of theatre in American society and its culture never wavered despite her renewed focus on fiction later in her career. The title of her last play, *Springs Eternal* (1944) perfectly projects the ambivalence that defined her career, with its unspoken, ongoing hope, in the face of the nation’s political and cultural conservation, for genuine equality, freedom and peace.
Thus, American Drama from its beginning contributes its remarkable share through the pluralistic voices of playwrights from the United States and represents what might be called the American Experience. The drama conforms to no fixed set of rules or format. Like other forms of literature, drama never fails to embody the American struggle. The playwrights create independently and explore multiple ideas depending upon the different concerns of the people of their society. Themes and motifs emerge because dramatists discover in the American experience a mirroring of their own attitudes and apprehensions. The world offers modes of experiences from which it is possible for dramatists to forge, analyse and apply them creatively. Still, American drama continues to be at fault for its refusal to take thought, its clinging to passion when passion is mere noise. The drama as a social text did not fit into the canons of high culture, as taught by the old-fashioned humanists or trend-setting acolytes of new theoretical methodologies. Poetry, fiction and nonfictional prose continue to dominate the canon of American literature while American drama hovers on the periphery. In spite of all its limitations, American drama attained its international status only in 1920s and 1930s with the works of Eugene O’Neill.

(II)

Although the United State’s theatrical tradition can be traced back to the arrival of Lewish Hallam’s troupe in the mid-eighteenth century and was very active in the nineteenth century, as seen by the popularity of minstrel shows and adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, American drama achieved its international recognition in the 1920s and 30s, with the works of Eugene O’Neill. In the middle of the twentieth century, American drama was dominated by the works of
playwrights such as Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller as well as by the maturation of the American musical, which had found a way to integrate script, music and dance in such works as Oklahoma and West Side Story. Later American playwrights of importance include Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, David Mamet, Wendy Wasserstein and August Wilson.

The stature of Eugene O’Neill casts a long shadow on the American theatre. John Gassner comments, “Find fault with O’Neill and you find fault with entire American stage; find merit in him and you find worth in its striving, or straining, toward significant drama” (Gassner 1). Because of his ceaseless efforts after 1915, the American drama actually contributed to world theatre that could be considered significantly modern. As Walt Whitman changed the nature of American poetry, O’Neill changed the whole scenario of American drama. In other words, he created it, for before him there were only melodramas and minstrel shows. He contributed a long list of plays to American theatre that consists of classical American themes. He structured his plays in terms of opposites—night and day, good and evil, land and sea, art and commerce and city and country. He covered an enormous range of American history, from Ponce de Leon’s search for the fountain of youth to the twentieth century’s bars, songs, sports and manners. O’Neill’s plays, like much of American literature, posed cosmic questions and often found them unanswerable. His sources were of not only American culture and sense of its history but also of his profound personal and contemporary experiences.

In his early days, O’Neill was extremely responsive to social and political movements. He had a hatred for class distinction and social inequality. He abandoned his radical political commitment in the mid-1920s but remained faithful
to a general radicalism so that he could stay with the underdogs of his society. Parties and dogmas left him increasingly unmoved. He often articulated a philosophy of studied indifference: “Life’s all right if you let it alone” (O’Neill 280). Sometimes he denied and at other times affirmed the existence of God and at times, he preferred the Theory of Evolution. No one exhibited more plainly and strongly than O’Neill, the nihilism so prevalent in the 1920s but he denied that he was a cynic or a pessimist. He just damned optimism as a false, unrealistic and hopeless philosophy. He perceived the awfulness and the absurdity of existence and so he transcended this through an act of defiance. O’Neill’s concept was, more or less, close to that of David Mamet, as his characters do not march towards the cessation of life but toward the progression of it. O’Neill said:

He wanted to dig at the roots of this sickness of today as I feel it – the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfactory new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct, to find a meaning for life in and to comfort its fears of death. (O’Neill 115)

He believed that man was so constituted that he must struggle with the universe and with himself and lose that struggle. As he was an ardent admirer of Greek tragedies, he was committed to the dramatisation of human destiny. He very much desired to be considered in the line of the great Greek and Elizabethan dramatists. An important aspect of O’Neill’s plays is that the factor responsible for tragedy is the mysterious structure of man’s mind itself. In his search for identity, man moves out in society and confronts problems to know what exactly he is. He develops an act of wearing a mask on his face to meet out the challenges of the particular
society in which he struggles hard to survive. His choice of the mask could be wrong if his assessment of the situation is wrong.

The protagonists in *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *The Hairy Ape* (1922) suffer for their pride because they try to have control or mastery over their circumstances. They are proud self-deceivers and in their desperate efforts to identify themselves with their masks they fail as they do not look back to see how wrongly they have created illusions for themselves. As O’Neill’s is a double vision, his protagonists remain suspended between hope and despair. He believed that tragedy had an ennobling influence on human life.

To me, the tragic alone has that significant beauty, which is truth. It is the meaning of life and hope. The noblest is eternally the most tragic. The people who succeeded and do not push on to a greater failure are the spiritual middle classes. Their stopping at success is the proof of their compromising insignificance. (Cargill 104)

Of all the plays he wrote after *Beyond the Horizon* (1918), only a few can be described as contemporary. The principal ones in this category are *The Straw* (1919), *Anna Christie* (1920), *The First Man* (1921), *The Hairy Ape* (1921), *Welded* (1924), *Strange Interlude* (1928), *Dynamo* (1929) and *Days Without End* (1933). *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* (1923) and *The Great God Brown* (1925) also deal with modernity but have their beginnings and roots set back in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. All other plays are historical in dealing with the near or distant past. They are *Diff’rent* (1920), *The Fountain* (1923), *Desire under the Elms* (1924), *Marco Millions* (1925), *Lazarus Laughed* (1926), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), *Ah, Wilderness!* (1932) and
*A Touch of the Poet* (1942). Even the last masterpieces such as *The Iceman Cometh* (1939), *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1941), *Hughie* (1941) and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1943) are historical. His historical plays fall into four categories. They are the historical exotics about the distant past like *Lazarus Laughed, The Fountain*, or *Marco Millions*, the American nineteenth century society like *Desire under the Elms* or *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the remembered past like *The Iceman Cometh* or *Long Day’s Journey into Night* and finally the contemplated cycle plays about the fate and fortune of a Yankee-Irish family in America from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century, of which only *A Touch of the Poet* survives.

Among all, *The Emperor Jones* remains as one of O’Neill’s impressive plays. When Brutus Jones, the former Pullman porter, who has made himself emperor of an island in the West Indies, is faced with rebellion of his own tribe, he starts immediately on an escape he has planned through the great forest to the coast, where he is to be met by a ship. However, what was planned as an escape turns into a retreat from the symbols of civilised success, which he has won for himself to fantasies of primitive terror that lie deep within him. The use of the tom-tom beating first at the rate of the normal pulse, and then gradually faster until it stops at the moment of Jones’ death, is a theatrical device comparable in effectiveness to the whistle in *Bound East for Cliff*.

*Bound East for Cliff* is a beautiful illustration of another aspect of O’Neill’s technique, which is nothing but an exercise in unmasking. The ship’s whistle keeps reminding us of her slow progress through the fog while, below the deck in the forecastle, Yank is painfully approaching death. He has had most of his
conversation with his mate, Droll to whom Yank confides his longing to have a farm in the middle of land far from the sea. The whistle stops and then the fog disappears immediately after his death. The play is unassuming but powerful. The movement of the action is the characteristic movement of an O’Neill’s play. It is a stride toward discovery or revelation or both – a kind of unmasking. Toward the end of an O’Neill’s play, there always comes a moment when the principal characters are for the first time fully revealed to the audience. It is only then, they fully understand themselves or their relationship to each other and to the world, they live in.

One of the most brilliant revelatory scenes in the plays of the early twenties is the final scene of *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*. Ella, the white girl, gets married to an ambitious negro. She destroys an African mask, which has been established as a symbol of artistic achievement and religious mystery. However, she takes it as a symbol of degradation. Soon, the quarrel between them ends with reconciliation. Both Ella and Jim become children once again. His utter defeat becomes a blessing in disguise. The final moments of these plays reveal that the principal characters revert themselves to savagery or childhood.

Most of his characters do not retreat from the circle of struggle that threatens their very existence. Juan Ponce de Leon, the hero of *The Fountain*, undertakes an expedition in search of Cathay, which is a glory for Spain and himself, but the self which sets the goal is only half the man and the less important half. The repressed romantic dreamer is his true self. In an interview at this time, O’Neill said that what he had tried to put in his plays was “an ennoblement of life, an exaltation, an urge toward life, which, derived in some way from dreaming”
(Mullet 18). The expedition in search of Cathay turns into a spiritual quest. His voyage of discovery across unknown seas is the exact opposite of the flight of the Emperor Jones across the forest. The relentless forward movement of Lazarus in *Lazarus Laughed* toward more and more exultant assertion of the value of the life shows that he too, like Juan of *The Fountain*, accepts the failure of life unmindful of the consequences. A far more convincing example of acceptance occurs in *Desire under the Elms*, in which the two principal characters, Eben and Abbie, move through a sequence of false attitudes toward each other culminating in true understanding and love. This play is an exploration of subconscious and conscious sexual motivations. Its characters have mask-like faces.

The central problem of *The Great God Brown* is both subtle and complex. It is the deformation of a creative impulse in a hostile environment. The urge toward artistic creation is also the urge toward spiritual self-fulfilment and therefore the artist is given the name Dion Anthony. The basic conflict in the play is between his religious and artistic aspirations and the doctrine of success as understood in a materialistic society. Thus the play, *The Great God Brown*, lends itself particularly well to the use of masks for it is the play about the divided self and about individuals torn between the natural impulse and the artificial act. The play attempts to convey the layers of falsehood and obsession of human beings and the means through which they confront the world. It is not surprising that O’Neill describes *The Great God Brown* as not only one of the most interesting and moving plays I have written but a play which “for me, at least … does succeed in conveying a sense of the tragic mysterious drama of life revealed through the lives in the play” (Gassner 184)
Thomas Lanier Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) succeeds Eugene O’Neill in the history of American drama. He is one of the most significant playwrights of the twentieth century among American Southern Dramatists. He frequently deals with intricate relationships among individuals as well as neurosis and psychological disintegration. Williams’ characters seem frequently to be fractured, insecure and dissociated with others and even his own confident self-identity. His paramount dramatic agenda is to understand the complexities of the human condition. Adler expresses that virtually all of Williams’ works during the 1940s and 1950s, delineated and probed character psychology. Another critic, Heilman, endorses the former’s views thus:

Failures of personality are a special theme of . . . of Williams and his plays deal with hypersensitive characters who, from weakness or disability, either cannot face the real world at all or have to opt out of it. (Heilman 2009)

He examines the turbulent, emotional, and sexual forces and physical and spiritual needs. He has a romantic fascination for extreme situations, the imagination’s power to challenge fact, capacity of the language to reshape experience and the ability of the self to people the world with the visions of it. He establishes the iconography of the romantic like fading beauty, death of the young, a dark violence and a redeeming love. His explanation for his career as a dramatist was that he was “creating imaginary worlds into which I can retreat from the real world because . . . I’ve never made any kind of adjustment to the real world” (Albert 106). After completing his college education and entering into a series of unsatisfactory jobs, he entered the University of Iowa and embarked on his writing career. His first
full-length play, *Battle of Angels*, which was published in 1945, was later revised as *Orpheus Descending* in 1957. It exhibits his characteristic lyricism and understanding of sexual passion as well as his mastery of stage techniques. He achieved his first stage success through his play *The Glass Menagerie*. He made use of expressionist technique and drew movingly on his own and his sister’s early life in St. Louis. He brought out an account of the tensions between Tom Wingfield (Williams himself), his domineering mother, Amanda and his invalid sister Laura (his own sister, Rose). After publishing a collection of eleven one-act plays, *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* (1946), he adapted the D. H. Lawrence’s story *You Touched Me!* (1947) collaborating with his friend Donald Windham. He, then, contributed one of his most popular and successful plays, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), which describes the downfall of the neurotic beauty Blanche Dubois. Through the character of Blanche, who is at once over-refined and whorish, Williams explored ideas and prejudices about the South and its culture.

His other play, *Summer and Smoke* (1948), takes place in Glorious Hill, Mississippi. It centres on Alma Winemiller, a high-strung unmarried daughter of a Minister and it exposes the spiritual as well as sexual romance that nearly blossoms between her and the wild, reckless young doctor, who lives next door, Dr. Buchanan, Junior. His *Rose Tattoo* (1953) is a comedy about a Sicilian woman’s quest for love. He produced his *Camino Real* in 1953. His *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) won him the Pulitzer Prize. It is an extremely powerful study of tensions in a Mississippi Delta family, whose patriarch, ‘Big Daddy’, is dying of cancer. The theme of homosexuality in the play gave it a widespread notoriety and so it was banned in Britain for many years. The Gothic element in William’s imagination
prevailed in his subsequent works. These include *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) which describes the devouring by cannibals on a remote island of the maladjusted and homosexual son of a doting mother. In *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1957), the irate father of the girl he has deserted castrates a handsome gigolo, Chance Wayne. The chained iguana outside a shabby Mexican hotel in *The Night of the Iguana* (1962) symbolises the chained passions of the characters residing there. His later plays include *Kingdom of Earth* (1968), *Bar of the Tokyo Hotel* (1969) and *Small Craft Warnings* (1972). They respectively deal with a dying transvestite, study of a painter and ‘cast-offs’ in a Californian coast bar.

Williams’ main contribution to the theatre is perhaps his expansion of its conventional and emotional range. The stories of his characters are compelling dramas, offering theatrical correlative for deeply felt human desires and needs. His non-dramatic works include short stories and two novels namely *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1950) and *Moise and the World of Reason* (1975). The former one is about an ageing actress’ relationship with a gigolo and the latter is about a homosexual writer.

Williams is more known as a dramatist than a novelist. His plays become the most popular ones for he has offered his spectators an incredible vision of life in the South and a series of remarkable portrayal of human conditions. He was deeply interested in poetic realism in which everyday objects become imbued with symbolic meaning. His plays appeared to be preoccupied with the extremes of human brutality and sexual behaviour namely schizophrenia, rape, incest, nymphomania as well as fantastic and violent deaths. According to Williams, violence in his work is nothing but part of human life especially in America. When
homosexuality and queer themes were considered as taboos to be avoided in dramas, Williams had the audacity to incorporate them into his plays. Theatrically, what he was after was a plastic theatre, fluid, evanescent, undefined and undefining.

The names of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller have been linked together for they appeared at about the same time and both with equal literary brilliance in the limelight of the theatre but they are as far apart as the poles – in background, in personality and in their creative output. As far as Miller is concerned, the chief asset of him lies in his deep realisation that the theatre must dedicate itself to the common man. He was constantly and consciously aware of the fact that his audiences were “persons to be addressed, never merely spectators to be tolerated.” Miller says,

A play, I think, ought to make sense to . . . people, and the only challenge worth effort is the widest one and the tallest one, which is the people themselves. He feels that the chief aim of the play is to arouse the passion of its audience so that it may establish new relationships between them and the society. His mission is to make each member of the public realise his own self so that by virtue of which he might touch others by his mutuality with them. It is only by virtue of this reason that he regards the theatre as a serious business, one that makes or should make man more humane.

(Collected Essays 53)

It is hardly possible to read Miller without being impressed by his desire to see and report life realistically. Even though an element of melodrama is visible in
his plays, *All My Sons, The Crucible*, and *A View from the Bridge*, it is difficult to reflect on Miller’s work without feeling that a hard realism is informing most of his concrete observations. What Miller prefers is a theatre of heightened consciousness. He speaks of the prevalent passion in man which is the passion to feel and know. He expects that the human society should possess more of the latter. He feels that drama, like any other invention of man, must help him know more.

Both Miller’s and Williams’ early and unpublished plays, written in the 1930s, display an unequivocal morality. They depict the fighting of the individuals against the oppressions and the oppressors. But, their 1940s works tell another story. The confidence has gone and social values seem unrelated to human need. Both are pastoralists inhabiting an urban world. Like Miller’s ageing cowboy in *The Misfits*, they both feel out of step with their society, living in an age in which money, power and a certain amoral materialism effectively deny the possibility of transcendence. In the 1930s, there was a commitment to the possibility of social change that could liberate the energies of the individual and preserve a confident selfhood. In the 1940s and 1950s, there was little evidence of this faith in personal or public transformation. In a period of enormous material advancement, with the Great Depression and war having given way to rapid expansion and peace, the values of society were seen as intimately connected with the success of American military might and commercial enterprise rather than inimical to it. Social values were reconstituted as private traumas in this psychological theatre and the public world was presented as the source of threat and oppression. In Williams’ case, as later in that of Edward Albee, this was perhaps a response to his own publicly menaced sexual identity as well as to his sense of being a poet in an unpoetic
culture. In post-war world, the theme of loss pervades the works of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, William Inge, Edward Albee, David Mamet, Neil Simon and many others.

During 1950s, the racial tension began to impinge more directly. For Arthur Miller, the shift to the right during the 1950s left him culturally stranded. In 1949, America lost its supremacy and its assurance due to the detonation of the Russian bomb. Apart from a powerful nostalgia, it seems to have registered a sense of disturbance in the social and the psychological world. It also imprinted bafflement over social process and it was most obvious in Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* or Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Camino Real*. But, there was also an increasing sense of apocalypse in American writing which was to intensify in the 1960s, 70s and 80s with plays like Edward Albee’s *Box*, Tennessee Williams’ *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, Sam Shepard’s *Icarus’s Mother* and Mabon Mines’ *Dead End Kids: A History of Nuclear Power*. The very structures of art began to dislocate under the pressure. The sense of consonance implied by the rationality of language, the integrity of character and the coherence of plot began to succumb to what seems at times to be a kind of cultural paranoia. The psychological derangement of characters such as Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* and Blanch Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* merely anticipated the more complete collapse of dramatic character to be found in Kenneth Brown’s *The Brig* (1963) or, in a different sense, in the works of Robert Wilson or Richard Foreman a decade later. On having publicly oppressed and on being deeply suspicious of the materialism and the increasing anonymity of society, writers like Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams tended to dramatise the
plight of the individual and the denied avenues in which they attempted to express that individuality. The self was seen under attack from without and within. Public and private moralities were at odds and the conflict between them generated their plays. Miller, living through young adulthood during the Great Depression, was shaped by the poverty that taught him the various experiences of life. They demonstrated to him the fragility and vulnerability of human existence in the modern era.

Miller’s first play *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944) was a total failure and it was closed abruptly after four performances. Three years later, his *All My Sons* won him the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award as the best play of 1947. This is the sad Post-World War II story about the Kellers, a seemingly all-American family. The head of the family, Joe Keller, conceals a great sin. During the war, he grants his permission to ship faulty airplane cylinders to the U. S. Armed Forces. His gluttonous desire for materialistic prosperity kills nearly twenty American pilots. Joe Keller as well as his business partner Steve is arrested for this crime. Later, Joe is released on getting his conviction overturned but Steve is imprisoned in jail.

In short, the play is a short critical investigation of the quest for material comforts and an improved social status through hard work and determination. Through the remarkable portrayal of Joe Keller, Miller attacks a system that would encourage greed and gain at the expense of the basic human values and its happiness. Along with *Death of a Salesman, All My Sons* and *The Man Who Had All the Luck* form a trilogy of plays about love triangle involving fathers and sons. The relationship among the family members is at the core of all of Miller’s plays.
The falsity of the American Dream is the dominant theme of his next major play, *The Death of a Salesman*. Willy Loman represents the primary target of this dream. He strives very hard to provide both financial security and success to himself and his family. What he owns after many years of business is only an old car, an empty house and a defeated spirit. Miller makes a very diligent effort to assign a job of travelling salesman to his protagonist of American Dream. As a salesman, he has no first-hand knowledge about the product and the process of production but he still works on the empty substance of dreams and promises. As profit is his only concern, he fixes his mind on materialising his dreams. The tragedy of dysfunctional family is the important theme of this play. His attempt to provide economic security as well as guidance to his son’s future ends in vain for he is unable to perform both. Unfortunately, his illusions do not fit into the aspirations of his real life. Finally, the only solution left is committing suicide to enable his family members to collect his insurance amount. As the failure of the American dream is always present, the audience questions its commitment to false dreams.

His next politically significant work that appeared on the stage was *The Crucible* (1953). It is a tale of the Salem witch-trials that contains obvious analogies to the McCarthy anti-Communist hearings in America in 1950s. In 1950s, America tried to purge the memory of that decade, seeking publicly, through the mechanism of the House of Un-American Activities Committee, to force people to deny the lives they had lived, Arthur Miller resisted this and out of that resistance was born *An Enemy of the People* and *The Crucible*. He also wrote other plays such as *A Memory of Two Mondays* and *A View from the Bridge* and
they were produced in 1955. His other works include *After the Fall* (1964), a thin
veiled account of his marriage to Monroe as well as *The Price* (1967), *The
Archbishop’s Ceiling* (1977), and *The American Clock* (1980). His most recent
works include the plays *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* (1991), *The Last Yankee*
(1992) and *Broken Class* (1994) which won him the Oliver Award for Best Play.

Thus, his plays turn on metaphors – the salesman, the crucible, the bridge,
the fall and the broken glass –are themselves metaphors. He condenses narrative
into image and expands image into narrative. His is a moral theatre, a liberal
theatre, in that it insists on the reality of those connections, which tie action to
consequence, past to present and self to society.

The successor of Arthur Miller Edward Albee opened up a new avenue in
the field of American Literature especially by categorising himself to the School of
Absurd. The middle of the twentieth century witnessed a tremendous change in the
social, political and economic development of the United States. A gushing
economic growth along with America’s triumph in the Second World War
contributed to its assertion of supremacy in the free world. The technological and
commercial growth resulted in a world of comfort and choice such as television,
fast food, shopping centres that initiated the growth of consumerism and 3-D
movies that paved for the extreme dominance of Medias in the everyday life of
Americans. Hence, the Popular Culture ruled the American scenario and resulted
in nuclear families that were framed by the concept of youth. These radical
changes left many writers like Albee confused and discontented as human values
and standard of life underwent an astonishing transformation. As Russia tried to
excel the United States especially in the field of technology, America’s supremacy
in technology and its acknowledged position as a superpower was ultimately threatened. The rise of nuclear arsenals between Russia and the United States ushered in the era of the Cold War where these powers were pitted against each other due to ideological differences. The radical changes in the field of science and technology and the changing climate of the political scenario affected writers as well. The works composed in this milieu reflected the political and psychological turmoil of that time. In the nuclear age, the fact that human life is highly fragile and hopelessly vulnerable came to be looked upon as a constant cause of anxiety.

Life came to be evaluated in terms of existential philosophy. His plays attack the ideals and basis of the American Dream. He laments that Americans had substituted the artificial for real values. They always want to relish their dreams to make unsurpassed achievement in all areas. He shatters the unaltered belief of Americans that their position is superior to others because of their scientific and technological supremacy.

Albee, in his themes and concerns, is a post-nuclear writer. His fundamental theme is the collapse of communality, the Others as a threat. The overwhelming mood is elegiac. His subject is loss, desolation and spiritual depletion. Racial strife, wars abroad, the rise of the cosmopolitan group and the decentralisation of family life are the facts that fly in the face of these ideals. Awareness of a deep uneasiness is inescapable and misgivings about the American way of life churn below the surface of the group- mind. Edward Albee lays open the centre of this uneasiness by dealing with America and American families in suburbia of 1960s. His treatment is a satiric indictment, sometimes savage, of American manners and mores and the cultural assumptions that shape them.
The essential problem that is covered by manners and mores, as Albee sees it, is the breakdown of real communion among individuals. Hence, the protagonist of The Zoo Story says that they neither love nor hurt because they do not try to reach each other. As people observe social amenities and accept stereotyped roles, it becomes possible for them to converse without communicating and live together while remaining as strangers. As Albee feels strongly the alienation of the individual in the midst of a group-oriented society, his work has an affinity with the continental playwrights of the Absurd. He also feels that social conventions have become defense mechanism that contributes substantially to this alienation and so his method becomes that of a satirist. His The Zoo Story explores the themes of isolation, loneliness, miscommunication as anathematisation, social disparity and dehumanisation in a commercial world. This play tells what happens when one character enters into the life of another character and quickly changes it forever. In the play, Jerry confronts Peter while he sits quietly reading on a bench in Central Park. Jerry, through a quick series of events, forces Peter to kill him. The three dominant themes that exist in the play are absurd versus reality, alienation versus loneliness and wealth versus poverty.

The primary theme of his next one-act play Sandbox (1959) is the question of how to express humanity in a world that is becoming more and more hardened. It further exposes the fact that there exists disintegration in the family unit. In April 1960, The Death of Bessie Smith was produced at Schlosspark Theatre, Berlin. The American Dream was staged in New York at York Playhouse in January 1961. The same year Albee received the Loa D’ Annuzio Award for original playwriting. Bill Rose Theatre produced Who’s Afraid of Virginia
Woolf? in October 1962 in New York. He received the Drama Critics Award and Tony Award for the play. Though the playwright of the Absurd is also a satirist, he does not belong to the tribe of Beckett, Ionesco and Genet. Absurd Drama brings modern man face to face with the void. It explores this moment of confrontation dramatically of what grips the mind, what images occur to the visionary and what emotions arise at this moment. However, Albee does not go too far. In Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, he does not insist on the ultimate meaninglessness of existence and of the struggle to communicate but he attacks the manners and attitudes of society that obstruct man from communication. He uses satire to demolish these barriers. His early plays are powerful and original. The energy and precision of his language is visible in the use of dramatic metaphors that are rooted in characters and situations that sustain belief. Some of his later works effectively explore a language detached from context but he is at his best when the ironies which he explores are grounded in social and psychological substance of The Zoo Story, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? and A Delicate Balance.

Vietnam and Watergate marked the end of a period in which people in the United States thought that anything and everything was possible for them and their country. But, what happened next was a growing national cynicism, which led Albee himself to become less and less certain about the resilience of civilisation. The result was reflected in the black ironies of Delicate Balance, the post-apocalyptic elegy that was Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, and the moral and political implications pointedly reflected by the title of another of his plays, All Over. When he first appeared, he seemed to be a demonic social critic. He covertly dramatised a deeply uncommunal people, alienated from one
another and from the public world whose authority they denied but they seemingly acknowledged their imperatives. With *The American Dream*, he naturalised and domesticated European absurdity into expressionistic satire. In *The Death of Bessie Smith*, he offered an apparently realist account of personal and institutional racism. In these terms, *The Zoo Story* might seem to stand as an indictment on materialism and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as a portrait of a defunct liberalism and a bankrupt but threatening scientism.

*The American Dream* could be said to be derivative, an American version of Ionesco’s *The Bald Prima Donna* accommodated to the function of social satire. The fatuity of character and aridity of language in Albee’s work serve to reflect and amplify a conviction that social forms and public myths have corrupted the self. Therefore, the American Dream has devolved into simple acquisitiveness. Exchange value has replaced human value and appearance is mistaken for substance. It is a play about the substitution of artificial for real values. But those real values have to be inferred from their absence. As in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, he explores the fate of those animating principles to which America laid claim in *The American Dream*. The American Dream becomes a superficially attractive young man sexually incapable of realising the promise that he seems to offer. It is an image, which recurs in his work as he establishes emasculation, impotence and incomplete sexual gestures as a metaphor for unfulfilled aspirations and misdirected personal and social energies. Here the only character who seems to stand aside from the general collapse of personal identity and moral purpose is Grandma, who steps outside of the frame of the action, but even she is infantilised. The problem is to find a cure for this alienation.
His *Tiny Alice*, which was staged at Billy Rose Theatre, won him New York Drama Critics Award and eventually, his *A Delicate Balance* brought him his first Pulitzer Prize. This play has often been credited with creating an archetype for American drama with its classic study of the American family which is a highly dysfunctional one. It looks into the confusion that erupts in a modern family’s attempt to avoid pain and discomfort but unfortunately, it only intensifies them. The major themes of his plays are denial of emotions, loss of opportunities and regret over paths not chosen. They are very well reflected in the lives of a wealthy suburban couple who have retired but find their long-sought freedom about to collapse. The visit of the emotionally wounded family members and friends of the couple, at the end of the play, exposes their traumatised condition. Two of the interrelated plays *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* were staged at Buffalo Studio Arena Theatre, Buffalo, New York in 1968. Another play *All Over* was produced at Martin Beck Theatre, New York in March 1971. He won his second Pulitzer Prize for *Seascape* and later his *The Lady from Dubuque* was performed at Morosco Theatre in New York. Two years later, *The Man Who Had Three Arms* was staged and in 1994 and subsequently, he received his third Pulitzer Prize for *Three Tall Women*. His most recent work, *The Play about the Baby*, was produced in 1998.

Though Albee is initially characterised either as a realist or as an absurdist, he combines elements from the American traditions of social criticism established by such playwrights as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Eugene O’Neill and with characteristics of the Theatre of Absurd as practised by Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. His plays often portray alienated individuals who suffer because
of unjust social, moral and religious strictures. His works usually proffer solutions to conflicts rather than conveying an absurdist sense of an inescapable determination. According to Allan Lewis,

Albee writes plays that grip an audience, that hold with their elusiveness their obscurity, their meaning; and he has functioned in the true role of the playwright to express the human condition dramatically and metaphorically. (Lewis 80)

His plays are “an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of the complacency, cruelty, emasculation, and vacuity” (Isherwood). Thus, Edward Albee’s plays, like his own life, have been shaped by the changing nature of American families and communities. He insists that the scope of his drama is America and the Western World only. Bigsby states, “The emptiness and loveliness of the characters are somehow the result of a collapse of values in the Western World in general and the United States in particular” (Bigsby 43).

After Albee, Sam Shepard, playwright and actor, has been a leader of the avant-garde in contemporary American theatre since his earliest work. Shepard’s plays are replete with blended images of the Old West, fascination for pop culture – rock and roll, drugs and television and bizarre family relations. He repeatedly examines moral and spiritual starvation in his dramas. His style is lusty, loud, splashy, populist and jagged. He is the playwright of the cowboy, America, wide-open spaces, the rock’n roll hero and of popular culture. His language is explosive and his plays are full of arresting images and monologues. His characters are disconnected and lost and hence, his audiences are always compelled to ask what
truth lies behind their motives and actions. His themes are familiar. They are the themes of the family and its decay, the failure of American Dream, the quest for identity, alienation and dissociation. It is an undeniable fact that they are all rooted in mythology.

His plays depict a world in which his characters struggle with a paradox of life in America. Incapable of ever attaining any semblance of their perception of American identity, they also cannot ever define themselves outside of national character. This paradox occurs, Shepard argues, because America—through its literature, culture and very history – has promoted and perpetuated a sanitised version of historical events. His plays throughout his career have concentrated almost exclusively on the American male experience. In fact, Bonnie Marranca accurately observes that in Shepard’s works, “The Voice – of the consciousness, of the emotions, of reason, of triumph, and of failure, too – and finally, of America – is a man’s voice” (Marranca 30). As he continues to write, his characters have evolved as they attempt to find new norms of American identity. In addition to their futile search for identity, this group fails in their quest for character. If this vision of American identity is inaccessible to white men (the privileged group that created it), then who can achieve it? Shepard’s work, therefore, illustrates not only the conflicted yet eternal search for American identity but also reveals the imminent difficulties of the search itself.

His characters, like Tennessee Williams’, are drifters and seekers after a truth in which they can no longer believe. Occasionally, they reach out a hand, hoping to find some momentary consolation but find that passion carries its own virus of violence and despair. Men and women meet across a great divide of
experience. He once remarked that the sadness of American country music derives from the fact that it speaks “of the true relationship between the American male and the American female” which is “terrible and impossible” (Shepard’s Interview 19). In fact, his plays convey a surreal vision of contemporary American society in which myth frequently collides with reality. His plays examine the spiritual dissolution of the family, the corruption of the artist by commercialism, the disintegration of the American dream and the vanishing Western frontier and its culture. His interest in the legends and myths of the American West dominate his dramas and it becomes obvious when he refers to jazz, lyrics, drugs, Hollywood films and other components of American popular culture. His first one-act dramas, *Cowboys* (1964), *The Rock Garden* (1964) and *Chicago* (1965) are marked by their disjointed structure, visual imagery and lengthy monologues typically loaded with obscenity. For example, *The Rock Garden* culminates in a verbal outburst of a teenager who elaborately explains his sexual techniques to his dumbstruck father. He continued to explore various combinations of sight and sound in his early full-length plays. His first full-length play *La Turista* (1967) is a comedy about a couple who fall prey to intestinal illness while undertaking vocational tour to Mexico. His *Operation Sidewinder* written in 1970 satirises the social and political upheavals of the 1960s. It features a giant rattlesnake-shaped computer as the central figure and ends with a prolonged burst of machine gun fire.

His notable play of this period is *The Tooth of Crime* (1976) which Shepard later described as *The Tooth of Crime (Second Dance)* in 1996. This play tells the story of two rock musicians namely Hoss and Crow. Their battle for prominence in the music industry resembles the actions of gunfighters in the Old
West. Language plays a crucial part in the play as Shepard employs urban slang, rock lyrics and other pop idioms in place of the conventional weapons of gunfighters. At the end, Hoss, leaving Crow in command until the next challenger comes along, commits suicide. The plays of the ensuing period focus on the artist’s pursuit of identity and creative freedom as well as the struggles that arise from this search. His *Suicide in B-Flat* (1976) suggests the stifling of creativity in the life of a jazz musician while *Angel City* (1976) satirises the film industry and the corruption of young writers.

His major plays of the late 1970s and the 1980s are domestic dramas in which working-class families become victims of self-perpetuated violence, guilt and abnormal fantasy. He uses the dissolution of a Southern California family in *Curse of the Starving Class* (1976) to symbolise the demise of the Western frontier and American society in general. The action in *Buried Child* unfolds when Vince returns to his Midwestern home after a long absence. He is confronted with his reckless relatives who harbour secrets of incest and murder. Eventually, these secrets are discovered along with an unwanted infant buried in the backyard years earlier. *True West* (1980) highlights the struggle between the two brothers, Austin and Lee. Austin, a reserved screenwriter, has returned to his house to finish off a long overdue script for his Hollywood contract with Saul. Lee, a fraud, who lives in the desert, surprises Austin by his sudden visit. After impressing Saul with stories from his sordid past, Lee entraps Saul to accept his ideas for a movie. Saul immediately succumbs to temptation of Lee and breaks his agreement with Austin. His next play, *Fool for Love*, examines obsession, betrayal, myth and truth. The plot develops through alternating submission and rejection between two lovers who
may be half-brother and half-sister. *A Lie of the Mind* continues Shepard’s exploration of American families and emotional stress. The play focuses its attention on a married couple, Beth and Jake, whose violent relationship both destroys and redeems their families. The playwright, throughout the drama, probes and reveals the true nature of the two families. Shepard continued his examination of the American family, father-son relationships and the search for love and identity even during 1990-2000. In *States of Shock* (1991), a nameless American and Stubbs, a soldier arrive at a restaurant to celebrate the death anniversary of the Colonel’s son. *Simpatico* (1994) elaborately portrays the escalating tension between two ex-partners, Vinnie and Carter, who once made a fortune by fixing a horse race. Years later, Vinnie threatens to blackmail Carter, now a successful horse breeder, with evidence of their past crime. *Eyes for Consuela* (1998) is a two-act play based on the short story *The Blue Bouquet* by Octavio Paz. In *The Late Henry Moss* (2000), two brothers return home to confront each other and their violent past after the unexpected death of their father. Moreover, Shepard has published several collections of prose and poetry in addition to his plays. *Hawk Moon* (1973) and *Motel Chronicles* (1982) contain a variety of prose pieces, poems and speeches. His *Rolling Thunder Logbook* (1977) reprints a journal based on Shepard’s experiences with musician Boy Dylan’s Rolling Thunder Revue Tour. *Cruising Paradise* (1996) and *Great Dream of Heaven: Stories* (2002) contain stories exploring themes of solitude and loss. He has also written a number of screenplays, including the award-winning *Paris, Texas, Far North* and *Silent Tongue*. David Mamet, another significant American playwright whose last
plays are the natural choice of the present researcher, appears on the stage after Sam Shepard.

David Mamet, the winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1984, the two Obie Awards in 1976 and 1983, and the two New York Drama Critics Circle Awards among many remarkable American playwrights, is regarded as a major voice in American drama and cinema. He animates his stage through language, a poetic idiolect that explores the relationship between public issue and private desires—and the effects of this relationship on the individual’s spirit. He is widely known for his wit and comedy but his major concern is for portraying the impact of social values on the private life and the personal relationship of the individuals of American society of his time. Mamet replicates human commitments and desires in demythicised forms: commodity fetishism, sexual negotiations and exploitations, botched crimes, physical assaults, fraudulent business transactions enacted by petty thieves masquerading as business associates and human relationships whose only shared features are the presence of sex and the absence of love. Mamet seems at his best when commenting on what he believes as a business ethic that has led to the corruption of both the social contract and his heroes’ moral values. His major achievements lie in his use of language, his social examination of professional and private betrayals and alienation and his ability to capture the anxieties of the individual – whether he or she is a small-time thief, a working-class person or a Hollywood executive.

David Mamet, a Chicagoan, was born on 30, November 1947 to Leonore Silver Mamet, a teacher for retarded children and Bernard Mamet, an attorney and a minor semanticist. Though the parents’ intellectual awareness of language
plainly influenced their son, their divorce seems to have affected him even more greatly. He grew up in a Jewish section on Chicago’s south until his parents divorced. After their separation, he moved with his mother to Olympia Fields, a Chicago suburb where the oppression of middleclass values and lifestyles provided him with his major dramatic themes. His geographical move seemed even more complicated because of his familial dislocations. His stepfather apparently abused the Mamet’s family both physically and psychologically and it was very vividly revealed in his essay entitled *The Rake* (1992). It seems as if the world of theatre offered the tension-filled playwright some form of reprieve and recognition. As a boy, Mamet acted on television and it was an opportunity made possible by his uncle, who was the director of broadcasting for the Chicago Board of Rabbis. Mamet was often cast as a Jewish boy plagued by religious disbelief and self-doubt. Rather than pursuing sports, he was drawn to the energy and liberation of the theatre. Later, he attended Francis Parker High School, which had an outstanding theatre programme. As a voracious reader, he found escape in the world of books and mind. Then, he became attached to theatres in Chicago, where he received his early training. He attended Goddard College in Vermont, which allowed him to spend a year in New York City studying at the Neighborhood Playhouse with Sanford Meisner, one of the founders of the Group Theatre in the 1930s. After his collegiate studies, he worked in a number of blue-collar jobs—taxi driver, boatman, carpet-salesman, an office cleaner and a window washer—and in the theatre as a dancer and actor, all of which provided material for his plays. According to Bigsby, these mundane works provided him,
A sensitivity to the American vernacular unequalled by any other playwright, but they also alerted him to what he sees as the profound alienation, which typifies an urban America in which activity is detached from meaning and desires are unrelated to human need.

(Bigsby 20)

The early 1970s found Mamet teaching at Goddard, where he formed a theatre group that put on early versions of his first works. At Goddard, he wrote his first play Camel to fulfil his thesis requirement for graduation. In 1970, Mamet taught acting at Marlboro College in Vermont, where he wrote Lifeboat based on his experiences with one summer job. It was first produced at Marlboro. His first play to receive attention, The Duck Variations (1972), displays features common to much of his works such as a fixed setting, few characters, a sparse plot and dialogue that captures the rhythms and syntax of everyday speech. By the fall of 1972, some of his early works were performed in a small Chicago theatre and later by the more established theatre companies in Chicago. By 1975, Mamet decided to try his luck in New York. Thus, the mid-1970s were pivotal years for the playwright. In 1975, his American Buffalo became the first major success. It opened at the Goodman Theatre and soon moved to the St. Nicholas Theatre. The play, in addition to Outer Critics Circle Award, won a Joseph Jefferson Award for Outstanding Production, as did Sexual Perversity in Chicago in the same year. In 1978, it became the first American play to be produced in England’s new National Theatre. In American Buffalo (1975) and The Water Engine: An American Fable (1977), Mamet explores contradictions and myths prevalent in the business world. The former play is set in Don’s Resale Shop, an old junk store and revolves around
the fact that Don believes that someone has swindled him out of a buffalo-head nickel. The play is about social interaction among three men. They indulge in a plot to steal the coin back into their possession but a lack of communication and understanding causes them to abandon their efforts. The moral degeneracy of their lives brought about by the corrupting power of American material values had been symbolised in the idea that the mythic grandeur of the Old West has been reduced to the image of a buffalo on a coin. Mamet, in 1975, finally saw his work staged in New York City: *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* and *Duck Variations* opened at the St. Clement’s Theatre and moved to the Off-Broadway Cherry Lane Theatre in 1976. In the same year, Mamet won an Obie Award for both *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* and *American Buffalo*. His *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974) examines the confusions and misconceptions that exist in the relationship between men and women. As a sad, comic and despairing commentary on modern male sexuality presented through a series of thirty-four brief scenes, it mainly involves Bernie. He, who does not know what he is talking about, tries to teach Don how things work between men and women. In short, it is a compassionate and rueful comedy about how difficult it is for men to give themselves to women, and women to men. It sarcastically suggests that the only thing to fear about sex is fear itself.

The play was later adapted into a film *About Last Night*. Mamet so vividly outlines a world in which anxiety-producing loneliness dominates in spite of the efforts attempted especially by men. At the end of the play, Danny and Bernard stare at women on the beach. Bernard does not respond to Danny’s coarse remarks and hence, he screams obscenities. It clearly exposes their frustration and their inability to deal with the loss of having sex with the women of their choice. Sexual
encounters, devoid of genuine love, account for the title and theme of this important dramatic contribution. Nearly nine of his plays appeared in 1977 in theatres such as New Haven, New York, Chicago and London. Again, in 1977, he received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for *American Buffalo* when it was premiered in Broadway. These successes confirmed Mamet’s reputation as a new and vital theatrical voice in the United States. Another notable drama of this period was *The Woods* (1977). He has written more than thirty plays, a number of sketches, poetry, essays, children’s plays, several important Chekhov adaptations, a book concerning film directing and more than a dozen screenplays.

Mamet’s career flourished throughout 1980s and 1990s with such notable plays as *Edmund* (1982), *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983), *The Shawl* (1985), *Speed-the-Plow* (1988), *Oleanna* (1992), *Squirrels* (1993), *The Cryptogram* (1994), *The Old Neighborhood* (1997) and *Boston Marriage* (1999). He has also garnered many awards, including the Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for *Glengarry Glen Ross* in 1986. His real-estate experience finds its echo in this play. It involves a group of salesmen who sell worthless swampland in Florida to naive clients. Theirs is a cut-throat enterprise that exposes the dehumanising relationship among the men in a value system where sale is sought at any cost. The play employs a style of dialogue that emphasises the egocentric, vapid mentality of people who have been brutalised by material values. Mamet in the 1990s has been honoured for his brilliant use of language and characterisations that capture important aspects of American Culture. His play *Oleanna*, which opened at the Orpheum Theatre in New York City in October 1992, has only added to the dramatist’s reputation for staging serious plays about serious matters. His
main dramatic power comes from his language, which is similar in some ways to that of Harold Pinter. It is spare, oblique, inferential and catching the everyday cadences and vocabulary of desperate people. The majority of his plays deal with the male ego, male relationships and the shallowness of the lives and activities of his male characters. The underlying cause of this shallowness is the corrupting power of the material values and the Americans’ obsession with money. He made remarkable contribution to film-industry during this period. He wrote scripts for The Postman Always Rings Twice (1981), The Verdict (1982) that won an Academy Award nomination, The Untouchables (1987), House of Games (1987), Things Change (1988), Homicide (1991), Glengarry Glen Ross (1992), Hoffa (1992), The Spanish Prisoner (1997), Wag the Dog (1997), The Heist (2001) and Hannibal (2001). They all have been praised for their intriguing plots and monologues of cruelty. His success as a screenwriter led him to become film-director to films such as House of Games (1988), Homicide (1991), Oleanna (1995) and Spanish Prisoner (1997). He made an attempt of adaptations of The Cherry Orchard (1985), Uncle Vanya (1988) and Three Sisters (1990). Besides his major novels The Old Religion (1997) and The Village (1994), he also published his popular essays namely Writing in Restaurants (1986) that best spells out the playwright’s theory of dramatic art as well as his sense of cultural poetics, Some Freaks (1989) and Jafsie and John Henry (1999).

While Mamet’s plays are taken into consideration, it can be very well perceived that his plays portray the disintegrating society of America in all its vital areas. Undoubtedly, it is a world devoid of a sense of community and moral values apart from the ones offered by a competitive capitalism. Perhaps, Mamet is a
social critic who denounces the brutality and ruthlessness of capitalism and exposes the alienations generated by its urban capitalistic society. He is also a kind of moralist who regrets the transformation of real values into artificial commodity and the decay of language, which is hardly expressive of human needs. Given this lack of communality, the loss of the sense of belonging, theatre exists, for Mamet, “to address that need for community, for trust, that perceived the sense of entropy, which lies at the heart of his plays” (Bigsby 34). Indeed, theatre is a place where the ideals come true in action on the stage and he praises theatre for being a community act. Accordingly, he defines the purpose of theatre as “to transcend the individual conscious mind, to put the spectator in a communion with his or her fellows on the stage and also in the audience, so as to address the problems that cannot be addressed by reason” (Schvey 6).

While criticising the society, Mamet actually aims at the American dream rather than its realities. There is a strong sense of betrayal and loss in his plays especially in Speed-the-Plow, Oleanna, The Cryptogram, Boston Marriage, and The Old Neighborhood deriving from the great American myth that fails to meet its promises. He depicts a nation that has lost its purpose in the hope of the possession of that myth. The creation of that myth, in fact, has its roots in the possession of the continent; the story that began by an act of theft actually follows its course with its successors. As Bigsby points out:

The Supposed frontier virtues of a sturdy masculine self-sufficiency that took by force what was denied by right are echoed in his plays by people who deploy that rhetoric and dispose those myths in a world that has lost its epic dimensions. (Bigsby 16)
America seems to be a new Eden where its inhabitants fell into with a hope to find their “ideal” yet disillusioned in the end. However, the irony of Mamet’s characters derives “not from a collapse of faith in the American dream but from the persistence of that faith beyond reason, and from the prosaic nature of the dream they choose to embrace” (Bigsby 17). Along with *American Buffalo* that brought Mamet to critical attention, in *Glengarry Glen Ross, Speed-the-Plow, A Life in the Theater, The Water Engine, Oleanna, The Cryptogram, Boston Marriage* and *The Old Neighborhood*, he examines a society that is propelled by the so-called business-ethics which is one of deception, betrayal and survival at the fall and defeat of their opponents. It is such a world that one speaks only to beguile and overpower even if they are closest friends, family members, superiors or students. Hence, Mamet comments,

> [The American Dream myth] interests me because the national culture is founded very much on the idea of strive and succeed. Instead of rising with the masses, one should rise from the masses. Your extremity is my opportunity. That’s what forms the basis of our economic life, and this is what forms the rest of our lives. That American myth: the idea of something out of nothing. (Roudane 46)

Indeed, his characters are self-centred and hence, they are indifferent to everything and everyone except their focus on the fulfilment of their dreams. They yearn for contact and love, yet their self-absorption and self-conceit make them even more lonely and frustrated. Hence, they desperately retreat into fiction where they construct themselves a coherent world of deception. At the heart of his plays, there is always a storyteller and a listener. They deploy language to conceal, deceive and
invent and the truth lies in what is not said. Even his urban settings like singles bar, junk stores, real estate offices, brothels and polluted environments represent the deterioration of the society. His is a different kind of realism since he does not offer us a faithful reproduction of reality, but rather fragments of that reality as it can be perceived, for instance, through a keyhole, or through a window whose frame, together with the walls that surround it, makes it impossible for us to see the complete picture of the subject observed and forces us therefore to imagine the rest, the invisible, the unseen. (Piette 81)

He has sometimes been accused of being misogynistic because of the scatological dialogue and the sexist language that Mamet deploys in his early plays like Lake Boat, Duck Variations, American Buffalo, A Life in the Theater and Glengarry Glen Ross. Even when he includes female characters in his plays like Sexual Perversity in Chicago, Edmond, Speed-the-Plow, The House of Games, Oleanna, The Cryptogram, Boston Marriage and The Old Neighborhood, these characters were viewed as a further evidence of his misogyny and therefore, he is blamed for depicting submissive female stereotypes. In spite of their resistance and relentless struggle for survival, the women are either dismissed from the world of men or defeated. However, identifying the author’s personality with his fictional characters is not a commendable approach. Although Mamet admits being fascinated with the communal aspect of male bonding, he cannot altogether be accused of misogyny since he exposes the obscene language and sexist remarks of his male characters as an indicator of their powerlessness. Besides,
the exclusion of women . . . implies that the values the male characters traditionally associate with the feminine – compassion, tenderness, empathy, spirituality – are seen as threatening to their business and weakness is despised as effeminate and dangerous.

(Zeifman 124-125)

By banishing women and the values they purportedly represent from these plays, Mamet thus shifts the focus to an examination of “the cocoon of the traditional American masculinity myths inside which he himself was raised. It is these values of machismo – toughness, strength, cunning – which have become appropriated and apotheosized by American business, alchemized into the fool’s gold of power, greed, and competition” (Zeifman 124-125).

Though he represents his women characters as submissive ones, they constantly resist the labels attached to them and expose how the male system of oppression works. The male characters view them as objects of their sexual desires yet the women both literally and metaphorically escape the male entrapment. In fact, Mamet’s women are revolutionary because they cannot be fixed within male representation. Just as Price describes:

His plays are masculine not because they objectify women but because they acknowledge their inability to objectify them; they question the validity of their own representations of women precisely because women are the objects of desire; they do not attempt realistic portrayals of women because such portrayals would always be an illusion masking the lack within the protagonist himself. (Price 58)
All the plays of Mamet somehow showcase and highlight the present condition of America and make a dig at its illusive claims of superiority over other countries. America experiences financial crunch again after the latest recession. Thus, the claim of economic and technological progress has become transient and insubstantial. The ideas and views of Mamet occupy a significant place his dramas and they have become prophetic and his visions genuine as that of a visionary.

The present study, *Fragments, Fortitude and Futurity – A Textual Study of David Mamet’s Last Five Plays*, concerns the most discernible aspects of the characters of Mamet’s chosen dramas. It has a bearing over the striking themes of his dramas also. However, basically, it has a direct relevance to the contemporary postmodern American society. In the new era, the people give undue importance to their greed but not to their need. This tendency leads them to amass wealth without adopting the right means to attain them. The capitalist as well as the consumerist competitions accentuated by mediatised culture only renders enmity and rivalry among people but not genuine human bond and comradeship. The study, hence, attempts to throw light on the position, plight, struggle and survival along with anguish and anxiety for days to come with an element of hope for success also. The thesis is organised into five chapters as, *Introduction, Fragments, Fortitude, Futurity* and the final *Summation*.

The introductory chapter traces the background of the age in which Mamet and his predecessors produced their dramas emphasising the place and position of the Americans and their society and how does Mamet dwell upon the theme deftly and diligently by the time it matures in his hands. The following chapter “Fragments” highlights the fractured nature of man who remains in his community
as a total alien focusing on his urge to make money in the New World Order. The characters of Mamet share this striking feature of their contemporary age and society and reveal themselves as living machines without any attachment for anything except money, wealth and power. They are devoid of cardinal human values and genuine qualities. Chapter III takes up one of the major characteristics of their survival strategy namely Fortitude. Their pursuit of wealth, money and power involves ceaseless efforts and struggle for which they evince formidable amount of Fortitude. Their patience and tolerance in the face of turmoil and toiling further expose their hope for the future that is enunciated in the next chapter. Futurity also induces positive hope and optimism of their wellbeing and comfort for their later days. The Summation, final chapter, synthesises the previous arguments of the core chapters and corroborates each strand with the other. In the light of these major themes, the researcher hypothesises that a ray of hope for success in the future makes one forget the pain and pinch of the struggles provided he or she focuses his/her attention on the target with fortitude.

The minimum number of characters, their interactive experiences and incidents fictionalise in the dramas of Mamet provides a limited scope to present variety of illustrations for explications that embody the research. Hence, the repetitive nature of presenting episodes and the related characters prove to be unavoidable.