INTRODUCTION

The Provincetown Players was an avant-garde theatre group of young and talented writers and artists who struggled to establish a unique kind of theatre in America. They set up their first stage in 1915 at Cape Cod in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Susan Glaspell, George Cram Cook, Susan Glaspell’s husband, and Floyd Dell were the founding members of the Players. Dell, Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell were at the centre of a collective movement that sought to create a revolution in drama by staging plays that were truly “American”, plays that would depict the true and finer spirit of American life and culture. The Provincetown Players was a non-commercial theatre group that worked together to advance literary and artistic expression. A number of plays by Eugene O’Neill, one of the most popular playwrights of the period, were staged by the Provincetown Players. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his four plays and also received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936. O’Neill’s achievements garnered a lot of publicity for the Provincetown Players. This theatre group later moved to Greenwich Village in New York and they finally disbanded in 1922. In the short span of eight years that the Provincetown Players existed, they produced 145 plays and made a significant contribution to American theatre. This theatre group popularised the plays of Eugene O’Neill, Susan Glaspell, George Cram Cook, Neith Boyce Hapgood, Floyd Dell, Rita Wellman, Djuna Barnes, Michael Gold, Edna St Vincent Millay, John Reed, Lawrence Langner, Evelyn Scott, Theodore Dreiser and many others.

The Provincetown Players made a breakthrough in the world of drama and theatre for women if we consider the scenario of what was the position of women dramatists before the twentieth century across the globe. Prior to the twentieth century a large number of
women wrote plays but their contribution has been foreshadowed by the male canon and very few names come to our minds even though women have been writing for more than a thousand years, Hrotsvitha (c. 930-1002) was the first known woman dramatist (See Appendix I). Critics like F.H. Londre have suggested that women who decided to pursue their careers in theatre were often challenged by the male playwrights in their attempt to achieve success. If women wrote plays that were regarded as being too clever to have been written by a woman, the works were thought to be plagiarised. Women had to act according to the whims of the stage managers who often exploited them in terms of business dealings. Women who worked as playwrights and actresses were often sexually harassed and were expected to hand over their plays to the control of men. However, as time passed, the gender bias that continued in theatre throughout the centuries and the difficulties that women faced in their attempt to establish themselves as playwrights and actresses started to diminish. Although women were not paid equally as their male counterparts but most of them succeeded in rising in their profession and were well rewarded.

The challenges faced by the women dramatists throughout the world for proper recognition were also witnessed by the American women playwrights although they were writing as early as 1770. Mercy Otin Warren is regarded as the first woman dramatist of America. She wrote a number of plays including The Adulateur (1772) that critiqued Thomas Hutchinson, the Governor of Massachusetts of those times, and also predicted the coming of the American Revolution. She derided the Governor again in her 1773 play, The Defeat. In 1775, Warren through her work, The Group, satirised the situation that would arise if the king of England abolished the Massachusetts Charter of Rights. Warren’s works dealt with the political affairs of the times and she supported
American rights but did not deal with the rights of women. However, the dramatist, Susanna Rowson, wrote *Slaves in Algiers* (1794) that commented on the significance of freedom and advocated women’s rights in the New Republic. Another playwright called Sarah Pogson in 1807 wrote *The Female Enthusiast*, a play that delineated the sympathetic life of a French woman, Charlotte Corday, executed for the murder of Jacobin leader named Jean-Paul Marat. The works of both Rowson and Pogson attempted to project the new born American patriotism and suggested the roles of women in the New Republic. The dramatist, Hannah Cowley, in plays such as *The Runaway* (1776) and *The Belle Strategem* (1780) dealt with issues such as marriage and women’s capabilities to fight against injustices done by the family and society to them. Elizabeth Inchbald wrote a number of plays, eighteen of which were published and most of them were performed in London theatres. Her play, *Lover’s Vows* (1798), was radical in its treatment of sex and pregnancy outside marriage. This play was featured in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* where she critiqued the radically changing Victorian society and the ideals of morality of that period.

Anna Cora Mowatt was the first American woman belonging to a significantly high class Society who entered theatre and worked as a playwright and actress. Her entry into the theatre world questioned the prejudices against the theatre which was regarded as ‘low’. Her career in theatre paved the way for the middle and upper-middle class women to pursue a career in the theatre. Mowatt’s play, *Fashion* (1845), was written at a time when theatre was a small world and consisted of people belonging to interrelated families. Theatre, at that time, provided a private and familial environment rather than being a public engagement. Most women who were part of the theatre were born to families who were into theatre business and worked within a secured family
atmosphere. However, people engaged in theatre were generally considered as social outcasts and women were looked down upon as if they were involved in prostitution. Mowatt changed people’s perception towards theatre to some extent through her revelations in *Autobiography of an Actress; or, Eight Years on the Stage* (1854). She defended theatre as a profession and also spoke in favour of actresses who were morally good and therefore urged people not to regard them as one of low repute. Mowatt regarded theatre to be a “mission,” and warns young women not to take it up “…unless she be strongly impelled by the possession of talents which are unquestionable, unless she be enamoured of Art itself.” (Mowatt, 426)

If she be prepared to meet petty as well as formidable trials, … if she be sustained by some high purpose, some strong incentive; if she act in obedience to the dictates of the “stern lawgiver, Duty,” - then let her enter the profession boldly; by gracing, help to elevate the stage; and add hers to the purifying influences which may dwell within the walls of a theatre as securely as in any other temple of art. Let her bear in mind that the sometimes de-graded name of “actress” can be dignified in her own person. (427)

Women playwrights such as Aphra Behn, Mary Pix, Francis Burney, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Joanna Baillie and many others have made their contributions towards British and American drama before the twentieth century but very few people remember their names although their works reflect an emergence of their consciousness towards the society and nation at large.

In the twentieth century, the Provincetown Players offered a platform to women playwrights who saw themselves emerging as an important group in theatre history.
More than one-third of the plays performed by the group were written and coauthored by women playwrights, a number that few theatres can equal even decades later. Many women whose plays were staged in Provincetown Playhouse were also associated as members who directed, acted and designed stages namely Neith Boyce, Nina Moise, Rita Wellman, Susan Glaspell and many more. A lot of women were attracted towards this theatre group due to its liberalism and progressive attitude. There was emphasis on community, decisions were taken by consensus and it was a group where there were no rigid power structures. It was a time when women dramatists were few in number and the Provincetown Players provided women the opportunity of working equally with the male dramatists of the group and excelling in various functions such directing, producing, scenic designing and other jobs that were earlier confined to male members only. The women of the Provincetown Players held charter membership and were also members of the executive committee. This suggests a liberal outlook towards women who worked in an environment that was free of any gender prejudices.

Many women of the Provincetown Players were actively associated with various organisations and feminist clubs that worked towards the upliftment of women namely the Women’s Trade Union League, the National Labor Defence Fund, the Lucy Stone League and Women’s International League. A radical women’s organisation, the Heterodoxy Club, had eleven Provincetown Players as its members. It was a club of unorthodox women who came together and discussed politics, economics, sexual mores and so on. They often debated and questioned women’s status in the society and worked together toward gender equality. Women dramatists realised that the issues raised by feminists were not simply ‘modern’ but rather they were problems faced by women of all ages and in all places. The women of the Provincetown Players were particularly
concerned with the problems crucial to male-female relationships, both within and outside marriage. A huge body of writing thus emerged from the women dramatists of the early twentieth century but they have been apparently overshadowed in the male dominated theatrical canon of American drama. It is Eugene O’Neill who stands as a prominent figure in the history of Provincetown Players although quite a great number of women dramatists appeared during the period with important works which deserve critical attention. This study will therefore bring to light the important contributions made by female playwrights to American dramaturgy in the early 1900s. I will restrict myself to the three playwrights namely Susan Glaspell, Sophie Treadwell and Rachel Crothers to make my study feasible and place them in the huge canvas of history of the Provincetown Players and American drama.

The early years of the twentieth century in the United States saw a number of significant developments in politics, economy, culture, technology and so on. These changes affected the lives of women in remarkable ways that altered their lives completely. The feminist movements aimed to establish equal rights for women and it transformed public and private lives of women in varied ways. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, women organized themselves into groups and sought suffrage which culminated in the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 that guaranteed every woman the right to vote. Another important development was the growth of women’s education and the subsequent participation in the workforce which enabled women to choose independent professional careers. After World War I, it was common to see women engaged in various jobs mostly clerical ones like that of stenographers, typists, and secretaries. Women believed that working could be a means of empowerment and asserting their autonomy. Women’s lives were altogether changed due to the growing
technologizing of traditional work at home. The introduction of new technology to reduce domestic labor helped women to devote their time towards various social and political causes. Women in the United States formed organizations and societies such as the League of Women Voters, National Woman’s Party (NWP), the Women’s Trade Union League, the General Federation of Women’s clubs and many more to deal with important socio-political and cultural matters of the times.

An important development during the early twentieth century was the admission of women to colleges and universities. Educated women could apply for better job opportunities and most of them preferred independent, professional careers over family. These issues were raised in many of the plays of the times, Crothers’ *A Man’s World* and *He and She* and James Herne’s *Sag Harbor* are notable examples which deal with the conflict between career and family as it was envisioned during the period. The characters of such plays express conflicts about the double standard of patriarchy and raise questions about the impact of women’s economic independence upon traditional gender roles as well as upon their identities and ambitions. By the early 1900s women adopted the stage as a medium for reflecting contemporary women’s issues by bringing it out of the private and offering it a place in the public domain.

Writing and staging women’s experiences and working in a form (drama) that is preconceived to be explicitly masculine can be seen as a deliberate attempt on the part of the women dramatists to break the silence imposed on women. The private/public divide has largely affected the lives of many women as they were expected to stay within socially and culturally provided roles. Working in theatres which is a public domain gave them the opportunity to break the stereotyped notion that women belonged
only to the private domestic sphere. Judith Olauson says, “…the woman writer has had a long history of struggle for recognition in virtually all areas of literature which she has attempted. Not much has been preserved of what women have written or said throughout history.” (Olauson, 2) Olauson refers to a magazine article published in 1963 named *The Angry Young Women* in which the writer Ellen Moers lists six social misconceptions about women playwrights which prevailed through the 1900s. They are as follows:

1. Women are uncomfortable with facts or big ideas. They intellectual preoccupations are small.
2. Women’s experience is limited to home and hearth.
3. Women are naturally sensitive to smaller emotional states but usually have less perceptive powers than men.
4. Women’s natures are passive, not active, and ordinarily they observe rather than do. Therefore, they are more adept at noting detailed social nuances than men.
5. Women are able to write short pieces of literature best because they are often interrupted by domestic demands.
6. Women are deficient in logic and order therefore lack the ability to create good plots. (Olauson, 3)

These wrong ideas have led men to consider women dramatists unworthy of being a part of the traditional masculine theatre and virtually side-lined their contribution from the male dominated canon of significant American theatre. The fact that the women dramatists could excel in a historically masculine art can be seen as an attempt to give an expression of the need to create new public lives that underlie the dramatist’s portrayal of women’s experiences.
These concerns constitute the recurrent themes in the plays of Glaspell, Crothers and Treadwell who portray the social and psychological restrictions placed upon women by the patriarchal society. It is generally believed that Americans had no theatre until Eugene O’Neill came along and even when other women dramatists emerged, theatre in the United States included mostly male in the American dramatic canon. This thesis will make an attempt to study some of the women dramatists of the twentieth century American drama from the perspectives of women. I will focus mostly on the thematic aspects of the plays due to the lack of accessibility of the performances. However I shall study the available theatre productions.

**Review of Literature**

My review of literature shows that a lot of anthologies have excluded the contribution of some major American women playwrights. Arthur Hobson Quinn’s *A History of the Present Day Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day* (1955), one of the most important books on the history of American Drama, mentions only Rachel Crothers and no other female playwrights throughout the book. However an entire chapter is devoted to Eugene O’Neill. *Modern American Drama* (2005) edited by Harold Bloom mentions no female playwright throughout the book. Books like *Masterpieces of Twentieth Century American Drama* (2005) edited by Susan C.W. Abbotson refer to only one woman dramatist, Lorainne Hansberry, excluding all the other women dramatists of that period. However Eugene O’Neill is the name that is consistent in most of the anthologies of critical works on American Drama. A recent book such as *The Norton Anthology of Drama* (2014) edited by J. Gainor also leaves out the contribution of many significant women dramatists and includes only three women dramatists namely Aphra Behn, Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell. However, the huge corpus of writings of
the women dramatists of 20th century America has caught attention of many scholarly critics recently.

For my research, the book titled *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama* (2005) by David Krasner is an illuminating study as it examines the importance and wide scope of American dramatic literature by focusing on as many twentieth-century America playwrights and their plays as possible. In order to showcase the range of American drama, the book traces the history of playwrights both well-known and lesser known. Particular attention is given to the institutions in which the plays have been performed, particularly, the theatres, venues, and directors of the playwrights, dramaturgical analysis of the play and the relationship between dramatic literature and historical and social conditions. The book also explains how the historical understanding of dramatic literature cannot be separated from cultural influences, political movements, and social transformations. Chapter 4 titled ‘Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell: Staging Feminism and Modernism’ is useful for an understanding of how these two playwrights were responding to the contemporary issues of their times.

*The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights* (1999) edited by Brenda Murphy illuminates the work of women playwrights in the history of the American theatre by examining their work through a number of lenses-historical, cultural and social, critical and theoretical. It studies significant writers such as Rachel Crothers, Susan Glaspell, Lillian Hellman, Sophie Treadwell, Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress, Megan Terry, Ntozake Shange, Adrienne Kennedy, Wendy Wasserstein, Marsha Norman, Beth Henley and Maria Irene Fornes. Playwrights are discussed in the context of topics such as early comedy and melodrama, feminism and realism, the Harlem Renaissance, the feminist resurgence of the 1970s and feminist dramatic theory.
Books on Provincetown Players such as Cheryl Black’s *The Women of Provincetown* (2002) are a useful study which provides a history of the life and contribution of the women dramatists of the Provincetown Players starting from Bernice Abbott to Marguerite Zorach. Black studies the dramatists according to their theatrical jobs and the book is divided into chapters namely Creating Women, Managing Women, Writing Women, Performing Women, Staging Women and Designing Women. Each woman is first introduced and her contribution is chronologically listed. Leona Rust Egan’s *Provincetown as a Stage: Provincetown, The Provincetown Players and the Discovery of Eugene O’Neill* (1994) discuss at length the importance of the village of Provincetown and how it shaped the lives of a number of dramatists. The book is informative due to its historical approach towards the origin and development of Provincetown as a stage. It also deals with Eugene O’Neill’s discovery by the Provincetown theatre group and his subsequent productions that were one of the most crucial moments that took American drama onto a global platform.

Glaspell: New Directions in Critical Inquiry (2006), and Kristina Hinz-Bode’s Susan Glaspell and the Anxiety of Expression: Language and Isolation in the Plays (2006) that has helped in understanding Glaspell’s contribution to the development of playwriting and theatre. The only full length book on Sophie Treadwell is Jerry Dickey’s Sophie Treadwell: A Research and Production Sourcebook (1997) and that on Rachel Crothers are Colette and James Lindroth’s Rachel Crothers: A Research and Production Sourcebook and Lois Gottlieb’s Rachel Crothers (1979). The rest of the works are mostly articles, reviews and references in books.

Articles like “The Culture of the Provincetown Players” by Arnold Goldman deal with how the Players emerged as a unique theatre group in the twentieth century America. They rejected the aspects of commercial theatre and saw nothing useful in the American drama of the past and attempted to create a theatre that would be entirely different from the theatre of the past. It was quite a challenge because most of them had little experience of theatre but they were highly influenced by the vitality of New York’s Yiddish Theatre, Stanislavsky’s Moscow Art Theatre and the Irish National Theatre. Ibsen’s social dramas also had an impact upon the progressive social sentiment of the players. “Susan Glaspell: Rediscovering an American Playwright” by Gerhard Bach and Claudia Harris discusses how studies on Glaspell have received critical attention at present times. Her play, Trifles, has been included in many anthologies thus making Glaspell one of the prominent figures in American drama. The article observes that some of her other plays which are representative of modern American drama have remained unrecognized. The article provides a commentary on the play, The Verge that deals mostly with the idea of change and instability and the experimental stage design.
The article “Drama and the Rhythm of Work in the 1920s” by Amy Koritz talks about the representation of machine sounds in plays such as *The Hairy Ape, The Adding Machine,* and *Machinal.* These plays show a critical attitude towards the situation of life in the age of machines. Most middle-class people recognized a threat posed by technology towards one’s self-realization and this is represented through various characters in these plays. Another article titled “Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal:* Electrifying the Female Body” by Katherine Weiss states that every aspect of Treadwell’s life and the plays that she wrote are seen to be mechanical. Whether one is within the domestic or public space, everything seems to be machine-like. The article provides a critical overview on the play, *Machinal,* where the protagonist named Helen Jones is surrounded by machines everywhere and this age of machines devastates the life of this young woman. A contrast is drawn between Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine* and Treadwell’s *Machinal.* In *The Adding Machine,* Zero, the protagonist experiences a happy life unlike Helen Jones who is frustrated and commits the murder of her husband. The story is inspired by the murder trial of Ruth Synder which Treadwell had covered as a journalist. Treadwell uses drama as a means to explore the causes that led these women to commit crimes and provided an alternative perspective towards these women and not just condemn them as is done by various institutions.

A theatre review on “he and she” by Anne Williams discusses the staging of Rachel Crothers’ play, *He and She,* by The Washington Area Feminist Theatre (WAFT). The article provides information on the production history, audience reception, stage design and so on. It throws light on the central issue of the play, that is, the home/career conflict, an important theme that is resonant in many of the works of twentieth century. Roger Howard’s “Modern American Drama: The Female Canon by June Schlueter”
provides a review on the collection of critical essays of the twentieth century plays starting with Rachel Crothers to Meredith Monk. Plays are analyzed for their effectiveness in conveying women’s experiences and perspectives. The article states that the editor’s main motive was to “to acknowledge and value the female ‘canon’ and... re-vision individual texts, critical standards and dramatic history.” (111)

For the critical framework of my research I have used works of feminist theorists such as Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique, Carol Queen’s Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out, Elaine Showalter’s Towards a Feminist Poetics, Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own which discuss how literary criticism can be based in a feminine perspective. These works have helped me to understand the specificity of women’s writing and how writing could help women come out of the male construction of the world. They also focus on nurturing a new feminine cultural perspective and this kind of an approach has been quite useful to provide my work with new insights.

In terms of doctoral work in this area, my research reveals that Neolia Hernando-Real’s Self and Space in the Theater of Susan Glaspell (2011) explores Glaspell’s use of one of the most essential elements of theatre, that is, space. It describes the various ways in which Glaspell employed stage spaces to reflect the changes she witnessed herself during the period she lived and also suggested to bring about changes that she thought was necessary. The book also makes an analysis of the semiotic system to help us understand all the elements on stage and how these elements determine the creation of dramatic geopathology in the plays of Glaspell. Notably, there is no evidence of work at the doctoral level on my field of study, that is, a critical reading of the plays of Glaspell, Crothers and Treadwell in the context of the Provincetown Players.
Introducing Susan Glaspell

Susan Glaspell was born in 1876 in Davenport, Iowa. She did her schooling from the public schools in Davenport and graduated from Drake University in Des Moines in 1899. During her college days, her ambition to become a writer was strengthened and she started writing stories for magazines. After her graduation she pursued the job of a reporter for the Des Moines News in 1899. Later she decided to quit her job and return to Davenport to “give all of my time to my own writing,” as she recalls (France 216). During this period of her life, like other educated women of that time, Glaspell “grew restless with the numerous restrictions on women and became inspired by the avant-garde social, political, and cultural movements happening in the United States and Europe.” (McMichael, 1108) When she worked as a reporter for a Des Moines News, she had covered the story on the murder trial of John Hossack in 1900. Hossack was murdered while he was sleeping and his wife turned out to be the closest suspect as the couple was not happy in their marriage. Initially she was convicted with the murder charge but a later trial proved her innocent. This story provided the basis for Glaspell’s well known works A Jury of her Peers (1917), a short-story, and the one-act-play Trifles (1916). These two works have been regarded as important feminist texts and they are included in the Women’s Studies curricula across the United States and other parts of the world as well. Glaspell has written fourteen plays between 1915 and 1944 most of which are reflective of an era of upheaval and regeneration that was so much a part of the Greenwich Village or the Provincetowners which was a community of politically engaged authors and artists. She was one of the founding members of the Provincetown Players also known as the Playwright’s Theatre and she led a revolution in American theatre and playwriting. Between 1916 and 1922, the Provincetown Players were
interested in producing new and experimental plays by authors like Glaspell. Working towards establishing a theatre that would be truly American, Glaspell plays depicted regionalism (Iowa), sexual tensions between women and men and characters in search of their true identity and life’s meaning.

Glaspell met George Cram Cook at the Monist Society in Davenport and gradually he was “the most meaningful influence on her life.” (France, 216) After being introduced to Cook, Glaspell continued to grow restless and “travelled abroad to explore new personal and professional possibilities” for herself (McMichael, 1108). When she returned to America, Glaspell started living on the east coast. She married Cook in Weehawken, New Jersey, on April 14, 1913. The couple travelled a lot and they spent their summers in Provincetown, Massachusetts and their winters in Greenwich Village in New York. The shifting of places took place due to their involvement with the Liberal Club, “a group of writers, artists, and itinerant thinkers” who moved between the two places (France, 216). This group helped George Cram Cook in establishing the Provincetown Players and also produced many of Glaspell’s plays.

Between 1915 and 1916, Glaspell’s two plays were produced by the Provincetown Players, namely Suppressed Desires, which was co-written with her husband in 1915 and in 1916 Trifles, her most anthologized play (Waterman 13). Trifles was written while she was in Provincetown and regarding the inspiration of the play she writes:

I went to the wharf, sat alone on one of our wooden benches without a back, and looked for a long time at that bare little stage. After a time, the stage became a kitchen. . . . Then the door at the back opened, and people all bundled up came in; two or three men, I wasn’t sure which, but sure enough about the two women, who hung back, reluctant to enter that kitchen. When I was a newspaper reporter
out in Iowa, I was sent down-state to do a murder trial, and I never forgot going to
the kitchen of a woman who had been locked up in town (France 217).

One of Glaspell most interesting techniques employed in the plays is that of the ‘absent
centre’ and in *Trifles* “this was the first time that Glaspell employed the device which
she would make uniquely her own; that of having the character most central to her
narrative never appear on stage.” (France 218) Glaspell used this device many times in
her plays throughout her career and it became a distinctive feature of her dramaturgy.

The Provincetown theatre group played a pivotal role in shaping Glaspell’s career as a
dramatist. She contributed ten plays during her seven years of attachment with the
Players. Both the Players and the playwright were influenced by each other; the Players
provided her the platform to bring out her artistic talents and she helped in contributing
important American plays to the theatre. Glaspell and Cook left the United States in
1922 and went to Greece. After two years of stay, George Cram Cook died in Delphi
and was buried in Greece (Waterman 14). Glaspell then got married to Norman Matson
in 1925 but their marriage was unsuccessful and they divorced in 1931 (Waterman
14). *The Comic Artist* was a play written by Glaspell in collaboration with Matson
before their divorce. The play was produced in London and a revised version appeared
in New York, but like their marriage, the play was not successful: “it received just
twenty-one performances.” (France 222)

Susan Glaspell was associated with many organizations that worked towards bringing
about social change. She was an active member of the radical feminist club,
Heterodoxy, “a group of twenty-five women, including writer Charlotte Perkins
Gilman, who began meeting in 1912 to discuss ways to promote economic, sexual,
political, and professional freedom for women.” (McMichael, 1108) Glaspell said, “I am interested in all progressive movements, whether feminist, social, or economic.” (McMichael, 1108) During the early part of her writing career she was grounded in her Midwestern sense of conservatism which served as the basis for many of her earlier works which were “about traditional young women seeking marriage and happiness.” (McMichael, 1108) Gradually she was confronted with the reality of her world and the social milieu of her times got reflected in her works which showed her maturity not only as a writer and but also as an individual. Her experience as a reporter allowed her to see “a world where women were denied voting rights [and] property rights,” among others (McMichael, 1108).

Glaspell was a Midwestern idealist throughout her life; her works showed the presence of her roots, family and the society in which she lived. However she shows the faults within the constructs of society:

…her concern with the Midwest; its lands, its people, its heritage; and her own fundamental Midwestern attitude unify all her work, including her periods of experimentation and revaluation…..she took the pulse of her region, probed its past, brought it to life, and gave it significance for contemporary America. From first to last she sought to remind the new age of the meaning of the past. (Waterman 117)

She is also known as a regionalist who represented a distinctive part of America in her plays that is generally unnoticed and created characters that depicted the kind of life that is prevalent in that area. During the early 1930s she was engaged as the Midwest Director for the Federal Theatre Project. In this period of her life that she spent in the
theatre, she was no more into playwriting. After a few years, she returned to her home Provincetown and started writing novels. It was there that she died on July 27, 1948, at the age of 66 (France 223). Throughout her literary career, she authored thirteen plays, fourteen novels, many short stories, a number of articles, and essays. Her representation of the American society and its people are quite significant in delineating a unique American experience. Glaspell and other little theatre movement dramatists like Eugene O’Neill were successful in creating and developing a unique American drama. One of the most important contributors of the Provincetown Theatre group, Susan Glaspell’s plays are vital to the development of American drama.

Sophie Treadwell

Sophie Treadwell is regarded as an important name in the history of the Provincetown Players. Many standard accounts of modern American drama have ignored her contribution towards theatre. Treadwell’s best-known play, *Machinal* (1928), was recognized as an example of 1920s expressionism on the commercial Broadway stage. However recently there seems to be a renewed attention given to *Machinal*, first with its reappearance in an anthology in 1981 and later by the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1990 and the Royal National Theatre in London in 1993, Treadwell has been a matter of more scholarly and artistic interest. She was associated with the theatre world for about six decades where she wrote forty plays dealing with a variety of techniques and subjects. Treadwell acted, directed and produced her own works for the Broadway stage. Treadwell’s writings reflect the situation of modern American society which restrains a woman’s struggles for independence and equality. Most importantly for her experimental works like *Machinal* and *For Saxophone*, Treadwell has been viewed as
one of the first American women playwrights to use non-realistic styles and techniques in the narratives to form a unique feminist experience in the theatre.

Sophie Treadwell was born to Nettie Fairchild Treadwell and Alfred B. Treadwell in Stockton, California in 1885. Her father deserted the family in order to pursue his career as a lawyer and a judge in San Francisco. His absence had a great impact upon Treadwell’s formative years. Treadwell felt humiliated due to her mother’s continuous efforts to reconcile with her husband. All these family tensions and experiences are reflected in Treadwell’s works which deal with patriarchal responsibility and absence, a woman’s individual struggle between her career and the awful life of a young working woman who tries to make her living all alone in the big city. Treadwell worked as a journalist and taught at a night school to support her studies and financially support her lonely mother. Later she decided to pursue her long time desire, which is, acting. She first worked as a character artist at the vaudeville theatre in Los Angeles but she was frustrated with the working conditions of the place. Eventually she was appointed as a typist for Helene Modjeska, a famous Polish star, for writing her memoirs. Modjeska helped her to establish acquaintances with the New York theatre companies. But Treadwell soon had to leave Modjeska’s job to tend her ailing mother. She then started playwriting and journalism first in San Francisco and then went to New York.

Treadwell has written in a variety of genres; her earliest interests were comic as well as domestic ‘problem’ plays. She is known dramatist for the kind of experimentation she did in the theatre with its form. She broke away from the realist tradition and wrote To Him Who Waits (1915-18) and The Eye of the Beholder (1919), where she employed symbolist and expressionist devices respectively. The latter work seems to remind us of
Alice Gerstenberg’s *Overtones* (1913) where we see different personas of a female character that were represented onstage.

Treadwell worked against the convention of the commercial theatre and defended the creative and artistic rights of the playwright and the dramatist. She believed that they are the most important creative force and visionary artist who control the theatre. Treadwell realized that she could gain popularity on the Broadway stage if she takes the lead in the theatre managing matters herself. In 1925, Treadwell acted, directed and co-produced *O Nightingale* which opened at the 49th Street Theatre in New York. Although it was not a grand success but Treadwell received much critical acclaim for her work and this further helped her to continue her perusal of directing and producing her own works and also carry on her experimentation with the theatre form that she had started. Treadwell got the platform of realizing her dream through the Provincetown Players who encouraged playwrights towards innovative works. During the 1920s a number of American plays emerged in the expressionist style. New York theatres also witnessed efforts in expressionism even before the 1920s. Some of the notable works include Alice Gerstenberg’s *Overtones* (1913) and Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* (1920), which reflected the influence of the style and technique as manifested in the German film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which was released in the US in the spring of 1921. Although differences were visible in tone, stage setting and subject matter but these works presented some common characteristics. All of them made an effort to do away with the depiction of surface reality and represent inner and subjective emotions and experiences. Emotional qualities were mostly visualized in the form of distortions, symbolism and exaggeration often through a dream-like sequence. The rapid growth of mechanization, urbanization and technologizing of modern life and its
influence was felt in the stage setting and also seen in the short and broken sentences or dialogues given to the characters. Music and sound effects also played an important role in communicating different emotional conditions of the characters. They were sometimes used in places of words and action. These expressionist plays also rejected the chronological sequence of the play’s action and often used short scenes in such a manner that they sometimes dissolved into the other in the manner of the cinematic effect.

Treadwell was eager to experiment with such non-realistic dramaturgy herself and the sensational story of a murder trial the following year provided her with the opportunity. The trial was on Ruth Snyder and her lover named Judd Gray both of whom were held convict of the murder of Snyder’s husband. Although there were many evidences which showed how Snyder and her small daughter were victims of her husband’s domestic violence but none sympathized with her and the media projected her as the most vicious criminal. The trial was a matter of sensation among the public and almost 180 reporters were appointed to survey and cover the case. The case continued to gain undivided attention until Snyder and Gray were executed by electric chair on 1928. The news of her death was also publicized as a reporter for New York Daily News went to the extent of secretly recording the moment of Snyder’s execution and the photo was printed the next morning. Edmund Wilson reported that prominent New York dailies devoted more column inches to Snyder’s execution than to the death the day before of Thomas Hardy, and he wondered why this act of violent retribution against this one woman would so intrigue and please the public (Wilson, The American Earthquake, 161-63) Treadwell was also awestruck by the same fact and tried to look into the case through her own perspective. She, as a journalist, had also worked to cover various other murder trials
involving accused women. In 1914 Treadwell had written a number of daily columns based on the trials of these women. Through these columns Treadwell came to the conclusion that the truth in the trials was quite more complex and elusive than the court judgments given and the media reports. Treadwell combined the reports of the facts along with the subjective response on the women who were held guilty. She recorded the way in which the accused held her mouth in moments of ease, conversation of women heard outside the trial room who commented on the looks of the man who was murdered or the sighing of the woman who was on the trial during the closing questions of the prosecution.

These details were emphasized by Treadwell’s contemporary journalist and playwright called Susan Glaspell who talked about this in her most famous work, Trifles. Such details were often discarded by men as insignificant but women comprehended their importance in relation to the action. Treadwell opined that women’s relation to their husbands and lovers and their violent actions against these men are far more complicated than what is concluded by the male lawyers, judges and society at large. Such a belief was projected by Treadwell while understanding Ruth Snyder’s case which she represented in her play named Machinal. The play was copyrighted on April, 1928 and gained immense success as it ran ninety-one performances at the Plymouth Theatre in New York in that year. Treadwell popularity was gaining grounds and she was appointed as a new member of the producing committee of the Provincetown Theatre. Treadwell was also the first woman to solely control the production of John Mosher’s Sauce for the Emperor.
**Rachel Crothers**

Rachel Crothers is one of the most popular American women dramatists who represented the status of women in modern American society. Her works are quite influential upon the other women playwrights of the Provincetown Theatre. She mostly wrote for the Broadway stage and her plays were commercially successful. Born in 1878, in Illinois, Crothers graduated Illinois State University and later pursued studies in dramatic art in the New York City where she also worked with different theatre companies. Her first full length Broadway play was titled *The Three of Us* which received much popularity in 1906. She not only wrote but also produced and directed almost all her plays. Some of her most important plays are *He and She, A Man’s World, Let Us Be Gay, As Husbands Go, and When Ladies Meet. Susan and God* was her last play that was produced in 1937. Crothers mostly wrote plays about gender relationships, marriage and divorce, the dilemma of women faced during the choice to be made between families and career and so on. Crothers dealt with issues like ‘sexual double standard’ that were carried forward by many Provincetown Players like Susan Glaspell.

Various drama critics of the 1930s have marginalized Crothers’ works by placing them outside the mainstream male playwrights. Fortunately Crothers has received some attention by the feminist theatre movement of the 1970s and some of her early works have been revived. For example *A Man’s World* (1909) and *He and She* (1911) which revolves around the issue of double standard and the conflict between career and domestic duties have been included in Judith E. Barlow’s *Plays by American Women*. However critics have been uncomfortable regarding her portrayal of the female
protagonist in *He and She* who sacrifices a promising career for the sake of her husband’s discomfort to handle her success. The protagonist of the play, Ann, is an expert sculptor who wins a competition for an important commission. After a long struggle she gives up the commission to serve her duties better as a wife and a mother. In this play Crothers brings forward some fundamental issues relating to marriage, motherhood, gender relation and so on. We see a major ideological shift between Crothers early plays and her later plays. Her earlier plays show her as an active feminist but her later plays are seen by most critics as plays which portray lack of commitment towards feminism. The protagonists of her later plays with radical ideas of freedom were mostly satirized and this got reflected in many of the one-act comedies of the Provincetown Players. The main aim was to contemplate on the ideas of radical feminism and see how much they were acted upon. Howard Taubman in *The Making of the American Theatre* commented that Crothers “used the stage to articulate the case for woman’s freedom. When the battle was won, she did not shrink from poking fun at the liberated woman’s pretensions.”

Before *He and She*, Crothers wrote *A Man’s World* in 1909 which became a commercial success as well as received a lot of critical attention. This play is about a woman who refuses to accept the justifications given by her fiancé for leaving his lover and their child. The play is a depiction of different sexual norms for men and women that triggered a lot of discussion among people about the double standard and the issue was also adequately addressed by the media. As an answer to this play, Augustus Thomas wrote *As a Man Thinks* (1911) which talked about how society expects a woman to be monogamous so that a man can feel secured about the paternity of his child. Thomas shows in the play how a woman needs to be better than her husband and that although a
man can be forgiven for his disloyalty but a woman cannot expect such liberalism. Crothers plays have been quite popular among the people for the kinds of issues that she addressed in her plays. She wrote about the personal struggle of a woman in the face of changing social and cultural values revolving around the idea of marriage, social responsibility, sexual mores, economic freedom and so on. Her treatment of the subject often turned out to be intelligent and satiric commentary on the lives of middle and upper class American women of the early twentieth century. Judith Barlow’s book *Plays by American Women* 1900-1930 mentions an interview in 1931 where Crothers said:

> With few exceptions, every one of my plays has been a social attitude toward women at the moment I wrote it…I [do not] go out stalking the footsteps of women’s progress. It is something that comes to me subconsciously. I may say that I sense the trend even before I have hearsay or direct knowledge of it. (xv)

Crothers has also delineated in many of her plays the problems crucial to the life of the ‘new woman’ in America. She is rightly regarded by many critics as the first American woman dramatist who held up the true image of the modern American woman. Dramatists like Glaspell, Akins, Boyce and Crothers dealt with the consequences of relationship outside marriage, career oriented women, the double standard of the society, impact of war upon women’s lives and so on. Rachel Crothers worked not only for the theatre but was also actively engaged in various social works like organising the American Theatre Wing in 1940 that provided food to the service people during the Second World War.
The objective of this research is to offer a number of critical perspectives on some of the plays of women playwrights of the early twentieth century America with special reference to the Provincetown theatre group. The study will deal with the problems central to the experience of the ‘modern woman’ in America by investigating the various influences that went into its creation. I will relate these issues to some of the plays of Glaspell, Crothers and Treadwell and study them individually but as sharing similar goals. The purpose behind this kind of a study is to show how these three contemporary dramatists were preoccupied with the ‘women’s question’ working in their own unique ways to represent feminist consciousness, perceptions and reflections related to a female character’s identity as a woman. This kind of an analysis will be helpful in understanding the role of the women dramatists in the development of American drama which has been largely neglected. An attempt will be made to provide an alternative (women’s) perspective to understand and appreciate American drama of the early twentieth century.

Given the nature of my proposed subject, I have taken recourse to feminist perspectives along with historical, socio-cultural and political aspects to aid my reading. A deliberate attempt has been made to arrive at my prospective argument and conclusion via the works of theorists like Elaine Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar, Betty Freidan among others. The women dramatists that I have chosen for my research have pre-articulated issues that were later theorised by these feminist writers. Showalter’s ideas regarding ‘the specificity of women’s writing’ that sought to challenge masculine standards and initiate an autonomous art towards diction, structure and characterisation is quite relevant in the context of my research. Gilbert and Gubar’s discussion of breaking the stereotypes of the angel/monster trope has been used in many of the plays that I have
discussed. Their observation that rage and frustration of a woman who inhabits the misogynist world can often lead to the state of madness is also central to the analysis of some the texts that I have studied, for example, *The Verge* and *Machinal*. Betty Freidan’s thoughts regarding the issues concerning women’s consciousness, experience and identity are of great significance for my research. I have also used the dynamics of theatre and performance studies to understand how gender, sexuality, body, social and professional roles are represented through and performed within specific ‘spaces’ of theatre.

The present study has been divided into five chapters:

Chapter-I will situate Provincetown Players in the context of American drama and also study the contributions made by the women dramatists towards American Drama by looking at some of their well-known works.

Chapter-II will deal with the problems central to the experience of the ‘new woman’ in America by investigating the various influences that went into its creation. I shall relate these issues to the plays of Glaspell, Crothers and Treadwell and study them individually.

Chapter-III will study the issues of marriage, motherhood and the shaping of female identity by situating these ideas within the era of the “Roaring Twenties”. The idea is to understand the characteristics of this age of change and progress and its impact upon women’s lives as reflected in the plays by Glaspell, Crothers and Treadwell.

Chapter-IV will discuss the development of stage space in American theatre of the early twentieth century and show how various literary, political and social movements have
shaped American theatre and the plays staged by Provincetown Players. I will study how space not only functions as backdrops to the action but also becomes a key element in the dramatic evolution of a character throughout the plays.

Chapter-V sums up the contributions made by Glaspell, Crothers and Treadwell towards modern American drama and reflect on the possibilities of more researches in this area.
Works cited


