CHAPTER ONE

THE DRAMA AND SOCIETY BEFORE ARTHUR MILLER
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The beginning and growth of American drama was slow, tardy and inadequate and was incapable of keeping pace with the progress in other branches of literature. America's colonial status and the puritan prejudice against dramatic art were two potent obstacles for the smooth and steady development of drama. The Puritans frowned upon the theatre and forbade its appearance as an evil influence. Jean Gould has explicitly summed up this interference and its retraining and discouraging impact on the proper growth of theatre:

"The novelists early told their tales, and the poets sang their songs, but those who might have written great drama were mute, because the drama involved people, the public -- and where the public was concerned, the government could raise its iron hand." 1

When America shook off her colonial yoke and the battle for independence was won, the nation was too occupied for the developments in other sphere of life and there was no time left to nourish and develop the neglected art of native drama. In the pre-revolution years, Mrs. Mercy Warren wrote biting "propaganda plays" to stir into action doubtful colonists who lagged behind through fear or apathy. Plays like "The Group", "The Block Head", satirized the Tories, made fun of General Burgoyne's redcoats and aroused patriotic penchant of Americans to oust British colonists. So it was that the infant American drama was born amid "The din and howl of revolution, a birth unnoticed by the press of events at the time, but nonetheless significant." 2

2. Gould, Jean. p. 3.
Despite the disappearance of Puritan prejudice against theatre in the 19th century, nothing significant was produced in the branch of drama and majority of plays, seldom transcended mediocrity. The people's need for drama was satisfied by improvisations of novels or foreign plays. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" by Harriet Beecher Stowe and "The Glided Age" by Mark Twain underwent transformation from one artistic medium to another. A school of writers sprang up led by William Dunlop, probably the most prolific adapter of French and German plays in the nineteenth century. Even these translations and adaptations were not proper imitations in the sense that they did not reflect the true spirit of the work they imitated.

In the last quarter of the 19th century and first decade of the 20th century James A. Herne, Browson Howard, David Belasco, Augustus Thomas, Clyde Fitch and William Vaughan Moody were the principal progenitors of the vigorous modern American drama. These playwrights, inspite of overwhelming handicaps, gradually created native drama which gave "a deeper meaning to the theatre, portrayed modern character and life in the fidelity, and pointed the way toward imaginative maturity." ¹

The 'Civil War' provided a great impetus to the development of art of Drama in America. During war, the demand for popular theatrical entertainment increased in the North which led to the production of variations upon such established traditions as the comedy of eccentric

character, domestic melodrama and the sensational play. But "most of the new plays, by contrast, were ephemeral, sensational, or sentimental legerdemain evoked by the huge popular demand for entertainment or escape."¹ James A. Herne, Bronson Howard, David Belasco, Augustus Thomas, Thomas Clyde Fitch and William Vaughan Moody were the principal dramatists of this period.

After the civil war, there occurred certain changes in the "show business" and the travelling company stimulated by the development of the rail roads, tended to replace the old stock companies. It deeply influenced dramatic authorship. The change, in fact, generated new problems, like that of monopolistic syndicate, its ultimate impact was to encourage dramatic authorship. The result was the establishment of a new profession of dramatic authorship attractive to talented writers, because performance of fewer plays on the stage increased the stay of the play upon the stage and assured professional income for such dramatists as they could overcome severe competition.

The entry of James A. Herne and Bronson Howard in the theatre facilitated the preparation of the way for modern drama. The development of Herne from the domestic melodrama of 'Hearts of Oak' (1879) to the domestic tragedy of 'Margret Fleming' (1870) reflects the improvement of popular taste. Herne educated in theatre of sentiment clings to the fidelity of the character and the rural

setting 'The Shore Acres' (1892) a satisfactory domestic comedy depicts the social life which traverses through American scene. Herne's major contribution to American drama is that he had brought realism to the theatre.

Bronson Howard restored the social comedy as a civilized art in the United States and it was he who mainly prepared the way for the social comedies of Clyde Fitch, Augustus Thomas, and the playwrights of the present century. His mature social comedies reflect his familiarity with the social consciousness product by the growing urbanisation and sophistication of American life and that growing awareness of international social contrasts to be found in the contemporary novels of Howells and Henry James. His play "Young Mrs. Winthrop" (1882) presents the mid-channel crisis in modern marriage caused by husband's absorption in his professional interests while his wife takes refuge in social affairs 'Shenandoah' (1888), Howard's best play, is remembered chiefly as the first fully successful drama of the civil war.

The real development of the social comedy, however, did not occur until the complexities of the present century provided dramatic materials for such playwrights as 'Langdon Mitchell, Rachel Crothers, Gilbert Emery, Philip Barry, Sidney Howard and S.N. Behrman.

David Belasco's plays are romantic in nature and he made enormous contribution to the 'mechanical' perfection of the modern stage and play-house. He continuously struggled against the monopolistic theatrical trust and supported courageous experiments in theatre. "In its mixture of romantic and realistic impulses, the work of
Belasco is typical of the American theatre even beyond the end of the century. While American writers of fiction progressed from the realism of Mark Twain and Howells to the sterner naturalism of Stephen Crane and Hamlin Garland, the American dramatist was inclined to compromise. This compromise is visible in his plays "The Darling of the Gods" (1902), 'Adrea' (1904) 'Madame Butterfly' (1900), and 'The Return of Peter Grimm' (1911).

Augustus Thomas contributed to social comedy through his hard-won understanding of American life in various localities. His picture of American life is broader than Howard. "He had the journalist's perception of the striking local characteristics of American regions so diverse as Alabama, Missouri, Arizona, Colorado and the cities of New York."  

His plays fall into two groups which illustrate the development of the American stage of his day. All his best plays are social comedies in the larger sense. Later, his preference was for a more sophisticated metropolitan society, sometimes, involving international contrasts. His best known social comedies, lively in wit and dialogue, are "The Earl of Pawtucket" (1903), "Mrs. Leffing Well's Boots", (1905). In 1907 appeared his first of realistic dramas of character, "The Witching Hour", in which the mysteries of human personality are investigated in a tense episode involving hypnotism, and the control of fear. 'The Harvest Moon' (1909) deals with the power of the individual to control his personality by the forces of his will.

2. Ibid., p.1329.
The plays of Fitch in the first decade of this century constitute the actual beginnings of what we recognise as contemporary realism. Clyde Fitch, like Thomas, began to write under the spell of the romantic theatre, but ended his short career with a number of realistic character problem plays. That Fitch was a successful playwright may be inferred from the fact that four of his plays were running simultaneously on the New York stage in 1907. Fitch best plays are 'The Girl with the Green Eye' (1902) and 'The Truth' (1907) with compassionate understanding, he presents in each play the problem of a girl who has been conditioned in youth to a psychopathic reaction destructive of personal and social relations - in the first case, jealousy, and in the second, falsehood.

William Vaughan Moody expressed in his plays the increasing awareness of the richness of the American scene. His early death probably "robbed our dramatic literature of a playwright who might have contributed more than any other, save Eugene O'Neill, to the modern symbolic drama of spiritual struggle in which romantic and realistic tendencies are blended." ¹ He possessed a profound understanding of everyday life and showed ability to interpret its complexities in simple and passionate symbols of action. His plays "The Great Divide" (1906), 'The Faith Healer' (1909), show the signs of the fact that he was feeling his way toward adult theatre.

1. Gascoigne, Bamber. 'Twentieth Century Drama'. (London: Hutchinson University; 1962) p.36.
The story of development of American drama till the emergence of Eugene O'Neill on the American dramatic horizon, represents its formative stage. All these writers, however, were handicapped by a tendency towards sentimentality and a readiness to follow theatrical convention. But the importance of these playwrights lies in the fact that inspite of overwhelming handicaps, they created a native drama which gave a deeper meaning to the theatre, portrayed modern character and life with fidelity and pointed out the way towards imaginative maturity.

The modern drama has drawn its strength and impulse from the ability of dramatists to find subjects from the stuff of every day life. Possibly this characteristic finds its point of origin, historically in Ibsen's dramas which began with 'A Doll's House' in 1879. In American drama, Herne's Margaret Fleming', in 1890, marks an epoch. "In the first years of the new century, the dramas which best stand the test of time are concerned with the mysteries of the human mind and spirit, or with some struggle of the will of the individual to overcome a fate that seems ordained in destiny or human fraility."1

The important dramatists of the period were still entranced by the human miracle which Moody called a "mystical hanker after something, higher" is demonstrated by such plays as Fitch's 'The Truth', and 'The Girl with the Green Eyes', Thomas' 'The Wiching Hour', and 'The Harvest Moon', Belasco's 'The Return of Peter Grimm', and Moody's entire work.

Though theatrical and melodramatic plays persisted until the end of the 19th century, yet a new vitality was discernible after 1880. "Stimulated in part by native forces and later by the experimental European Theatre, American drama gradually acquired social responsibility and seriousness, a surer grasp of psychological and spiritual realities, Enriched by the complexities of life in the twentieth century, these same convictions later found a most masterful statement in the dramatic symbolism of Eugene O'Neill."¹

The cultural changes accelerated by the war were to change the life of the nation in aspects affecting all phases of individual and social life. Under the leadership of Woodrow Wilson the American people gave themselves over to an inflated and impossible idealism—an emotional spree which was deflated into the disillusionment of the post-war spirit, variously described as the "wasteland" or the "lost generation," neither term being adequate to describe the complexities of the life and literature of the 1920's. The period from 1910 to 1920 sometimes is called the "teens" and it has many similarities to the condition of teen age adolescence. It was for America a period of development as a nation and change in social patterns, a bursting out of relatively provincial life into the larger cosmopolitan world.

The war brought industrial expansion, increased employment, higher wages, greater mechanization. The developments in medicine and public health increased the life

¹ Spiller, p.1015.
span; home equipment increased the physical comfort of families; concern for diet improved the eating habits of the nation.

The relationship of the individual to group life and to society speeded up in directions already indicated by earlier social change. Parental authority weakened and the Victorian concept of the paternal family was no longer tenable. Young people could gain employment on their own - and they did. Women entered industry and various employments outside the home in large numbers. The millions of young men in the armed services were seeking new places, learning new ways. How are you going to keep them down on the farm after they have seen Paris? became the burden of a popular song; and the question was more pertinent than most lyrical melodies are. The changing attitudes and questioning of faith in the traditional lodestones was expressed by Archibald MacLeish in the lines

We too in whose trustless hearts
All truth alters and the lights
Of earth are out.....
("Pole Star for this Year")

The America that had been at the beginning of the decade largely agrarian and dominated by domestic problems was at the end of the decade thoroughly committed to industrialization and the urbanism which goes with factory development and it was deeply involved in world finance and problems of world power.

Until the emergence of Eugene O'Neill on the American dramatic horizon, dramas in America lacked vigour, significance and importance, though Clyde Fitch, Augustus Thomas and William Vaughan Moody were the popular playwrights
before him whose works exhibited some increase in literary sophistication and who made a cautious effort to treat themes which had some relation to contemporary life." But none of these men was permanently important, and the works of none achieved conspicuous excellence, when judged in accordance with the standards set by the contemporary efforts of novelists and essayists, philosophers and historians."¹ and "they pretty consistently consented to work within the limitations of a very narrow theatrical tradition, and that tradition tolerated no bold departure from long-established stereotypes both artistic and moral."²

The real beginning of modern American drama and its enormous growth and development was largely facilitated by the plays of Eugene O'Neill, who was unquestionable "the first American to write a number of plays which assured his eternal place in the future list of native classics and made him the inevitable central figure in any discussions of the new school of American dramatists."³

Truly, he can be conveniently treated as an inevitable central figure because "His works reveals both strong originality and the effects of forces in the world outside himself which sometimes help mold and sometimes actually distort the expressions of his own talents. In him, therefore, may be observed both an individual

¹. Gascoigne, Bamber. p.69.
². Ibid., p.70.
creative writer and the effect of an intellectual milieu common to him and his fellows."

Neill, in fact, liberated the American drama from the conventional shackles imposed by commercial theatre, wrote on the contemporary interests and problems, and gave it direction, dynamism, force and multifarious technical experimentation.

At least three factors largely influenced the determination of his intellectual milieu; the native, non-dramatic, literary revolution which produced Theodere Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and H.L. Mencken; the somewhat belated influence of Ibsen and the post-Ibsen playwrights of Europe; and the revolutionary "little theatre" movement with which O'Neill was in the beginning identified.

After 1910, a new dramatic movement began. Many intelligent Americans felt that the commercial theatre in New England was unsatisfactory because having capitulated to the movies, it no longer provided "road shows" carrying drama to the remote parts of the country. Many young, enthusiastic Americans travelling abroad between 1900 and 1916 found European theatres very stimulating. The Theatre-Libre of Paris, founded in 1887, the Abbey Theatre of Dublin (1894) the Moscow Art Theatre (1897), the Kleines Theatre of Berlin (1902), all were carrying on interesting experiments in the realm of drama which seemed to point the way to healthy changes.

Coming back to America, these travellers preached their new gospel and won converts. During the first two decades of the present century, numerous community playhouses or workshops—little theatres as they were—were established all over the country, from Boston where the Toy
Theatre produced plays, to Palo Alto, California, where the Stanford University Theatre was active. A number of colleges at the same time, offered work in playwrighting and production under such teachers as George Pierce Baker of Harvard, Thomas Wood Stevens of Carnegie Institute of Technology, A.M. Drummond of Cornell, E.C. Mabee of Iowa, and Frederick Koch of North Carolina. In these little theatres and workshops, many radical experiments were carried on by able persons which no commercial theatre was likely to attempt.

By and by, the movement began to influence even the commercial theatre. It served to change the taste of the audience toward receiving heartily a novelty in writing and staging dramas. It supplied producers, actors and dramatists, who had learned their trade in community playhouses and college classrooms. And in three important cases, little theatre groups became leading commercial producers: the Washington Square Players, founded in Greenwich Village in 1915 became the Theatre Guild in 1919; the Provincetown Players, also founded in 1915, left their fishing-smack playhouse on Cape Cod to go to New York City to become active in production there; and the Group Theatre, founded by some insurgent Theatre Guild members became professional in 1931. These theatrical organisations, which were successful both commercially and artistically were responsible for the initial production of plays by distinguished authors like Edna St. Vincent Millay, Paul Green, Clifford Odets, and Eugene O'Neill.
The modern American drama originates from these little theatre movements, which encouraged experimentation in American drama.

The American theatre in the 1920's experimented in multi-directions. It tried to represent life more concretely through abstractions, tried to moralize, satirize, lyricize in terms of new manipulations of space and movement, new concepts and sequences of dialogue, new versions of characterization. It also experimented brilliantly in the matter of stage design; the settings in many cases proved more revealing of theme and motivation than the characters themselves. The newness was not exclusively a matter of techniques, but part of the general stir of experimental activity in the arts. The most important characteristic of the American theatre after 1916 is its relentless experimentation - desire to avoid cliches of plot, characterization, dialogue, acting and staging, which had hithertotended to make the theatre dull and lifeless. In the list of experimentations in dramatic form be mentioned, T.S. Eliot's attempts at the revival of poetic play, and the works of Paul Green and Thornton Wilder. Spiller has attempted to classify these trends into four directions. These four trends were: (a) Maxwell Anderson's experiments with tragedy which, unlike those of O'Neill, assume that verse is necessary if the highest effects are to be achieved; (b) S.N. Behrman's development of a comic style not wholly different from that of his predecessor Rachel Crothers or his contemporary Philip Barry,
but seeming to be more consciously aware of the problem of adapting conceptions of the nature of comedy to the circumstances of American life; (c) the work of Clifford Odets as representing the most successful cultivation of the play intended to further a definite political and social ideology; and (d) the attempt on the part of several otherwise diverse writers to develop a dramatic form in which symbolism and fantasy definitely replace the realistic method.

Expressionism had been developed by Strindberg as a method of representing states of mind. In his efforts to cut below the surface he used starting symbols and unrealistic patterns of speech, and dispensed with the logical sequence of time, place and action - with 'consequence', in fact. To later dramatists the freedom and fantasy of this method made it seem ideal for satire.

Expressionism was imported to America from Europe. It influenced all the field of arts, especially in German films and architecture. Likewise it demonstrated and artist's dissatisfaction with naturalism or realism. The expressionists rejected naturalism as it had a limited scope and was grossly involved with surface reality. They wanted to project in outer symbols a state of mind, an inner crisis, a psychological condition. This also involved expressions of the dream state. The form and the purpose of an expressionistic play could be summarised in what Strindberg wrote in his prologue to his Dream Play (1902):

".........imitate the disconnected but seemingly logical form of the dream...... Time and space do not exist... The characters split, double, multiply,
vanish, solidify, blur, clarify. But one consciousness reigns above them all — that of the dreamer; and before it there are no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples, no laws. There is neither judgement nor exoneration, but merely narration.  

Expressionism made positive contribution to the American theatrical spirit. It encouraged a remarkable variety of experiments, large and small. Some of its most successful effects were found in comedy, where its exaggerations and arrangements of abstractions in motion were especially useful. Elmer Rice's 'The Adding Machine' (1923) was the most remarkable illustration of expressionist comedy. Stereotypes of character and setting illustrated the native stereotypes which the comedy satirized. Elmer Rice's Mr Zero (The Adding Machine, 1923), who went mad between the horrors of his clerking job and his home life and suddenly murdered his boss, has since been having various adventures in heaven. But the moment comes when he must be returned to earth for another spell, this time to work on the very latest and largest adding machine. Naturally he is reluctant. So the captain up in heaven, knowing what goes in this world of movie stars and advertisements, invents a beautiful blonde who is to go down with him. He points to an empty space and describes her standing there, for Mr Zero. At first Mr Zero fails to see her — understandably, since she does not exist. The captain describes her in more detail. Suddenly Mr Zero can see her.

Zero: Oh sure! Now I see her! What's the matter with me anyhow? Say, she's some Jane! Oh, you baby vamp!

1. Quoted in Bamber Gascoigne's 'Twentieth Century Drama', p.6.
Captain: She'll make you forget your troubles.
Zero: What troubles are you talking about?

The moment is made more pathetic, and the author's disgust more clear, when one knows that Zero's sex life on earth has been confined to peeping through a blind at a prostitute undressing. At the time, there was a tendency, evident in the work of Rice and Lawson, to move from comedy to social tragedy.

**Eugene O'Neill's Contribution**

O'Neill was the genius behind the change that came over American theatre and made the 1920's and 1930's the greatest period in its history. He gave American drama its requisite genius and authority. American theatre was in a desperate need for reform. There were notable playwrights in America before O'Neill but the drama had got enmeshed in a stereotyped pattern demanded by the commercial theatre, a pattern consisting of a mixture of Elizabethan tradition and the "well-made" play. Clyde Fitch and August Thomas, who wrote a decade before the arrival of O'Neill, contributed to the strengthening of the conventions rather than freeing drama from them. Eugene O'Neill proved himself to be the chief insurgent against worn-out dramatic conventions and the romantically banal and established himself as the symbol of a renaissance that paralleled on the stage the so-called renaissance in poetry.

In his early sea-plays in which O'Neill tried to capture naturalistically his experiences particularly on
board the Charles Racine, he presented a series of semi-articulate, primitive characters who carry in their heart some dream of happiness. All the brutality and horror of ship life, even the cruel practices like crimping and shanghaing that sometimes condemned a sailor to slave labour for the whole of his life, could not destroy that dream. In these plays O'Neill put down his own longings for adventure that took him to far off places, his own yearnings to attain the unattainable that constantly tormented his soul and above all his persistent sense that rationality cannot exhaust the meanings of the human situation.

'The Long Voyage Home', 'The Moon of the Caribbes', 'In the Zone', Bound East for Cardiff' are the plays of this period, in which he creates a set of men to whom life had nothing pleasant to offer to them. They had no self-transcending faith, no lofty principles to live by - even God seemed to have deserted them. Still they looked forward because of some vague dream of happiness and thus asserted the triumph of the human spirit. Says O'Neill in this context:

"The tragedy of life is what makes it worthwhile. I think that any life which merits living lies in the effort to realize some dream and the higher that dream is the harder it is to realize. Most decidedly we must all have our dreams. If one hasn't them, one might as well be dead. The only success is in failure and one must accept this as one of the conditions of being alive. If he ever thinks for a moment that he is a success, then he is finished." 1

Such a vision of the human situation finds its mature and culminating expression in The Straw and Beyond.

1. Quoted in 'Bamber Gascoigne's' Twentieth Century Drama', p. 56.
the Horizon. Beyond the Horizon is the story of two brothers trapped by fate so that the one who wanted adventure is compelled to stay at home while the one who wanted to stay at home is driven to find wealth in far off places. It is a tragedy of bleak frustration.

1921 marks a turning point in O'Neill's career as a dramatist. From now on he started experimenting with new techniques and new themes. Still his faith in the dignity and resilience of the human spirit that inspired his early dramatic effort never left him throughout his subsequent career. In the early plays he caught the reality of common people living on sea or land; in other plays he presented humanity struggling against inherited prejudices, the hardness of a stony soil, the frustrations of puritanism and the effects of a materialistic world which thwarts the human spirit.

O'Neill was also deeply conscious of the predicament of man surrounded by forces that he could neither comprehend nor manipulate. He saw that man's attempts to reach out to something higher than himself were constantly foiled and his urge to find fulfilment was frustrated at every step. He remained an isolate wandering alone in a spiritually sterile universe in which he could not have a sense of harmony. Unable to strike meaningful relationships with the world around he remained alienated and deracine and much of the torture and anguish of the human soul was the result of a lack of fixity in either a comfortable cosmos or a spiritually acceptable society. In a series of plays
he set out to examine those pressures, either from within or from without, that bring about the disintegration of human personality.

In 'Diff'rent' and 'Mourning Becomes Electra', O'Neill projects the psychological dilemmas of his characters against the background of the rigid puritanical code of New England inhabitants. 'Diff'rent' reveals O'Neill's insight into the psychology of puritanism and frustration and his power to externalise inner stresses.

In another group of plays O'Neill dramatises the craze for material success that followed the gilded prosperity of the twenties. He seemed to suggest that even if one emancipates oneself from the loveless faith of one's ancestors one might lapse into machine-worship or mammon-worship which are equally destructive of the life-force. 'In Dynamo' he deprecated the materialistic philosophy of the 20's by dramatising the failure of machine-worship, whereas in Marco Millions he presented the hero as an arid-souled materialist immune to and blindly destructive of the beauty and poetry of life.

Hereditity and environment are other forces that shackle the individual in his pursuit of happiness and integrity. Howsoever one may try to live down one's past or transcend environmental influences, it is difficult to exercise primitive fears and conquer racial prejudices. "We are all ghost-haunted," said O'Neill and in plays like 'Emperor Jones' and 'All God's Chillun Got Wings' he dealt with the forces of heredity and environment in a manner that suggests the Greek idea of fate and retribution. 'Emperor' Jones is the study of a negro retrogressing into his aboriginal fears
in a moment of anxiety and terror.

Here then was O'Neill's assessment of the human situation. On the one hand man appeared to him a puny little creature surrounded by forces much beyond his control, roaming alone in a godless universe; on the other he appeared to be great and terrible particularly when he was in the grip of great passions, affording a spectacle not only absorbing but also at once horrible and cleansing. Says O'Neill:

"Just here is where I am a most confirmed mystic - I'm always, always trying to interpret life in terms of lives, never just lives in terms of characters. I'm always acutely conscious of the force behind (Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it, Mystery certainly) - and of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him, instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression."

O'Neill seemed capable of so many new ideas for the theater. He incorporated both realism and expressionism. Expressionist effects were first made noticeably a part of his drama in 'The Emperor Jones' (1920). Later O'Neill moved to bolder and more varied experiments. In 'The Hairy Ape' (1922) expressionist devices and settings combined with strictly naturalistic details, so that the "real" achieved a symbolic quality through formal repetition and exaggeration. In 'The Great God Brown' (1926) he tried the addition of masks as an experiment in dramatic effects. They were the best way, he explained, for the dramatist to express, "those profound hidden conflicts of the mind which the probings of psychology continue to disclose to us."

'Lazarus Laughed' (1928) carried the use of masks to an extreme complication: seven masked choruses representing seven periods of life, each of which contained seven types of character.

So O'Neill used naturalistic detail with symbolist mood, suggestiveness and symbol. He deliberately violated what John Gassner calls "the sacred right of the play-goer to discharge his obligations to the stage in two hours and a half of theatre attendance." His plays are of epic dimensions, and through these O'Neill brought to the American theatre a spaciousness that was known only on the Greek stage where an Aeschylean trilogy kept the people spell bound for hours. To quote John Gassner:

"The stature of Eugene O'Neill casts a long shadow on the American theater. Whether it stretches or contracts in the critical estimates of a particular period or critic this much is certain: the height and breadth of the American theater is measured by it. Find fault with O'Neill and you find fault with the entire American stage; find merit in him and you find worth in its striving or straining towards significant drama. It is possible to single out American playwrights endowed with greater refinement and facility than can be attributed to him but none who made a comparable impression on the twentieth century. Chiefly as a result of his persistent efforts after 1915, the American drama actually entered the century and made contributions to world theater that could be considered significantly modern." 1

The genuine comedy of manners was an innovation of the 1920's. Its supporters and exponents were Philip Barry and S.N. Behrman, who were extraordinary in their mental make-up. Among the nicest plays by Barry were "Holiday" and "Paris Bound". In the thirties, he completed

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2. Ibid., p.36.
'The Animal Kingdom' and 'The Philadelphia Story'. These two plays gave vehemence to a civilized writer's protest against conventional adulation of wealth and social position, as well as righteousness in moral concerns.

Behrman's concern with conflicting dispositions served realism with comic penetration in 'The Second Mass' (1927). 'In Biography' (1932), an over-tolerant woman and over-strenuous person differ on coming to understand their basic incompatibility. 'Berhaman's treatment of political themes is to be found in 'No Time for Comedy', produced in 1938. In the best work of Behrman, there is a keen insight into the realities of character sustained by wit and urban dialogue.

Maxwell Anderson who experimented with poetic tragedy which, unlike those of O'Neill, assume that verse is necessary for achieving the highest effects in it. Among the earliest of his plays "What Price Glory", earned enormous popularity. He later on tried his hand in the field of comedies also, but suddenly in 1930, he revealed an entirely new style in the formal tragedy in verse, Elizabeth the Queen. Though from time to time, until 1945, he wrote pieces in several different manners, it is probably with the formal tragedy, frequently historical in subject but in some instances dealing with a contemporary situation, that his name is often associated. Plays of this kind include, 'Mary of Scotland' (1933), 'Valley Forge' (1934), 'Winterset' (1935), 'Key Largo' (1939), and 'The Eve of St. Mark' (1942).

Apart from O'Neill and Anderson, those who wrote good American plays were: George Kelly, who wrote
'The Show Off' (1924) and 'Graig's Wife' (1925), George S. Kaufman, who wrote 'Beggar on Horseback' (with Marc Connelly, 1924), and 'The Royal Family' (in collaboration with Edna Ferber, 1927), and Robert Sherwood, who produced 'Road to Rome' (1927) and 'Reunion in Vienna' (1931). One name must be mentioned here - Elmer Rice, who wrote his popular play, 'The Adding Machine', which was produced by the Theatre Guild in 1923, and attained enormous popularity.

The mental climate of the playwrights who wrote in 1930's was coloured by the impact of the Depression of 1929, which exposed to them that forces beyond man's control to affect and modify man's various dreams and desires. The Stock-market crash of October, 1929, marked a new period in the affairs of the nation. The down-ward drop of stock value moved the country to the Great Depression, a period lasting much of the 1930's. When the nation suffered unemployment, reduced incomes, business failures, home foreclosures, lower prices for agricultural yield. It was the decade of the New Deal of Franklin D. Roosevelt - the PDR who was not only such a national hero but also a world leader and popular political idol. He and his programme and plans to bring assistance to the under privileged helped to usher in the concept of his as the century of common man; the rise into political influence of the masses of the world.

Such changes of a sociological, economic, and political nature as were modifying the traditional individualism naturally brought great changes to the literature being
produced. The stress of the depression and wide spread unemployment furthured a literature of proletarian protest. The literary left or a literature allied with Marxian doctrine became for the first time a self-conscious and active part of the American literary scene.

Clifford Odets, during the thirties, was associated in public mind with a sympathy for the revolutionary movement and an attack upon the principles of middle class society and mercantile enterprises. The works of Odets embody a 'definite' political and social ideology. Born in Philadelphia and educated in the public schools of New York City, he joined an acting company, which later became the Group Theatre. In 1935, the Group produced his brief tour de force called 'Waiting for Lefty', a dramatized bit of labour conflict involving a strike of taxi drivers. The hollow plea of a capitalist agent is contrasted with the elements of social injustice, corruption, and personal tragedy faced by the drivers.

The work of Clifford Odets as representing the most successful cultivation of the play intended to further a definite political and social ideology. Born in Philadelphia and educated in the public schools of New York City, he joined an acting company, which later became the Group Theatre. In 1935, the Group produced his brief tour de force called Waiting for Lefty. The public reaction was extremely favourable, and his first full-length play, Awake and Sing which deals with the problem of labour class, was begun before the author's conversion to Marxism, but the
concluding scene draws a 'revolutionary moral', Odets was much influenced by Chekhov. He learned from the Russian "his most striking stylistic trick, the writing of brisk colloquial dialogue in which much appears to be irrelevant or random." 1

During the same year which saw the first production of Awake and Sing, the Group Theatre produced two other plays by Odets: Till the Day I Die, an undistinguished if earnest drama of Nazi brutality, and Paradise Lost, which the author professed to regard as his most important work, but which to most critics seemed a highly doctrinaire study of American society in the process of disintegration closely in accord with the pattern laid down in Marxian philosophy. Another play, Golden Boy (1937), attempted to tell a story capable of conveying to the attentive a moral for the politically radical; and it was not until the following year that Rocket to the Moon gave convincing demonstration of its author's talent. The plays that followed, Night Music (1940) and Clash by Night (1941), were neither commercially successful, nor added to Odets' reputation.

A more realistic view of the world is present in Lillian Hellman's plays. Her place is next only to Odets. Like Odets, she too is a social playwright. She shows a steady, mature intellect in her work. In her two great successes of the Depression years, 'The children's Hour' and 'The Little Foxes', she expresses the belief that those whose social attitudes she hated were too tough and

too experienced to be swept aside by nothing more than the rhetoric of protest. She did not recommend open rebellion. If her plays agitate against evil, they do so by the indirect method of holding it up to view, not by direct means of militant appeal.

Other writers also took to political or social ideology. Thus, Robert Sherwood's 'There Shall Be No Night' (1940) was widely praised for its statement of the case of Finland against Russia. Sherwood can deal with what he sees as the social and spiritual bankruptcy of modern life without making it a mere cry of social protest. Lillian Hellman's plays have a propagandistic element which makes it difficult to take her artistic pretensions with full seriousness. She began with a powerful drama on a malicious child called 'The Children's Hour' (1934). Soon she devoted herself to social themes, first with 'The Little Foxes' (1939), an implied criticism of capitalist society, and then with 'Watch on the Rhine' (1941), in which the condemnation of Nazi Germany is the main motivating idea. These works suffer from immediate political considerations. 'Another Part of the Forest' (1947) deals with the same family as 'The Little Foxes' and is theatrically the most dexterous of her plays.

The symbolic plays were written during the Forties. Among such plays, which achieved marked success, were Thornton Wilder's extravagance 'The Skin of Our Teeth' (1942) and Mary Chase's engaging farce-comedy 'Harvey' (1944). William Saroyan deserves special mention as an original playwright. His many plays are whimsical and symbolic to
the extreme. Of his several plays, only two, 'My Heart's in the Highlands' (1939) and 'The Time of Your Life' (1939), achieved any sort of conspicuous success. They are highly dramatic. The serious objection to Saroyan's plays is that, like his stories, they lack continuity, form, or unity. His less successful pieces are 'The Beautiful People' and 'Love's Old Sweet Song'. Saroyan is far too eccentric, both as a personality and as a writer, to be taken as typical of anything but himself.

A number of regional dramatists who emerged about the same period merit a consideration here. The ablest of these were Lynn Riggs, best known as the author of Green the Lilacs and Paul Green whose weakest products were fantasies such as 'I Read the Green Grass'. His strongest work with or without symbolism was rooted in the social realities of the South. From his pen came a little later 'The House of Conelly and Potter Field'. Paul Green's most genuinely poetic writing will be found in the speeches he delivered to the sadistic chain-gang 'Captain of Hymn' to the 'Rising Sun', a very potent drama of protest against the penal system of the South.

The thirties established the fact that the New Deal was a new era in which a new society faced a new day. Social security and government control were firmly accepted as the successors to the ruggedly individual self-reliance of the frontier and the warfare over economic conditions on the expanding industrial front which the
development of the machine had brought to the increasingly urbanized society. The responsibility of the government for the social and economic welfare of the citizens was accepted although the question was still debated of how the public welfare could best be served. There was no longer any question but that America had firmly embarked upon a society merging governmental controls and governmental responsibility with private enterprise and individual capitalism. Before the thirties were over America had become also more firmly involved in international complication. Fascism and Communism as totalitarian concepts of government, both aggressively on the march, were alien to the idea of democracy, and America with other democracies in the world faced the presence of another world war.

The new age or since the outbreak of World War II has brought not so much technical change as a reorientation of ideas and concepts. Three of these large areas of modified thinking have been of importance to American literature; the changing nature of science and the changing attitude toward science accompanying that change; the changing concept of the nature of the political state; the re-evaluation of the individual himself.

In the century of the world wars the nature of the state in political terms has been modified also. The meaning of sovereignty has had to be examined in the light of the complex interrelationships of nations and in the creation of many new nations incapable of military defense of their own new national existence. Technological
developments in warfare, international travel, international commerce, international programs regarding finance, control of disease, promotion of education, supply of food have all made such total isolation or such ideas of monolithic integrity and independence as once prevailed no longer defensible concepts.

The quotation from a Devotion by John Donne which Ernest Hemingway used in his novel 'For Whom the Bell Tolls' quickly caught the public fancy in the 1940's because it was recognized to be so apt and applicable to the new age.

It applies particularly to the condition of nations:

No man is an Hand, intire of it selfe; every man is a peecse of the Continent, a part of the maine; if a Clod be washed away by the Sea, Europe is the lesse.... any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankinde.....

The United States of America found itself in the forties involved with mankind in a way the nation had never before conceived as possible. In the twenties it had failed to join the League of Nations, and only reluctantly yielded any of its sovereignty to the World Court; but in the new age the United Nations as an idea and in general cooperative action among nations on a multilateral scale is the accepted idea. No nation is an isolated island but each nation belongs to the mainland. Thus to most Americans the idea of noncommitment concerning issues important to the world's future has seemed a failure to measure up to the demands of the new age and an evasion of the responsibility inherent in man's humanity.

Both of these changing ideas have contributed to the third change to be considered, the changing evaluation of the individual himself. The once independent and reliant individual who was confident of the future and filled with pride and patriotism at the sound of his national anthem and the sight of his national flag has of necessity given way to a less sure, less confident, less provincial man trying to adjust himself to a world he never made and a world he scarcely understands. It even seems that the extension of knowledge about man, such as the work of the psychologists has given him, has made it even more difficult to know man's nature. In the Einsteinian world where the one constant is the speed of light and where the over-changing universe is described in terms of nebular space and distance of light years, even man in his space ships is dwarfed until the importance of the individual and particular concern for his individual happiness or welfare and especially concern for his belief in traditional patterns of action and thinking has faded away.

"The ancient Psalmist sang, What is man that Thou art mindful of him? and modern man is asking the same question in an entirely different framework. Man's certainty in belief and man's sureness in acting in traditional ways have been eroded until one of the questions asked most persistently in recent literature is the same pathetic cry raised by Washington Irving's Rip Van Winkle after his long sleep, Who am I?" 1

Many of the post-war writers concern themselves with this search of the alienated individual for an identity, for a meaning. This is the central quest of the Beat Generation, the writers who were early associated with San Francisco and who responded to Allen Ginsberg's "Howl." This wailing protest against man's condition struck a responsive

chord and has been subjected to considerable critical discussion. Probably it is more important for the battle of criticism it produced than it is as a piece of literature. The Beats' attempt at a revival of poetry after their mode died aborning and shows no real contribution to the developing literature.

The situation of postwar drama was paradoxical: it boasted the most challenging experiments while claiming the fewest figures of prominence. The roster of serious playwrights is brief: Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams who have made distinguished records, and Edward Albee and Jack Gelber who give promise of doing so. Yet drama also showed the will to encompass as much of reality as men can bear, and to break the molds which time and experience inevitably must alter. In this respect, drama was at one with postwar fiction and poetry; the three genres pointed beyond formalism to new conceptions of form. Like the other genres, too, postwar drama held its images of the self paramount, veering toward expressionism or surrealism merely to render its vision of a human truth that the mass of fact and cliche threatened to obliterate. The emphasis, if not always absurd or private was certainly personal: the focus was on the elusive or illusive part of man. Thus Arthur Miller, despite his abiding social passion, distinguished himself from playwrights of the thirties by a more troubled awareness of individual psychology. Tennessee Williams concerned himself with the power of dream and desire breaking helplessly on the ramparts of culture;
and Gelber and Albee moved on the boundaries of reason, looking at the darkness within. As might be expected, from the shattered proscenium of the stage a solitary image of man sought to disengage itself.

The two dramatists who have emerged into prominence since 1940, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, both indicate that they are children of the bewildered and protesting age, yet Miller has a more hopeful view of man than Williams does. Williams is saturated with a feeling that something is lost, that in place of whatever might have been of value from some lost past is now a raging emptiness. No longer in his work is there a social protest which is in itself a seeking for the justice which is understood implicit in the protest. Rather his plays present an inner probing with in a small group, a stirring of the embers of a burned out fire.

Tennessee Williams is very much influenced by the contemporary concern with psychological problems. Williams' important plays are 'The Glass Menagerie', 'A Street Car Named Desire', and 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof'. Williams is not a dramatist of ideas. Rather, he is satisfied with communicating his own sensibility, his own feeling of horror at the world. He stripped the South of all its romantic halo. 'The Glass Menagerie' is a memory play, a subdued, nostalgic family portrait. The hero is a young poet, haunted by memory of his mother's desperate attempt to keep up the appearance of the old South's graceful formality. The dramatic interest is derived from the conflict between
a romantic, idealistic attempt at recovering a dead past and the hard struggle for survival in an unfriendly atmosphere. 'A Street Car Named Desire' depicts the shattering of souls, the destruction of a young woman who yearns to lead the mythic life of the South before the war. She meets with nothing but despair and frustration. She seeks asylum in her sister's house but is raped by her brother-in-law and ends up in asylum. Williams' characters exhibit qualities that are pathetic. Pathos at times yields to a sort of modern Gothic melange in which Williams' preoccupations have been stylized into fashionable nightmares of castration, incest and homosexuality. One of Williams' favourite themes was the ruthless destruction of idealists and artists. This has often caused him to be described as a romantic.

Arthur Miller was born October 17, 1915, in New York city. He attended the public schools of the city, but left school to go to work in a warehouse. Awakened to some inner urgings by reading as Miller says, 'The Brothers Karamazov', he attended the university of Michigan School of Journalism as a special student and turned to writing drama. 'All My Sons' (1947) was a dramatic Broadway success, but 'Death of a Salesman' (1948) was more lightly applauded and received the annual Pulitzer Prize. With it Miller became a playwright of literary importance.

Arthur Miller has rightly said "Since 1920 American drama has been a steady, year by year documentation of the frustration of man". Odets, Elmer Rice, Maxwell Anderson, Irvin Shaw and Lillian Hellman did their best
work in the conviction that modern civilization was committing repeated acts of criminal injustice against the individual. They also dramatized the protests of minorities. And thus they ploughed the land for O'Neill.

Miller belongs largely to the tradition of social drama of the thirties; Williams, a poet manque, looks ahead to a lyrical, balladic Gesamthunstwerk in which words as such are likely to have less and less importance. Yet the two men share much. Yet Miller and Williams have common ground to agree and share with each other. Both are against life printed on dollar bills. Miller is a rebel against, Williams a refugee from the familiar ogre of commercialism, the killer of values and the leveller of men. Both echo now and then the evils of American system of life economic, social and political. But such a criticism of American society is by chance and not by deliberate machinations. Their main theme is frustration and desperation.

Miller and Williams may take up the same theme, yet their techniques are different. Miller is the Scandinavian to have translated Ibsen. Williams on the other hand is the Mediterranean, the lower of Lorca and D.H.Lawrence, sensuous, funny, verbally luxuriant, prone to immersion in romantic tragedy. Miller's plays are hard, 'patriot', athletic, concerned mostly with men. Williams are soft 'matrist', sickly, concerned mostly with women. What links them is their love for the bruised individual soul and his desperation.
'Death of a Salesman' faced up to the question of the identity of the individual with more firmness of structure than is attained in Williams' plays. Miller has a greater naturalness in his conception of character forces in conflict with his isolated and alienated individuals. 'The Crucible' (1953) is a dramatic representation of the witch hunt and witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1962; and yet the play has a sufficient depth of character revelation to give it universal pertinence. Miller has presented John and Elizabeth Proctor, well-meaning and honorable people, tangled in the Web of frenzy which is the relentless tragedy of man's failure in rational and mercy-giving qualities, man's blind drive toward prejudice, custom, greed, and self-destruction. Yet man does have a dignity and a hope and a saving integrity in this presentation. John Proctor, no saint, cries out from his condition of hopeless entanglement. "God in Heaven, what is John Proctor?" and his wife Elizabeth has the answer that he is a rational and merciful human being. "John, it comes to naught that I should forgive you, if you'll not forgive yourself...... Whatever you will do, it is a good man does it." Here is the kind of spirit which William Faulkner spoke of in his Nobel Award address. Other Miller plays are 'A View from the Bridge' (1955), a waterfront play involving anti-Semitism, and 'After the Fall' (1964), a much discussed play involving what has been called "a shockingly intimate portrayal of the author's
own personal life with Marilyn Monroe," who was his wife. The play seems to say, "No one has to be to blame" on the one hand and, also, on the other that "we were both born to many errors; a human being has to forgive himself."

The drama in America over the past generation has shown in general less vitality than it did in the preceding generation under the influence of Eugene O'Neill. Williams and Miller seem to stand much above other dramatists writing over the period. No great new voice is showing at the present, though there may be some younger playwrights giving promise. The theater is dominated in the early 1960's by the older and more standard works and by newer voices from Europe.

It will not be wrong to recall, in conclusion, the comment of Gerald Weales: "In the years since the end of the war, the changes in the means of production and the methods staging having brought easy acceptance of what was once experimental. Although these changes have made great holes in the restrictive walls of the realistic theater, only a few American playwrights have dared to break through, to go out and up. What we need at the moment are playwrights willing to risk a great deal, Perhaps we have a theater without walls. What we need now is a theater without bounds." 2

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1. Miller, Arthur. 'After the Fall', p. 31.