BACKGROUND: EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN DRAMA

American drama took a long time to take a clear shape and develop an identity of its own. Even after its advent, coming of age was a very slow process. Jean Gould explains the reasons:

America was a wilderness that had to be tamed first, and then it was a colony, not a country. To these shores came people of many nationalities, most of them seeking refuge of some sort—refuge from religious or political persecution, from justice or injustice.... Small time for recreation, for entertainment, for literature, and no time at all for an art that combined the three: the theater.¹

A major deterrent to the progress of a native theater was the attitude of the Puritans who considered it an evil influence on the public. Story tellers and poets could function, but not the theater which involved the public as audience. Even after winning independence, nation-building was the prime concern which demanded such a total commitment that the theater continued to be relatively neglected.

Yet the field was never really barren. There were several precursors who tried to create a world of the theatre, but most of the pioneering works were influenced, understandably, by European, particularly British models. Still, though at a rudimentary level, the early American drama tried to reflect native American manners and customs and projected major issues including various levels of conflict in society.

The first American play acted on the American stage was Thomas Godfrey's *The Prince of Parthia* written before 1765 and produced at the New Theater, Philadelphia, on April 24, 1767. Melodramatic in its powerful display of dark passions and violent action, the play appeared to have been indebted to Shakespeare and to Beaumont and Fletcher for plot elements and language. Observing that in *The Prince of Parthia* "tradition was put to good use by the first native American dramatist", Alexander Cowie explains:

That the play was a tragedy was perhaps consonant with the prevailing sobriety of our national thinking at the time. That it was Elizabethan in pattern and oriental in subject matter is not to be wondered at. The population of this country at the time was in effect that of Englishmen transplanted, but scarcely rooted, in a new land.²

*The Patriots* which appeared very soon after the Declaration of Independence was written by Colonel Robert Munford. It was a comedy which contrasted genuine patriotism with vain boastfulness. The loyalty to the new spirit of American nationalism was reflected with intensity

In *The Patriors* suspected loyalists are haled before the Committee of Safety in hearings which are all too reminiscent of those by the House Un-American Activities Committee in the period of Joseph McCarthy.³

Several minor plays written subsequently reflected the spirit of the emergent American nationalism and depicted themes of relentless fight against oppression and tyranny. The spirit was laudable but they were of very little literary value.

*The Contrast* by Royall Tyler is a landmark in the development of American drama. It was produced at the John Street Theater in New York in 1787. The setting was New York in 1787 against the background of the attempts of the nationalists to bring thirteen loosely confederated states under one unit, the United States of America. The playwright wanted to sound the note of patriotism by instilling a sense of unity and national pride.

The prologue is significant:

Exult each patriot heart! - this night is shown.

A piece which we may fairly call our own.⁴

The story works but "the contrast between foreign sham and native honesty, between imported vice and home-grown virtue".⁵


5. Note 3, p. 4.
But modern youths, with imitative sense,
Deem taste in dress the proof of excellence;
And spurn the meanness of your homespun arts,
Since homespun habits would obscure their parts;
Whilst all, which aims at splendor and parade,
Must come from Europe, and be ready made.⁶

Alexander Cowie points out the significance of the first American comedy:
Its universally interesting theme of urban sophistication vs rural
naivety had a peculiarly appropriate application in post-revolutionary
America, when the British, having lost political control, were still
able to patronize us culturally.⁷

Tyler's play was obviously influenced by contemporary British drama, especially
the works of Sheridan.

Cowie explains: "The characterization of the 'fashionable' elements in the
dramatis personae is done with the authentic tone of a writer who knew his Sheridan
- for The Contrast has much in common with The School for Scandal - but the
prologue sounded a national note that was well sustained:

Why should our thoughts to distant countries roam
When each refinement may be found at home?⁸

7.  Note 2, p. 186.
8.  Ibid.
The Contrast, according to Alexander Cowie, "was a lusty embodiment of American ideals in a play which, without pointedly ignoring English tradition, made its own way."

William Dunlap's blank verse tragedy Andre, produced in 1798 reflects the emergence of the spirit of internationalism in America. Based on an actual episode of the Revolution, the play introduces John Andre, a major in the British army. Dramatic tension is established by the strained relations between Britain and England during the course of the story. The play was invested with high seriousness, its blank verse echoing Elizabethan dramatists. In his other plays also Dunlap displayed brilliant craftsmanship. He was an adept in several fields of art, but "he fell short of genius in any single category...."

Dunlap was interested in theatrical production and management, and presented Shakespeare's plays with meticulous attention to details. In 1832 he published his History of the American Theater which is significant as the work of a man who had contributed in several ways to the development of American drama.

Robert Montgomery Bird (1806-1854), novelist and dramatist, was one of the pioneers of romantic drama in the United States. The historical tragedy The Gladiator (1831) and the domestic tragedy The Broker of Bogota (1834) are among his masterpieces.


10. Ibid, p. 188.
Dion Boucicault was a major figure in American drama. He presented the sentimental side of the Negro slavery issue in his play *The Octoroon* (1859), but carefully avoided the question of the abolition of the evil. Several dramatized versions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) continued to raise the issue, contributing towards building up of public opinion against slavery. Idealism was merely on principle, many wealthy members of the industrial north and the agrarian south preferred retaining slavery.

Thus the conflict was more than a sectional conflict, it was a general conflict between materialism and idealism, between the desire to hang on to wealth and power and concern for human rights and human dignity. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* left no doubt on which side in that conflict lay the right.11

Bronson Howard's play *Shenandoah* (1888) reflected the effect of the Civil War and concentrated on the tension and pathos focussing attention on the human side of the conflict. His role was felt in restoring social comedy to a place of importance in the American theater after having been popular during the middle years of the century. The newly awakened social consciousness of the urbanized and sophisticated American audience created the ideal atmosphere for his mature social comedies like *The Banker's Daughter* (1878), *Young Mrs Winthorp* (1882) and *One of our Girls* (1885). Howard showed, simultaneously, an awareness of international social contrasts. Barrett H. Clark considers Howard as a symbol of a new awakening in American drama. He observes:

There is enough in his plays to warrant the hypothesis that while he himself in no sense inaugurated any movement in the theater that

developed into what we now recognize as our modern drama, there is in his output as a writer enough evidence to enable us to designate him as a symbol of what was, slowly and obscurely, happening to a few native playwrights.¹²

Arthur Hobson Quinn comments on the sense of social consciousness that inspired Howard's drama, especially with regard to character-delineation:

Howard placed on the stage for the first time in America a group of characters whose actions are determined by the power of social laws and the interruption of social distraction without making the prevailing note one of satire.¹³

George Henry Boker, another major figure in American drama represented the older tradition of romantic and heroic tragedy. Sculley Bradley explains the significance of Boker's contribution:

From Dunlap to Bird it mattered little whether the protagonist were an American patriot, Peruvian Indian, Greek slave, or British commoner, so long as he struck for freedom. Boker was the first American playwright to enlarge this concept and to deal with the tragedy of the great individual at desperate odds with society, with his own nature, or with malign destiny.¹⁴

¹³. Ibid., p. 646.
In fact, this statement sums up the basic themes of modern drama and highlights the very core of the modern individual's tortured self. The twentieth century dramatists including Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams give expression to various aspects of the agony of the individual at odds with society and with himself. Boker's works are pointers to the highly developed modern American drama.

Among his works Francesca da Rimini (1858) and Calaynos (1851) are the most popular, though they were not very successful in theater. But romantic tragedy was elevated to high dignity in Boker's drama. A significant aspect of Boker's handling of the theme of the star-crossed lovers in his masterpiece Francesca da Rimini was that he managed to give a new interpretation by bringing out the pathos as well as the strength of the character of the deformed husband while retaining the emotional appeal of the lovers. He points a finger at the code of social honour suggesting clearly that the callous society and not superhuman fate was responsible for such cases of tragedy.

Augustine Daly won international fame for his production of Shakespeare but his original contribution to American drama was the introduction of social problem play. Among his plays Horizon was a frontier drama with a new realism of setting and atmosphere. Divorce and Pique mark an early approach to the social problem play.

One of the major figures among those who prepared the way for the emergence of modern drama is James A. Herne. The response to Herne's plays Hearts of Oak (1879) and the domestic tragedy Margaret Fleming (1890) indicated a
clear improvement of public taste. His growing interest in realism produced plays like Shore Acres (1892). Margaret Fleming as, Barrett Clark points out:

...expresses the author's attitude toward men and women as members of society, and is not simply a melodramatic pot-boiler or a vehicle for particular action.15

Herne himself had clear views on the function of art made certain bold statements:

Art for truth's sake is serious. Its highest purpose has ever been to perpetuate the life of its time.

He adds:

If (the artist) has a truth to manifest and he can present it without giving offence and still retain its power, he should so present it, but if he must choose between giving offence and receding from his position, he should stand by his principle and state his truth fearlessly.16

He chose to stand by truth fearlessly. His play Margaret Fleming was a reflection of this attitude. Hamlin Garland asserts that:

it was the most naturalistic, the most colloquial, and the most truthful presentation of a domestic drama ever seen on the American stage up to that time.17

15. Note 12, p. 650.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p.651
Sculley Bradley assesses the significance of the contribution of Augustus Thomas and Clyde Fitch to American theater. They brought American drama to the modern age:

Herne and Howard foreshadowed the modern realistic theater, but four plays of Thomas and the latest plays of Fitch in the first decade of this century, constitute the actual beginnings of what we now recognize as contemporary realism.\(^{18}\)

Clyde Fitch had a clear idea about the function of a playwright:

I feel... very strongly the particular value... in a modern play, of reflecting absolutely and truthfully the life and environment about us; every class, every emotion, every motive, every occupation, every business, every idleness'. Life was never so varied, so complex... If you inculcate an idea into your play, so much the better for your play and for you and for your audience.... One should write what one sees, but observe under the surface.\(^{19}\)

Understanding what went on beneath the surface of the society was necessary for presenting problem plays. Clyde Fitch proved that he could present the serious side of life, calling for greater attention. His masterpiece, *The Girl with the Green Eyes* (1902) and *The Truth* (1907) show profound understanding of the characters against the background of contemporary society, even though the playwright avoided tragic conclusions.

\(^{18}\) Note 14, p. 1013.

\(^{19}\) Note 12, p. 660.
Again 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. His dramatic instinct was to avoid the intense clinical examination which weakened certain European dramas on such themes. Some critics have felt that the author manifested a fatal weakness in not pursuing the logic of these situations to the tragic conclusions ordained by the conventions of modern naturalism.

His inclination to highlight the positive aspects of love and faith does not in any way weaken the intensity of the situation he has created - situations and characters with tragic potential. Fitch's interest in looking to the psychological aspects of a situation anticipates the modern dramatist's preoccupation with psychology, most often of the abnormal levels. This interest was to find its full expression in the plays of Tennessee Williams in its full potential.

William Vaughn Moody was interested in the symbolic drama of spiritual struggle. The blending of the theme with romantic and realistic tendencies did not affect the seriousness of the tone of the drama. The Great Divide (1906) and The Faith Healer (1909) are of great philosophical significance, dealing with the themes of sin, focussing attention on its destructive power on the human soul. Sculley Bradley explains the relevance of Moody's choice of the theme:

The distinction is intended between evil, which may be an absolute, and the sense of sin or evil, which may have no absolute sanction, and may spring, indeed, from hereditary inhibitions, or

from prohibitions which bear little or no relation to truth and justice. It is a common place of American history, and a principal clue to American behaviour, that this sense of sin which Moody attacked in all of his plays was sharpened by the persistence of the Puritan inheritance, the Calvinist conception of the original sin and total depravity of mankind. For more than a century this problem has engaged the profoundest efforts of writers as diverse as Hawthorne, Whitman, Melville and Edwin Arlington Robinson.21

The sweeping Miltonic canvas of Moody's poetic plays The Masque of Judgement questions God's concept of sin and punishment. The ancient Hebrew God worshipped by the modern puritan is even defeated by the serpent because of the error He committed in the matters of sin and punishment. The Fire Bringer with the theme of Prometheus and The Death of Eve presenting the story of Eve and her sons deal with the same theme. They sound heretical with the playwright's daring handling.

Barrett H. Clark makes an assessment of Moody's contribution to American drama:

I see in The Great Divide and The Faith Healer two signs of transition, mileposts on the road between the make-believe and largely artificial drama of the nineteenth century, and the infinitely more genuine, grown-up American drama that began to develop about 1900 and flourished between 1920 and the present day.22

21. Ibid., pp. 1013-1014.

22. Note 12, p. 655.
He was "ready to come to terms with the theater as it existed, but at the same time he tried to bend it to his own ends".23

Moody was conscious of playwrights, "capital chaps", whose "allegiance to the Sisters of the Sacred Well is tempered by their interest in the genie of the box-office sill".24

What Moody called a "mystical hanker after something higher" characterized the attempts of American dramatists of this period. The influence of Ibsen's plays, especially _A Doll's House_ (1879) can be traced in some of the works. American theater displayed the signs of developing fast.

The complexities of life in the twentieth century found the most powerful expression in the dramatic symbolism of Eugene O'Neill. He represented an era in the history of American drama which became truly international, far beyond the confines of the national frontiers.

Daniel Hoffman's assertion that "most playwrights' careers come to an end; O'Neills' came to a culmination"25 points out the significance of O'Neill's contribution to American drama. His was an epoch, an era which had to come to a culmination, not an individual's contribution in the simple sense.

23. Ibid., p. 656.

24. Ibid., p. 657.

America was a new world for many writers - a world not hitherto observed very honestly. American literature burst on the international scene in the early decades of the twentieth century.

This was a truly great epoch: "An epoch that includes T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, Eugene O'Neill, can hardly escape notice....."26

Some of the greater writers who made their respective forms of creative writing enriched America during this period. Literature, in their hands, outgrew the 'American' and became 'human' in the real sense. The themes they handled covered a wide range:

Innocence and Experience, Eden and Utopia, Self and Society, Nature and History. The symbolist and expressionist modes dominate poetry and drama; mock romance and autobiography prevail in fiction. Violent or sentimental driven toward extremes of perception, struggling with history (Time) even more than with the frontier (Space), American literature develops a complete myth of itself against which every author feels that he must assert his own identity.27


27. Ibid.
The dramatists who took up the challenge of the times felt called upon to create a modern drama for the stage by experimenting with new forms or styles, such as symbolism and expressionism, as well as by assimilating and domesticating naturalism. They found stimulation in modernizing the stage and the creation of an "art theater".

The theatrical monopoly which was in existence sickened many young enthusiasts. They were bent on reforming the American drama, founding free theatres and art theatres against the "system". In February 1915, an enthusiastic group of young amateurs calling themselves the Washington Square Players waved a solemn manifesto in the face of New York drama and opened the Bandbox theater. Just a year and a half later another group, equally young and enthusiastic, started the Provincetown Theater. But the Washington Square Players disbanded in the spring of 1918 because America's entry into the war had produced an atmosphere unfavourable to their activities. The Provincetown Theater continued under various directors to house productions straight through the war years and offered its stage to O'Neill's early plays one after another. The Washington Square Players had a major role in the dramatic history of the United States. The veterans of this organisation founded the Theater Guild. This was the most influential theatrical organisation ever known in the country. The first foreign plays produced were mostly those of George Bernard Shaw. These were followed by the works of native dramatists like Howard, Lawson, Behrman, Barry, Sherwood, Anderson and O'Neill. O'Neill the Provincetown playwright came over to the Theater Guild in 1928 with *Marco Millions*.

A discussion of the development of the contemporary American drama begins with some reference to these two groups. They made the first successful attempts
to provide a local habitation for the unconventional American Playwright. The Washington Square Players were reorganized after the Armistice as the Theater Guild. They presently built the only "art theater". The new American playwright wrote at first for the new American Theater. They did not belong to any school and had no acknowledged master, either native or foreign.

In the beginning of the Twentieth century, American drama was found only as a commercial operation. When the triumphs of Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov reverberated the whole of Europe, America had only its melodrama. The function of the American theater was to entertain and entertainment to them was escapism. The conventional theater did not have the courage to stage problem plays.

Referring to the maturity American drama had achieved by 1920, John Gassner explains how the decade witnessed a sense of fulfilment in all aspects of American life:

Our pioneering days were now definitely a thing of the past, and the surplus of our energies flowed into the arts. We adopted the best that we could find in European culture without allowing it to stifle native growths. We emancipated ourselves from provincialism and from the gaunt hand of fanatical puritanism, although we allowed it to keep a tight finger on our liquor supply. We began to explore human nature with the lantern of philosophy and the scalpel of modern surgery. The lantern revealed the richness of our resources, dreams, and striving, the scalpel probed our intestinal tumour of complacency, intolerance, and acquisitiveness. In short,
we achieved criticism of life without which the drama is nothing but evanescent showmanship.\textsuperscript{28}

American drama reflected all these positive aspects during the early part of the twentieth century. It was with the advent of Eugene O'Neill that American theater began to have its firm footing. O'Neill brought about a revolution both thematically and technically. The works of O'Neill particularly proved to be capable of exploring human nature. "Most modern plays are concerned with the relation between man and man, but that does not interest me at all. I am interested only in the relation between man and God."\textsuperscript{29}

He had to resort to unconventional techniques to probe into the human soul, and to project the workings of the deeper levels of the mind. Rational analysis would never be adequate to serve this purpose. A dramatist of great power, he combined symbolic expressions with subtle realism. O'Neill found universal relevance in classical mythology. His masterpiece \textit{Mourning Becomes Electra} is a modern interpretation of the Agamemnon story against the background of the American Civil War. Modern psychological theories take the place of classical concepts like Nemesis, Furies and pre-destination. Another recurring theme handled by O'Neill centres around the idea of 'belonging'. \textit{The Hairy Ape} presents the tragic fate of man "who has lost his harmony with nature". \textit{Emperor Jones} is one of the finest specimens of Expressionism in modern drama. O'Neill explored the possibilities of the use of masks in projecting complexities of modern life. O'Neill's contribution


\textsuperscript{29} Note 25, p. 398.
to drama has been of such magnitude that it can be equated with that of an epoch. Daniel Hoffman asserts:

Most playwrights' careers come to an end: O'Neill's came to a culmination.  

After O'Neill it was impossible for the American theater to go back to the romantic tragedies and sentimental comedies of the conventional type. He proved to the world that production of great drama in that genre was still possible in contemporary theater.

Gerald Weales says:

American drama since the end of the World War has been pushing down walls so that it can find room to stand on a smaller and smaller space.

The second decade of the twentieth century witnessed the consequences of the First World War. The impact of the war could be felt in all realms of life. John Gassner points out:

The American theater entered the war period with depleted resources, unhappy memories and jaded nerves. Considerable time was elapsed before it would recuperate from its neurasthenia.

30. Ibid.


The nation began to gain self complacency after the war. The decade also witnessed the glorious prosperous years, and an apparently sound economic structure. But there was a steady disintegration of social values. It was in one of the most crucial decades in the history of the United States of America that the catastrophic collapse of American economy took place. It sent a shockwave through every nerve of the country. Not a single field of human activity was left unaffected. The collapse of the production, distribution and marketing systems followed the drastic fall of prices of shares. The stock market which had controlled American economy began the endless series of failure at every level, affecting the existence of the common man, threatening his very survival. Unemployment rose to staggering heights. The Government had to press all its machinery into functioning to prevent large scale starvation deaths in the country.

This situation, as irony would have it, had a salutary effect on the society in an indirect manner. It dealt a deathblow to the smug complacency of the American and shook him rather rudely into a world of reality. Introspection became imperative on his part. It was at this stage that literature reflecting the pulse of society had to play its specific role. Among the popular literary forms, drama is the only one that has direct access to the audience. Therefore, it was but natural that there was a sudden spurt in theatrical activity, bringing out drama of all possible varieties.

Though the decade began with unprecedented economic dislocation and ended with the global war, it was a massive trial of endurance. It was also a period of hope. A sudden jolt in the political and social fields took place. In the words of Gassner:
Then on October 29, 1929, amidst a flurry of ticker-taper and a rain of suicides from office windows, the bubble of our financial structure burst with a deafening explosion. Its fragments littered the landscape of the richest country in the world with apple-stands and bread lines.33

Sensitive minds reacted to the situation. Drama in particular became the mirror of the society. Intellectuals began to think about the relationships of Man with Nature and Man with Man. Quest for truth was the main theme of the writers.

Around this time the Theater Union, the Group Theater, the Federal Theater and various other theatres contributed to the sporadic growth of American drama. Anita Block makes an assessment of the contribution of these organisations:

...the Provincetown Players and the Theater Guild carried the American theater forward from infantilism into robust and intransigent youth... on the other hand, the 'little theatres' of the country with few exceptions, have been timid and vacuous, passionately dedicated to stage carpentry as a noble end in itself and to the presentation of worthless Broadway 'success'. Finally, impelled by a change in American social and economic conditions, stimulated by original workers' theater groups in pre-Hitler Germany and by the new theater in Soviet Russia, American workers play-producing groups also developed leading to the formation of the theater union.34

33. Ibid., p. vii.

In 1920's the Theater Guild, besides popularizing show on the American stage, had produced the work of European dramatists whose "continental" treatment of the comedy of sex was widely regarded as a corrective to Puritanism.

John Mason Brown comments on the theater of Twenties:

"...It was a theater throbbing with protests - not the social protests which were to come in the tin-cupping days of the thirties, but aesthetic revolt. The "New-movement" as it was called, was to many a cause if not a crusade. It stressed the importance of the director as an interpreter and the significance of the visual contributions of scene painters, now identified as scenic artists. Luckily, however, in this teeming atmosphere of change and growth, of repudiation and experiment, actors were not forgotten. They and their performances were among the glories of the decade."

The plays which appeared during the period were characterized by sincere forthrightness, realistically honest facing of the facts, and a liberal attitude toward moral questions. Though commonly described as the years of disillusion, the twenties were fundamentally optimistic and self-confident. All the same it was hardly less compatible with the contempt freely expressed for the exuberant materialism. The most frivolous of youth preferred to have the age in which they lived labelled "the jazz age". It was the age in which the drama, like many novels and poems, exhibited, even when the form was satiric and protestant, a fundamental confidence that a world which had grown secure and prosperous can be made beautiful and happy also.

The society that was projected in the plays suited the temper of the time. Political and social awareness gained popularity in the theater. John Gassner explains the 'irritants' and the 'stimulants' that involved the new type of drama:

The irritant of a straitened economy in the thirties, which left the Broadway theater floundering for a time, resulted in the rise of uncommercial, socially critical, militant or ameliorative organisations like the proletarian Theater Union, the New Theater League branches, the Group Theater, and the relief project for the theatrical profession known as the Federal Theater which became the first national institution of its kind in the United States.\(^{36}\)

The years between the two world wars saw a great change in the American drama.

Walter Meserve observes:

The major trend of the period, though not always indicative of the best plays of the time, was a continuation in principle of a major trend in American drama since James A. Herne.\(^{37}\)

By that time the theatres were flooded with dramas from abroad. The development of sea routes gave an opportunity for many to travel far and wide. Such travellers who observed the technique of play-production in other countries, returned with a new zeal to their native country. Hence many small theatres were established in every nook and corner of the country. The Little Theater movement started.


There was a sense of general awakening among the public. In the words of John Gassner:

The great body of American citizens would ultimately perhaps leave their trough of dollar-mindedness; that is, if they were badgered long enough with its Bohemian satire, for the young Americans of Greenwich village and tributary places had discovered the European game of baiting the bourgeoisie. Meanwhile, however, the art movement was to consist of an aristocracy of the spirit.\(^{38}\)

Little Theater movement brought about a great change in the production of drama. The influence of Freud, Jung and Marx made a great impact on most of the American playwrights. The Provincetown Players and the Washington Square Players produced American dramas of real distinction. Walter J. Meserue points out:

The history of American theatres from 1915 to 1941 is the story of change and achievement. During the second decade of the century, several influences brought distinct innovations in theater production which were translated into mature achievements in the Twenties. Then two events - the talking movie and the stock market crash - had their effect upon theater attendance. Various producing organisations, however, stimulated theater activity during the thirties, and by the beginning of World War II, the quality of American theater productions helped by new and imaginative playwrights and designers, had reached a new height.\(^{39}\)

38. Ibid., p. 638.

39. Ibid., pp. 638-639.
This attitude of confidence produced a multitude of plays and stimulated experiments with both form and ideas.

Clifford Odets' plays reflected a deep sense of social commitment. 'Commitment' means a pledge, an involvement of the nature of a binding promise. In literature it would imply clear involvement in a specific social problem. Drama, more than any other literary form, is, by its very nature committed to human values. Waiting For Lefty created a new record in the history of American theatre. The realistic portrayal was so convincing that the audience got under the spell and began to behave like members of the group on the stage. Awake and Sing is a masterpiece, projecting the conflicts of modern life from the perspective of a young man from a Jewist-American background. Clifford Odets' plays bear testimony to the fact that social commitment and aesthetic values can go hand in hand in the theatre.

After Odets several playwrights experimented with different forms like symbolism in their plays. To quote Spiller:

The work of Clifford Odets as representing the most successful cultivation of the play intended to further a definite political and social ideology; and 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.\(^{40}\)

By 1939 the writers who had made their mark in the 1920's were middle-aged, caught in the grooves of an established style as a result of plying it

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40. Note 14, p. 1320.
for a decade or longer, accustomed to ways of responding and thinking that had reaped ample rewards. The second generation of depression-bred, Marxist-oriented dramatists had airily dismissed them as jaded and inclined to evade reality. Simplifications of issues by war led, of course, to over simplification in playwriting.

S.N. Behrman deserves mention as the author of high comedy of a different nature. He tried to delve deep under the surface, while the other playwrights concentrated only on comedy. He prophesied that comedy would prevail over the later half of 1930's. Behrman's *Wine of Choice* deals with idlers in society whose charm he appreciates. Though his viewpoint was that of comedy, Behrman revealed his humanism in the plays, with real consciousness of deeper issues involved in those which provided him with the stuff for comedy. *The Second Man, End of Summer, Brief Moment* and *Rain from Heaven* are among his important plays.

Robert Sherwood, another major writer of comedy had a positive approach towards ideologies. *Reunion in Vienna, The Petrified Forest, Acropolis, Idiot's Delight,* and *Abe Lincoln in Illionis* are the best among his works.

Maxwell Anderson, considered to be the successor of Eugene O'Neill, and second only to him in dramatic genius, represents an interesting paradox. He had great faith in his art and never lost heart even in the face of adverse criticism. His significant plays were *What Price Glory?* and *Gods of the Lightning.* Maxwell Anderson's star had declined after writing 'Winterset' and *High Tor* in 1935 and 1936 respectively.
Writers like Elmer Rice, Maxwell Anderson, Thornton Wilder and John Steinbeck were accustomed to trying to set down articles of faith for the Western man. To some extent the literature of 1930's reflected the optimism of the people who were slowly recovering their lost glory.

To quote Malcolm Goldstein:

The response of the theatre to the appeal for forthright action to relieve economic pressure and the threat of war was commendably strong; then, as now, intellectual playwrights were scarce, but they were present in sufficient numbers to create exhilarating drama. Social protest was in the air, it was the dominant direction of creative thought. Each new theatrical season brought a fresh supply of dramatized injunctions against materialism and injustice. The general result, despite the usual expected spate of tractlike propaganda pieces, was a praiseworthy drama which prodded the conscience and stimulated the imagination. 41

The emergence of Elmer Rice in the mid-thirties is a significant landmark in the development of modern drama in the United States of America. His Adding Machine which appeared earlier during the heyday of expressionism became a symbol of the new approach of intellectuals to the defective modern set up. He could handle with equal ease such divergent forms as expressionism, naturalism, and even light farce. Some of his plays are Street Scene, Not for Children and The subway, The Adding Machine, uses a modified form of expressionism.

After the outbreak of the Second World War most radicals, including even the members of the Communist Party, became convinced that it was advisable to form with a United front with capitalism against the Axis powers. Many new plays of social import were written, and audiences became larger than at any time since the twenties; but between 1939 and 1945 no one kind of play was persistently cultivated, and no new theatrical movement became discernible.

Many of the most successful pieces were adapted from popular novels, apparently because original plays did not appear in sufficient number to keep the theatres filled; and, while certain writers continued to use the stage to comment upon the war or its implications, their comments were usually either patriotic melodrama or the defence of some specific ideological line.

Lillian Hellman's plays, despite the critical acclaim and popular success which some of them have won, have a propagandistic element. She began with a powerful drama *The Children's Hour* (1934) centering round a malicious child. Soon she devoted herself to social themes, as in *The Little Foxes* (1939). In *Walk on the Rhine* (1941), violent condemnation of Nazi Germany is the main motivating idea. *Another part of the Forest* (1947) deals with the same family as *The Little Foxes* and is theaterically the most dexterous of her plays.

The identity of the American writers who establish themselves after World War II is collectively as well as individually distinct. These writers begin by dissociating themselves from both the literary and political inheritance of the thirties. that is, from both naturalism and Marxism. Ihab Hassan observes:

Yet despite the culture of the postwar era, curiously violent and hedonistic, angry and apathetic, the American writer makes a place
for his imagination in it. It were also an error to speak of the postwar period as if it possessed a unified character. Each decade witnesses shifts in personal tone.\textsuperscript{42}

He adds:
\begin{quote}
In the fifties, ideas about culture seem particularly rife. The trend effects a subtle revision of American individualism and the protestant work ethic, a revision of "inner-direction" and all its attendant values.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

The critic continues:
\begin{quote}
If the fifties appear implosive, the succeeding decade must be called explosive. The sociological, religious, and existential interests of the former years continue into the sixties, though the temper of the times becomes more autonomian, more experimental. All is called into doubt, new styles of life evolve in every direction.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

Post-war 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 obliterater. Apart from the influence of the contemporary society, two other specific influences on drama, could be noted, that of the off-Broadway theatre of Madison Avenue. Born out of economic as well as artistic necessities, these theatres achieved a high standard of performance in

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{42} Note 27, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., p. 5.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 8.
\end{footnotes}
presenting the classic repertory of Shakespeare, Ibsen, or Chekhov in introducing foreign playwrights such as Beckett, Genet and Brecht and in offering new American dramatists the opportunity to try out before a select audience.

After the establishment of the Circle-in-the Square and the Phoenix Theatre, a large number of theatres began appearing in and around Greenwich village; and though a few tended to be, like little magazines, rather fugitives, others, like the Theatre de Lys, the revived Cherry Lane, and the embattled Living Theatre, contributed greatly to the renascence of drama. That this renascence extended well beyond Broadway was evident in the original work done by regional theatres in Houston, Dallas, Cleveland, Detroit and San Francisco.45

An entirely different incursion on drama was made by the mass media, particularly television. Some dramatic adaptations were made for television plays.

Gerald Weales concludes in American Drama Since World War II (1962):

although television drama is the most realistic of dramatic forms today, its most important effect on the theatre has been its contribution to the spread of nonrealistic staging, and the concomitant shattering of the strict act structure.46

45. Note 14, p. 1436.
46. Ibid.
Between the drama off Broadway and the video culture of Madison Avenue a large and indefinite area of the commercial theatre subsisted. This area was usually dominated by musical comedies and certain type of melodrama.

It was with Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams that the post war drama acquired new dignity and impact. In the same way as the theatre of Eugene O'Neill seemed to emerge out of the heightened national consciousness which marked the close of World War I, the theatre of Tennessee Williams became an expression of a new identity which American Arts and letters reflected at the conclusion of World War II.

Brooks Atkinson observes:

If Mr. Williams and Mr. Miller know how to fill a theatre with beauty, passion and people, it is because they know the elementary facts of human society.

Postwar drama in America was paradoxical in effect. With very few figures of distinction in the field, drama recorded the most challenging experiments in themes and techniques. Ihab Hassan analyses:

Yet drama also showed the will to encompass as much 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 dramas 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. 48

In the method of handling themes projecting "the elusive or illusive part of man", the major playwrights differed from each other. Ihab Hassan explains: 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... As might be expected, from the shattered proscenium of the stage a solitary image of man sought to disengage itself. 49

"The solitary image of man" has been projected in several ways by master figures who probed deep beneath the veneer of one's social self. Twentieth century American dramas with towering figures began reflecting this aspect of life, with variations in emphasis. Eugene O'Neill is the greatest phenomenon among those who introduced the solitary individual.

Tennessee Williams entered the stage which was already enriched by Eugene O'Neill. He struck a path, exclusive to himself and succeeded in projecting a "solitary image of man" from a new perspective. His contribution is not to the literature of the theatre alone, but to the whole area of dramaturgy. A realist in essence, he

48. Note 14, p. 1435.
49. Ibid.
took recourse its techniques which went far beyond realism. Considering him as the first American playwright to earn the descriptive title of "popular dramatist", Esther Jackson comments on his contribution:

to the development of a singular dramaturgy, to the refinement of a distinctively American art of acting, staging, and designing. Of greatest significance, perhaps, has been his contribution to the development of a popular theatrical form.\(^{50}\)

Williams believed in the total commitment to the principle of artistic collaboration between playwright, director, designer, and actor. Elia Kazan had understood the theatrical effectiveness of Williams' plays and devoted himself to the directing them with genuine creative joy. Influenced by the "Kazan magic", Williams understood the significance of "the collaborative aesthetic" and explored the potential to the full, establishing a total theatre - complete in effect. This new theatrical idiom took American dramas beyond the normal concept of playwriting, producing, directing or acting. It was the creation of a totally new world. His stand against theatrical realism which was the dominant mode in American drama before the Second World War was very firm. He believed that unconventional techniques of presentation were imperative to bring drama closer to "truth" - the truth in the deepest recesses of the mind. Williams asserted that "symbols are nothing but the natural speech of drama" in his foreword to *Camino Real* he explained:

We all have in our conscious and unconscious minds a great vocabulary of images, and I think all human communication is based on these images as are our dreams; and a symbol in a play

has one legitimate purpose which is to say a thing more directly and simply and beautifully than it could be said in words.\textsuperscript{51}

The theatre had to be exploited to its maximum potential to introduce symbols to produce the highest effect. In this context, Tennessee Williams propounded the concept of a "plastic theatre". He explains in the preface to \textit{The Glass Menagerie}.

These remarks are not meant as a preface only to this particular play. They have to do with a conception of a new, plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as a part of our culture.\textsuperscript{52}

It is against this background that a careful study of Williams' symbols becomes highly relevant. A clear pattern of evolution emerges when the use of his symbols is analysed keeping with \textit{The Glass Menagerie}. This evolution traces the development of the playwright's subjective attitude to life which becomes universalized when translated into pulsating life in a theatre.
