



Emergence Of Modern American Drama – An Overview

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Abstract:

One of the most significant societal changes that arose was from the burgeoning rise and dynamics of movement in the population. America's population is said to have registered a growth of almost 150 percent in 30 years from 1830 to 1860. The reason for this surge is attributed to the influx of people from Europe, particularly from Germany and Ireland. With these immigrations came some disturbances as the incoming people were bringing their cultures with them. The natives reacted aggressively to the coming of these people as the natives saw this as a threat to their identity. Their social behavior and norms being so different from the native customs, was at once seen as fodder for the plays. The Irish especially with their idiosyncratic mannerisms soon became the stock characters in the plays and drew a hilarious response from the audience. Plays based on the Germans, who were nick-named 'Dutchmen' were not as popular as the ones that had Irish characters, possibly because their social norms were perceived as less eye-catching.

Key words: *Ephemeral, resonance, idiosyncratic, suffrage, temperance*

As a convenient starting point for a brief outline of American drama, the study would like to fix the mid-nineteenth century – a time period that most American literary and drama historians posit as the emergence of modern drama in the United States of America (Spiller et. al 1974:1000). Though the demand for theatrical entertainment is said to have increased in the northern part of America during the time of the Civil War (1861 – 1865), nothing new was produced. What were produced amounted only to mere variations on those that had been already established and existing traditions such as the comedy of eccentric character, domestic melodrama, and the sensational plays. More often than not it was an import from Europe, and even when a largely popular dramatist like H D Howells (1837 -1920) wrote, Cunliffe observes, "he brought no startling novelty to the stage" (1991:435). Great actors like Edwin Forrest, Edwin Booth, Lester Wallack and others continued to hold the audience's attention with their masterful enactments of plays, especially those by Shakespeare. And the new plays that emerged were seen as ephemeral, sensational, or sentimental by an audience that demanded



entertainment or escape.

The rapid changes creeping into the American society was mirrored in the drama that was produced at the time. Several far-reaching changes that were manifesting such as important social movements and problems associated with the society offered the dramatists the requisite raw material for them to forge plays out of. The dramatists and the theatre managers were alert to the potential. These also found a strong resonance with the people. Thus, from about the third decade of the nineteenth century to about the outbreak of the American Civil War in the mid-1860s, America in its search for nationhood responded enthusiastically to these changes.

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The growth of American theatre can directly be related to the prevalence of issues in the society and these were the raw material out of which the plays were forged. In the middle of the nineteenth century women's demands for suffrage grew in intensity. Along with this, grew what has come to be known 'temperance movements' – responses to the habits related to the consumption of alcohol by the immigrants. This led to an increase in the number of plays called 'temperance plays' that were based on the temperance issues. The fact that the Irish were Roman Catholic also heightened the anxiety in the Americans.

It was under these circumstances that dramatists like James A Herne (1839 –1901), Bronson Howard (1842 – 1908), Clyde Fitch (1865 – 1909) and Vaughn Moody (1869 -1910) who are considered as the main progenitors of the modern American drama began surfacing on the theatre scene.

Certain changes that took place between 1860 and 1890 in the 'show business' is said to have had a great impact on drama writing in America. These largely pertained to the laxity in the enforcement of laws of copyright which did not extend protection to the international playwrights. The plays of the foreign writers were constantly pirated. This discouraged the off shore writers evincing any interest in the production of their plays in America. This led to the rise of a new profession of dramatic authorship which was found attractive by the young talented writers such as Bronson Howard who was one of the first. These playwrights began a period of transition that saw a decisive break from commercially oriented formulaic conventions of the American theatre.

Clyde Fitch's growth career as a dramatist in many ways illustrates the nature of the change that came over dramaturgy in America at the beginning of the twentieth century. He was an extremely



successful dramatist in commercial terms. He was held in great admiration by such diverse people as Dean Howells, Syndicate's Frohman as well as anti-syndicatists like the dramatist and producer David Belasco. Fitch's play *The Truth* (1907) described as a kind of comedy of manners that dealt with the lives of a well-to-do married couple that set up a clash between a scrupulously honest one with the unscrupulously dishonest other. This marks one of the earliest attempts at infusing modernity into American theatre as Fitch attempted to fuse the literary and the commercial in his plays.

Some of his extremely successful plays that tended towards the melodramatic were *The Girl with the Green Eyes* performed in 1902 and *The Woman in Case* that saw the light of the day three years later in 1905. These were incident-based plays that centered on vice, blackmail and murder but ending on a happy note which was demanded by the companies (Meserve 1994:164). Apart from these, he also penned in the realist mode comedies such as *The Truth* and *Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines* (1901). The play revolved around a comical, failed military protagonist who lays a bet that he will win over the much sought after singer. Ironically, he falls head over heels for her and consequently loses the wager almost losing the lady and becoming a laughing stock in the process. However, the play concludes on a happy note with the two coming together, singing. What is remarkable about the play is the blending of a romantic tale with distinct political innuendoes. The play was appropriated by the anti-imperialist faction that opposed the Spanish –American War. The play also was used by the satirist Ernest Crosby for his novel that was written in protest of the War.

Several plays written during Fitch's time were overtly melodramatic and explored the rising city culture. The themes were predictably woven around the enticements, allures and perils that surrounded the urban anxieties. These plays portrayed the changing value systems that the city culture was associated with in America at the turn of century.

Some of the most famous plays that sarcastically articulated this concern was Langdon Mitchell's *The New York Idea*, William Vaughan Moody's *The Great Divide* and Percy Mackaye's *Jeanne d'Arc* which were all first performed in 1906. These marked the onset of the proper modern American dramatic tradition. Wharton remarks are very useful in underlining the importance of such plays in the forging of a new dramatic practice that was emerging on the horizon of the American theatre scene:

Engaging with issues that dogged the rise of the great American cities, plays by Langdon, Moody and Mackaye sarcastically, albeit realistically, document the realigned societal geography and spatiality that the United States witnessed as rigid boundary lines were beginning to be drawn between not only the haves and have-nots, between the industrial and the labour classes but also the city and the country dwellers. (1984: 224)

In this context, it must be mentioned that it was only the contributions of the playwrights that brought about a revolution of sorts in the tenor of American drama. As important as the dramatists were to effect the break was the emergence of several amateur theatre groups that initiated what has come to be known as the Little Theatre movement. One of the significant groups was the Provincetown Players. For it was not until the performance in Provincetown of a one-act play titled *Bound East for Cardiff* by Eugene O'Neill's (1888-1953) in 1916 that marked the onset of a remarkable era in American theatre history. The short play was performed by small group that called itself "Provincetown Players".



The group basically consisted of a small band of artists and writers who in 1915 had come together with the sole objective of “amusing themselves” (Cunliffe 1991: 436).

O’Neill’s penchant for introducing a new mode of expression in American dramatic practices in the first decade of the twentieth century did not concern either surrealistic world of dreams or the world beyond the ‘natural’. He, in line with the dramatists of the time, skillfully attempted to side step what had by then become an abiding favorite of most of the playwrights then. He tried to steer clear of the realistic and pseudo-realistic trends that the dramatists were besotted with.

A brief examination of the one-act play – *Bound East for Cardiff* by Eugene O’Neill will substantiate the above observation. The setting of the play on the sea has lead to the play being classified under ‘sea play’ (Beard 2004:45). Though written in the year that the First World War broke out, *Bound East for Cardiff*, it was not staged till 1916 by the Provincetown Players in Cape Cod. The critical attention that this short play received established O’Neill’s career as a dramatist which till then had been largely uncertain. Much of play is set on the ship *Glencairn* and opens on a night that is rendered visibility-challenging on account of the thick fog. The sailors are seen involved with the normal off-duty activities such as sleeping or chatting or listening to music or quibbling with each other. However, this night is different because there is a man lying on his bed who is on the verge of death. The man’s name is Yank and it is revealed that he is ill following a fatal fall from the ship’s deck. The men on board get their first experience of being so close to death and are understandably panic-stricken. Driscoll, Yank’s best friend is visibly more shaken than the others. Yank’s greatest fear is not being dead but being dead when his friend Driscoll is not around and on duty. The very thought of dying alone when his friend is not nearby, listening to the snoring of the sleeping men is torturous to him. Driscoll, on his part, attempts to calm Yank down and keep his spirits high by reminding him of an earlier incident when the two of them survived after being adrift on a lifeboat for several days. All of a sudden, Yank starts complaining about the low visibility in the cabin and attributes it to the deficiency in his eyes (O’Neill 2001:29). With these words, Yank starts gasping for his breath and conveys to his friend Driscoll his vision of a comely young woman in dark attire. Yank breathes his last soon after and his moment of death coincides with a sailor conveying the news that the fog had cleared. The last scene shows Driscoll with bent knees praying near Yank’s bunker.

O’Neill carried on with his innovative approach to dramaturgy largely in terms of technique and structure. His main interest lay in exploring the interconnections of various dramatic elements such as character –relationship dynamics, their notions of identity and formation. To a great extent, O’Neill was deeply impacted by Strindberg, notably his *The Father*, *Welded* which appeared in the early 1920s. The play by Strindberg investigated the romantic relationship between a writer and a screen artiste. The complexity of their relationship that was marked by contradictory emotions such as a deep and intense affection and attraction for each other that is accompanied by mutual envy. O’Neill’s one of the most successful play, *Desire Under the Elms* written a year later in 1924 shows the extent of influence that Strindberg’s play has on him. Most critics opine that O’Neill was instrumental in effecting a lasting transformation in the American theatre scene that breathed modernism in American drama.



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