

History of Modern American Drama

American theater grew out of the milieu of sweeping economic, political, social, and cultural changes that occurred in the last half of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth. The fallout of the Industrial Revolution and the shock wave of new psychological theories would resonate throughout American culture, making strong impact on a burgeoning American population realigned by surges of immigrants, traumatized by war, and increasingly uprooted in the shift from a primarily agrarian to an urban/suburban society. Ironically, American playwrights in their reach to clarify and give meaning to the turbulent changes of this "modern" world would draw heavily from the sources that had helped effect change. Experimenting in symbiotic relationship with European writers and artists of other genres, American dramatists found inspiration in the intellectual "arguments" of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and Herbert Spencer and especially the psychoanalytical concepts of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. The vibrancy of the themes and forms of modern American drama resound with these influences.

To speak to a world in which the individual had been increasingly cut loose from the traditional "anchors" of religion, socio/political alignments, family relationships, and a defined self-image, American dramatists such as Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams crafted forceful statements of psychological and spiritual displacement, loss of connections, loneliness, self deception, and retrogression into sexual hedonism. In confronting problems of the "lost" individual in an industrial, "mechanized" society, they lay bare human passions, exposed the raw tensions of the American family, and challenged Victorian/Puritan "morality." Whether delivered in the shocking hyperbole of overstatement, the ambiguity of images and symbols, or the heartbreak tone of understatement, the "messages" wrought indictments of a "wasteland" in which the term "heroic" was redefined. The protagonist was no longer an idealistic "doer" who ventured out to "save the day." He was an alienated tragic hero seeking to "belong" in an eroded "jungle" society, or an "everyman" trying to "cope" through false compensations of "pipe dreams," or a muted survivor living a life of "quiet desperation," a victim of societal pressure, animal desires, and loss of integrity.

Such themes cried out for fresh designs in form. Freudian and Jungian theories and the innovative patterns of visual art helped point the way. Such psychological delineation as layers of the inner self, the duality of "anima" and "persona," the delusions of neuroses, the power of association and simultaneous experience in stream of consciousness provided ideas for provocative structural patterns. The presuppositions and canvases of Impressionism, Expressionism, and Surrealism served as inspirations for the effusion of evocative imagery and symbolism into both diction and technical directions. Lighting, music, visual props, and set design became an integral part of dramatic scripts, deepening characterization, punctuating dramatic tensions, reinforcing theme, and achieving heightened intensity in presentation.

From different perspectives and with varying degrees of emphasis on social themes, America's great dramatists become both the "consciousness" and "conscience" of America, digging deeply into the American psyche, probing the implications of the Freudian "Id," pulling back layer after layer of the social "ego," scrutinizing the probity of the American Dream. But in these processes of thrusting, peeling, and poking, they reveal, in stunning ways, that the American heart is a universal heart.

The themes and forms of the work of one of America's most gifted and innovative playwrights, Tennessee Williams, showcase many of the influences and trends that characterize modern American drama. Williams, on the periphery of the Southern Renaissance group of writers that include such names as William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Robert Penn Warren, would build many of his themes around the old South's lost aristocracy in tension with the invading materialism of the reconstructed South.