



American drama: A brief history and its significance

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Abstract

American drama marks an interesting link between the literature of the war decade and that of the twenties. The renewed vitality in the theater came a few years later than that in poetry, but when it did come it came with decided vigor. (Egbert S. Oliver)

This article attempts to trace the origin and the development of American drama with reference to its history and its significance in the American literary tradition. It makes a comprehensive study of the acclaimed predecessors of America, who contributed immensely to the growth of the dramatic genre, and the formidable contemporaries who explore the territories of the human mind in an unimaginable way. In a country that signed its emancipation proclamation as late as July 4, 1774, the root of American drama seems very young and fresh. There are many factors that contributed to the development of drama, both, as a theatrical art form and as a literary genre and the tradition continues till date. To understand the historicity of drama in America, it is essential to understand the constantly changing trends of the American life style over the periods and this article takes a short journey into that time.

Keywords: American literature, dramatic genre, dramatic history, theatrical art forms, acclaimed dramatists

Introduction

Literature is a representation of life, and is an expression of human experiences. It provides a better understanding of countries, their institutions, ways of life, and it helps develop an interest in the appreciation of life. Its function is to 'humanise' life and to 'harmonise' the different interest of the humans. Literary forms give glimpses of the realities, the complexities and the truth of life. Drama is one such form of literature. It originated from Greek which means "action". It tells a story, and it makes imaginative use of language. It is a narrative art which is composed for play readers and spectators ^[1]. It also means a mode of fiction represented in performance in theatre, on a radio, or television. It is a distinctive genre which is the most peculiar, the most interesting, the most elusive and the most enthralling of all types of literature. It takes its very life from the actions, and the thoughts of men and women. It is based on life, and it presents the internal and the external states of mind. This literary product has charmed millions, for it gifted to the world such prolific dramatists as Eschylus, Sophocles, Seneca, Euripides, Plautus, Terence, Moliere, Shakespeare, Congreve, and a host of elegant playwrights today.

Methodology

William Dunlap, the father of American drama, defined the theater in 1832, as a powerful engine that should be put into the hands of people to transform the American nation ^[2]. In order to understand the characteristics of the drama engine, it is necessary to analyze the forces that created it. As a result, the role of the theater and the dramatic activity in America during the Revolution, this, in the opinion of many researchers, established America's cultural identity. Livius Andronicus, Plautus, Terence, Gains Maecenas Melissus, Seneca, Enrius, Lucius Accius and Pacuvius are the notable Roman playwrights. Drama had a beginning in England with the enactment of Mystery plays and Miracle plays which dealt with stories of the Holy Bible. The Elizabethan

Age gave the legendary playwrights Shakespeare, Christopher Marlow, Thomas Dekker, John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont. Henrik Johan Ibsen was one of the most distinguished playwrights in the European tradition. Bernard Shaw, the Irish legend, wrote more than sixty plays. He was the leading dramatist of his generation.

European dramatists influenced the American playwrights with their literary ideas. They imitated the style and the subject matter of the European playwrights. In drama America had been poor until about 1900. The early American theatre was slow in developing. The early playhouse was a poor structure. *The Price of Parthia*, presented in Philadelphia in 1767, was the first play written by Thomas Godfrey. During the Revolutionary Period (1775 - 1783) numerous satires and farces appeared to support the struggle ^[3]. Royall Tyler's comedy, *The Contrast*, produced in New York in 1787 was the second important American play ^[4]. It was about contemporary America. It introduced a character called the Yankee. At the end of the eighteenth-century William Dunlap's *Andre* (1798) appeared. Though the play has many faults, his honest attempt deserves recognition.

Result and Discussion

American Drama from 1800 to 1860

No great drama was produced in America during the first half of the nineteenth century. Sentimental and melodramatic comedies were presented ^[5]. One remarkable feature of this period was the companies that lived and performed on the Mississippi River Boats. Reflection of foreign influence was felt during the time. William Dunlap made many adaptations from the France and German plays. John Howard Payne translated several plays of Europe. Men like Edwin Forest ruled over the stage to showcase their acting power. Robert Montgomery Bird's *The Gladiator* (1831) and George Henry Boker's *Francesca da Rimini* (1855) were the two significant plays. These plays did not present, American thought and life. In Mowatt's *Fashion*

(1845), the best social comedy of the period, and in James Nelson Barker's *Tears and Smiles* (1807) there were incidental reflections of American life. *Rip Van Winkle* played by Joseph Jefferson and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were the two lasting favourites during the early period.

Advanced American Drama from 1860 to 1900

Augustin Daly (1839 - 1899), Bronson Howard (1842 - 1900), Steel Mackaye (1842-1901), and James A. Herne were the four men who advanced the American drama between 1860 and 1900. Augustin Daly built up travelling stock companies, and encouraged native talents and subjects. Bronson Howard was the first important realist in American drama. In the *Banker's Daughter* (1878), *Young Mrs. Winthrop* (1882), and *The Henrietta* (1887) he studied two areas of American society like business and marriage [6]. Steele MacKaye introduced and taught a new realistic type of acting with a more natural and more impressive manner. He was for more realistic stage settings. The playhouse improved in his hands with the introduction of the comforts such as hinged cushioned seats and the first ventilating system. James A. Herne produced two realistic plays which were not successful.

Modernizing the American theatre

William Dean Howells, the realist novelist tried to modernize the American theatre. He produced at least thirty - Six plays of which only one play, *A Counterfeit Presentment* (1887), was really successful. He founded the first Independent Theatre in Boston along with Hamlin Garland, another important realist novelist. Its objective was "to encourage truth and progress in American Dramatic Art". It served as a model for the "Little Theatre" Movement which started around 1912. It opposed the big theatres whose main interest was in earning a lot of money quickly. "The Little Theatres" flourished between 1912 and 1929 [7]. There were over a thousand Little Theatres in America. The Washington Square Players and the Provincetown Players were the two most famous theatres of the time. The Provincetown Players introduced the seasoned dramatist Eugene O' Neill (1888-1953). His plays were performed by the Provincetown Players.

New Developments in American Drama

Around 1890 the local-color movement reached the American theatre. David Belasco (1853-1931) and Augustine Thomas (1859-1934) were the pioneers. David Belasco projected the romantic west on the stage in the plays like *The Girl of the Golden West* and *The Girl I Left Behind Me*. Augustus Thomas wrote *Alabama*, *Arizona*, *Colorado*, and *In Missouri*. All the plays were about the four states in America. The social comedies of the nineties gained popularity than the local-color plays. They were more lasting and more interesting. Clyde Fitch (1865-1909) wrote some "period plays" such as *Beau Brummel* and *Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines*; some historical plays such as *Nathan Hale*, and some pure melodrama such as *The Cowboy and the Lady*. He deserved recognition as one of America's greatest playwrights [8].

Domination of American Drama after 1900

Realism dominated the theatre after 1900 [9]. Numerous "Problem Plays" were produced. David Belasco wrote *The Return of Peter Grimm* which deals with spiritualism.

Augustus Thomas produced *As a Man Thinks* with race prejudice and the double standard of morality for its themes. His play, *The Witching Hour* is on mental telepathy and responsibility for crime. William Vaughn Moody won wide popularity through his drama, *The Great Divide* (1906). *The Boss of Edward Sheldon* studied the relations between politics and crooked business. The Theatre Guild of New York was the leading drama company during the 1920s. It was able to produce twenty - two new plays between 1931 and 1941. The most notable realist dramas of Clifford Odets (1906-1963) include *Golden Boy* (1937), and *Waiting for Lefty* (1935). He staged seven other plays such as *Awake and Sing!* (1935), *Till the Day I die* (1935), *Paradise Lost* (1935) *Night Music* (1940), *The Big Knife* (1948), *The Country Girl* (1950), and *The Flowering Peach* (1954). The Urban lower - middle class people are the protagonists in Odets' plays. During the last years of the nineteenth century, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates set up the Hull - House Players (1897-1941), and the Chicago Hull-House Theatre was started in 1901. Provincetown Players and the Group Theatre were the Theatre companies which made a significant contribution to the revival of modernist dramas in America.

Conclusion

American drama is a literary field that may have been mostly inspired by republican spirit. The drama of the early republic was firmly tied to the sphere of citizenship of America. It retained its commitment to the common good, long after poetry and prose replaced the general good with some more personal goals. In this way, drama and theater remained closest to the American people not only as a form of entertainment but also as a form of awareness. American dramas represent the social, cultural, and political world simplified by the aesthetics of the revolution, and this inextricable connection between them requires good knowledge and understanding of each one individually, when interpreting these literary works. If these works were exclusively appreciated as dramatic achievements and evaluated by dramatic norms, this would then signify a sure disappointment concerning the dramatic legacy. However, these dramas are of great historical significance, as they transmit and revive the passions, motives, and vogue of that period, using a realistic approach with the creative pass time that endow increasing awareness.

Abbreviation

This manuscript deliberately avoids abbreviations, preferring to present all terms and phrases in their full form for consistent clarity.

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