
UNIT 1 AMERICAN DRAMA : AN INTRODUCTION

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit proposes to examine the growth of the American drama from its beginnings in the 17th century to the emergence of modern American drama in the 1920's. Every struggle, national, cultural and artistic, in this long process of growth has finally shaped the powerful medium of 20th century American drama. This unit is designed to equip the student to approach the 20th century American drama with perspectives of dramatic history, art and ideas.

1.1 BEGINNINGS OF AMERICAN DRAMA

A serious discussion of American drama usually begins with Eugene O' Neill and the 1920's in America. Eugene O' Neill made the world of letters reckon with American drama as a literary genre. But the genre had been struggling to exist for more than two hundred years by then. Even before the birth of America as an independent nation in 1776, theatrical activity bore witness to European immigration and the British colonial rule of the immigrant settlers. With the predominance of the English settlers, theatrical activity in America was a clear manifestation of the English love of theatre, especially after the great Elizabethan period in drama that easily resisted the opposition of the puritans to theatrical activity in England.

1.2 PURITAN HOSTILITY TO THEATRICAL ACTIVITY

The English loved entertainment and pageantry but the early settlers in America, preoccupied with physical and spiritual survival in an alien land cherished the puritan belief in hard work, frugality and piety. For them, theatrical activity was anathema.

So much so, the production of a play called *Ye Bare and Ye Cubb* in 1665, possibly the first theatrical performance in America, resulted in the trial of the actors. In fact, many colonies in America enacted laws prohibiting theatrical activity.

1.3 THEATRE IN THE 17TH CENTURY COLLEGES

The puritan opposition to theatre could not sustain itself for long. Aware of the new cultural beginnings, the colonies sought intellectual and oratorical exercises theatrical activity afforded. After a good deal of hesitation, the early colleges in several colonies permitted theatrical activity. For the students, theatrical activity was an immense relief from the rigors of classical education. Further, several oratorical skills necessary for a career in business or Law could be acquired through theatrical activity.

1.4 COLONIAL DRAMA

It did not take long for theatrical activity to grapple with the overall colonial cultural experience. The first play written by an English Governor, Robert Hunter *Androboros* (1714) dramatises the growing sense of independence felt by the Americans. More satirical than dramatic, *Androboros* charts out the course American drama was to follow for the next two centuries - Drama as a political tool. The issues for the early settlers were numerous - the arbitrariness and irrationality of British colonial rule and its systems of law and government. The focus could not be lost on the sectarian antagonism of the settlers themselves. Several popular plays of the period like *The Paxton Boys* (1732), *The Trial of Atticus* (1771), whose authorship was unknown, Robert Munford's *The Candidates of The Humours of a Virginia Election* (1770), Thomas Godfrey's *The Prince of Parthia* (1759) were primarily historical, chronicling America as an emerging nation getting ready to shed the colonial yoke.

1.5 DRAMA OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Though the early settlers regarded themselves as Englishmen living in North America, the British tendency to treat them as the colonial subjects lit the fires of rebellion and freedom. Patriotism for the cause of the American nation exploded as a political force, however, to be countered by the loyalists to the British crown. Drama became an instrument of pamphleteering for either the cause of nationalism or loyalty to the crown. Instead of being conflictual and dialogic in itself, drama became a faithful and monologic servant of a political cause. Mercy Otis Warren's plays, *The Adulateur* (1772), *The Defeat* (1773), *The Group* (1776), *The Blackheads* (1776) and Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *The Battle of the Bunkers Hill* (1776) presented revolutionary rhetoric than drama. An anonymous play, *The Battle of Brooklyn* (1776) took up the loyalists' cause and satirized leaders like George Washington.

Drama failed its own cause as well as that of the nation as a land of freedom. It promoted political conformity in the place of freedom. However, a truly American voice that carried certain dramatic strength was that of Robert Munford whose play *The Patriots* (1779) critically examines the simplistic arguments of the divergent political forces. Munford sets future intellectual tasks for the American nation.

1.6 NATIONALISTIC DRAMA

The nation of America was born in 1783 with the decisive victory of the nationalist forces against the British colonial power. In fact, the birth of the nation was the beginning of a long struggle for cultural independence from the British. To be different from the British and to display a vibrant Americanness was the riding passion of the new republic. Robert Taylor, the first playwright of the nation, grapples with dramatic tasks of the new nation. Falling inescapably in the format of British Comedy, particularly that of Sheridan's *The School of Scandal*, Taylor's *The Contrast* (1787) takes upon the burden of drawing a contrast between the Americans who are themselves, as one character puts it "the true born Yankee son of liberty" and those Americans who continue to be victims of servility to the British. Taylor was keen on asserting nationalist sentiments than any sense of drama. The credit for rooting drama in America goes to William Dunlop. He introduced Melodrama in his plays which flourished in the 19th century America but, more importantly, he gave drama its most important characteristic, dramatic conflict. Resisting early nationalist sentiments, Dunlop creates a very admirable British character, Major John Andre in his famous play *Andre* (1798). The point of the play was a critical examination of the unqualified antagonism towards the British on the part of George Washington who refused to pardon John Andre who conspired to destroy an American Garrison but displayed exemplary humanness in saving a young American captain.

The point of attack shifts from the British to the decadent British aristocratic values in James Nelson Baker. Baker who foresees the continued hold of British aristocratic values in the guise of chivalry. Set in England, his plays, *Marmion* (1812) and *Superstition* (1824) forewarn America how the 16th century Scotland lost its freedom to the British in its adherence to British values of aristocracy.

1.7 ROMANTIC AND POPULAR DRAMA

The surge of literary romanticism across the national and continental barriers in the early 19th century blurs the focus of the nationalist cause in America and the nation joins the continent in responding to the aesthetic values of romanticism. The American playwrights seek transamerican plots as well as the audiences for these plays. *Brutus : The Fall of Tarquin* (1819) by John Howard Payne, *The Gladiator* (1831) by Robert Montgomery Bird, *Francesca da Rimini* (1853) by George Henry Baker fashion out American romantic tragedy with its focus on the sheer romantic impulses of the dramatic character than any other cause. The American romantic tragedy did not further the cause of the American drama but promoted the literary and aesthetic credentials of the American playwright on the continent and, concomitantly, at home.

The romantic drama, however, could not grapple with the concerns and aspirations of the growing nation. The nineteenth century witnessed the growth of the nation in a continued expansion of the national boundaries on the west. The myth of the frontier seiged national imagination and held sway for a century on the American minds and the Indian play and the Stage Yankee explained American drama until the nation came to be gripped with the civil war. John Augustus Stone's *Metamora* (1828), James Kirke Poudling's *The Lion of the West* (1830), Samuel Woodworth's *The Forest Rose* (1825) and Anna Cora Mowatt's *Fashion* (1845) present a paradigm - shift from both the romantic and nationalist drama. First, there is the domestication of the romantic impulse in the westward struggles of the nation. Secondly, the urban based and tragically inclined American protagonist gets ruralized and emerges

comically, both in his person and temperament as Yankee. The Indian plays and the Yankee contribute to the proliferation of dramatic efforts in America, thereby creating a popular medium of national history in the making, though the medium has to wait for decades to be truly dramatic.



John Augustus Stone

Along side the Indian play and the Yankee, popular drama grappled with the institution of slavery, that divided the nation, brought about a civil war and forced a redefinition of the nation. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) sets the task of national redefinition. George. H. Aiken's adaptation of the novel for the stage, was a tremendous success in pressing the dramatic medium in the service of a national cause.

1.8 THE AMERICAN MELODRAMA

Popular causes dominated American drama right from its inception. However, as a genre, American drama, in the course of the 19th century, lent itself to one dramatic premise – melodrama. In fact, until the beginning of modern drama, based on the rational and scientific principles of realism and naturalism, melodrama could claim a history of two centuries on the English and the American stage. As commonly understood, melodrama meant a departure from credibility and working out of a fantasy. As Gary A. Richardson puts it,

.... A moustache – twirling villain attempts through dastardly means to compromise the personal or financial integrity of the golden haired heroine until prevented by a white-clad hero who arrives in the nick of time to preserve chastity and rightful titles, and oversee a denouement replete with poetic justice....images of heroes pushed from cliffs and heroines about to be sawed in two do suggest some of the appeals of Melodrama... ⁽¹⁾

The description particularly fits popular Indian cinema. What sustains Indian cinema explains the durability of the melodramatic form during the 18th and 19th centuries on the English and the American stage. Disagreeing with the 20th century critics of Melodrama such as Bernard Shaw and William Archer, Gary Richardson writes

They do not acknowledge its durability, its cross – cultural popularity, its service as an agent of socialisation, as its later function as a forum in which conflicting ideologies could confront each other and, to a certain extent resolve the social and political tensions of the emerging western industrial capitalist states of the 19th century ... Melodrama became the projected fantasy life of an America caught up in a period of unprecedented flux ²



Dion Boucicault

It is through this genre that Augustan Daly, Dion Boucicault, Bartley Campbell, Bronson Howard and David Belasco presented America on the stage during the most formative period in its history. Melodrama had a two fold task: make the stage action appetising and thrilling to the audience even if it were to be undramatic. Secondly, address, not so much the problems of the nation but the individual's preoccupation with the issues of family, social position, wealth and class. The high ideals of American individualism and democratic equality get discounted in the immediate pressures of the individual ego, though their ultimate success is always guaranteed in the facile resolution of the issue, on hand in the plays. As could be seen in popular plays like Boucicault's *The poor of the New York* (1857), Daly's *Under the Gaslight* (1867), Howard's *Shenandoah* (1888) and Belasco's *The Girl of the Golden West* and *The Heart of Maryland* (1895), melodrama posits a nation of two societies, one of aristocratic rich and the other of the poor or of the north and the south in America, or a world of aristocratically conceived individualism and the bourgeois individualism. In the evaluation of the American nation during the 19th century, melodrama looks at the intersecting and conflicting societies of the nation and works for their reconciliation. melodrama progresses through a carefully planned world of misunderstanding, intrigue, sudden danger, loss of position and prestige - all these to be pleasantly retrieved at the end of the play. The dramatic action is rather romantic

rather than credibly realistic and the task of the playwright is one of gentle correction of the societal conflicts.

As Melodrama chooses to reckon with gentle tasks in a rather romantic way, a female character, quite often, emerges as the protagonist of the play. Laura Courtland in Daly's play, *Under the Gaslight* is the most enthralling character of the 19th century American drama.

Though dramatically facile, Melodrama, nonetheless, achieves a quiet redefinition of America in the post-civil war period, its growth from a liberated colony, through a process of ethnic integration, expanding frontiers and growing industrialization and urbanization of an essentially agrarian economy. The plays of Daly and Boucicault have gained enthusiastic audiences not only in America but on the European stage as well. Melodrama elevated American drama to the international stage partly reversing the trend of only importing plays from Europe into America, thereby allaying fears of cultural colonization of America by Europe inspite of gaining national independence.

1.9 THE AMERICAN DRAMA : THE ACTORLY TRADITION

Right from its inception in colleges as an exercise in oratorical skills, to its emergence as a popular medium in the 19th century, both at home and abroad, American drama displayed an actorly tradition. It could never evolve itself as a discipline in dramatic art. Shakespeare's plays were a great attraction to the American audiences in the 18th and 19th centuries. Quite often, his plays outnumbered the native ones on the stage in different parts of the country. Nonetheless, the native dramatic art remained largely uninfluenced either by the Shakespeare's or the Elizabethan dramatic imagination and art. The actor in the place of the playwright acquired pre-eminence on the American stage. In fact, it was the actors from England, like Anthony Aston, Adam Hallam and his sons, David Douglass who braved the hostile puritan environment in the 18th century to make theatre possible in the first instance, in America. The great Shakespearean actors from England like Edmund Kean, Junius Brutus Booth and Charles Mcready established theatre as a popular medium of entertainment in America.

The native American actors, beginning with the earliest of them, Edwin Forrest, further strengthened the pre-eminence of the actor in the American dramatic tradition. It was Forrest, more than the playwright or the play, who evolved the myth of the frontier hero and his rugged American individualism in the 19th century through his acting in plays like *Metamora*. With his flamboyant acting, Forrest was a cult figure in the middle of the 19th century America. He evoked such patriotic fervour among the audiences that when the British actor Mcready was to perform in New York in 1840, Forrest's ardent followers created a serious disturbance resulting in the death of 22 people when the National Guard fired on the violent mob of Forrest's followers.

Edwin Booth, son of Junius Brutus Booth and Charlotte Cushman, the greatest female actress on the American stage in the 19th century, strengthened the actorly pre-eminence in the dramatic medium. Though both were primarily Shakespearean actors, they equally excelled in American Melodrama. They brought great maturity to American acting, a maturity the American dramatic art could not gain. Richard Moody sums up the nature of dramatic art in America.

Players and plays enriched American life since the mid-eighteenth century. And players more than plays have drawn audiences to the playhouse. Not until late in the 19th century some would say not until the advent of Eugene O' Neill in the 1920's had the play

exerted any compelling magnetic power. It was the actor, supported by his managers, producers and directors who had given the American theatre its remarkable vigor and incredible variety³

1.10 THE BEGINNINGS OF THEATRICAL REALISM

The pre-eminence of the actor in American drama and theatre suffered a great deal in the later decades of the century, first, on account of the rise of the stage manager, or what is called Regisseur in the production of a play, subordinating the actor to his discipline and authority and, secondly, to the rise of theatrical and dramatic realism. The first phenomenon became all the more forceful when playwrights, like Augustin Daly, David Belasco and Steele Mockage assumed the role of producer-director for their plays. However, the actorly tradition did not die down as such, for the actor, though exceptionally in a few cases, rather than the playwright, continued to define the play for the audience.

Realism in theatre began earlier than in drama. The old actor based theatre presupposed a need to be unreal on the stage in order to reach out to the audience. Bernard Hewitt points out the unreality even in the best of American acting.

Miss Cushman is the best magic actress in English drama whom we have had on the American stage. Dignity, feeling, sound sense and the most deliberate and studious care are marked characteristics of her acting. Viewing her as she was before the incessant repetition of one abnormal delineation had exaggerated her force and impressiveness to the borders of the grotesque or the ghastly...⁴

The alternative to stage histrionics came in the form of a shift of focus from the actor to the scene. Steele Mackage creates a portable stage for his play *Hazel Kirke* (1880). It was the first significant move towards stage realism. Bernard Hewitt writes:

In the Madison Square theatre an entire Box setting with heavy three-dimensional pieces and the actors too, if need be, could be removed and replaced by another in forty seconds. It had no apron or procenium doors.. All these characteristics were part of the trend towards realism in production. The machinery was needed to shift the realistic scenery. The production must be flamed by the procenium arch to create the realistic illusion⁵

Hazel Kirke is a significant departure from Melodrama in that it is no world of heroes and villains but a domestic arena of familial misunderstanding played out on shifting stages within Box – like house setting. Both the stage or stages and the drama there on begin a process of interiorization totally foreign to the ethos of melodrama, and its predecessors, romantic and national drama as well.

A further advance in stage tradition was carried out by David Belasco who still persisted with sensational melodramas. To Belasco goes the credit for the finest triumph in realistic stage management. In Belasco's production of a French play, *Gaza* in 1895, realistic effects such as the making of thunder, lighting, wind and galloping horses behind the scenes are achieved with "the dexterity of a master mechanic".

The stage realism of the sort championed by Mackage and Belasco, is not a matter of individual inclination and effort but a distinct theatrical ideology taking shape on the Continent in the latter part of the 19th century. The earliest theoretician of the

realistic stagecraft was Duke of Saxe Meiningen who popularized realism through the concepts of ensemble acting and ruthless realism on the stage. What the Duke attempted was evolved ideologically by Andre Antoine in France through his *Theatre Libre* in Paris, Otto Brahm in Berlin through his *Frie Buhne*. Stage environment or realism, ensemble acting, directional supremacy and the elimination of unrealistic stage effects were the passionate causes championed by these theatrical movements. The thoughtful American producers and directors like Belasco and others responded enthusiastically to the new European tidings. For them, it was a two-fold task: First, they had to realize the new theatrical art on the American stage which never allowed itself any notions of art. Secondly, these playwrights had to contend with the increasing hold of the business interests, which developed into theatrical syndicates controlling the American stage. The realistic experimentation had to succeed on its own to force the established theatre or theatre interests to follow the new realistic formulations. Success could not be delayed for long for the idea of verifiable realism in all fields of knowledge is the motto and value championed by modern science taking roots in 19th century Europe and America. Further, the industrial revolution facilitated by modern science started creating conditions of scientific culture, and the 19th century American or European society had no choice but to base itself on them.

1.11 THE RISE OF REALISTIC DRAMA IN AMERICA

The rise of theatrical realism in the late 19th century did not *ipso facto* bring about realistic drama. Belasco's Melodramas staged in realistic style illustrate that realistic drama is not a matter of theatrical formulations. Drama was never a privileged element in American theatre since its inception in the 18th century. Drama flourishes in periods of great cultural reflection as it did in ancient Greece, Rome and the 16th century Elizabethan England. The playwrights in these periods were the foremost thinkers of society. The rise of modern science and the consequent industrial revolution in Europe and America in the latter part of 19th century brought about a paradigm shift in the socio-economic situation necessitating a deep cultural reflection.

William Dean Howells regarded as the father of literary realism in America, is a theoretician of realist drama as well. In several of his writings, including his reviews of plays for the periodicals, like *Harpers*, *Atlantic Monthly*, Howells traces the growth of realistic drama in America. For him, the rise of realist drama, like the rest of literature, is an evolutionary progress from romanticism. Romanticism included Melodrama, both European and American as well. The next stage of development from romanticism was that of the French Well-Made Play and the English Problem Play. The French Well-Made Play in the hands of playwrights like Eugene Scribe, Victorien Sardou, Alexander Dumas and Emile Augier, is a dramatic structure of "a complex plot with a maximum of theatrical ingenuity and an absolute minimum of thought". It is realistic in the choice of its subject matter and linear in the progress of the plot and enacts an archetypal action with a preordained conclusion and moral. The English problem play, though it borrows certain elements of the French Well-Made Play, is structured both in form and content to deal with an important socio-economic problem of contemporary relevance. The playwrights like Bernard Shaw, Henry Arthur Jones, Arthur Wing Pinero and Oscar Wilde made literature, through the problem play, an effective instrument of intellectual reflection on the contemporary socio-economic issues. There was a proliferation of problem plays in America during the 1890's but they lacked the intellectual vigor of the British problem play. They often displayed an enthusiasm to dramatize an issue and, in the process, tended to contrive the plot to force a particular conclusion and a moral.

Realistic drama, through an evolutionary growth from romanticism, made very humble beginnings in America during the last decade of the 19th century. The

American playwrights, as Howells sees, were obsessed with plot, a burden of Melodrama, to be able to give a realistic drama "*fresh in motive, pure in tone, high in purpose and very simple and honest in method*". Howells found his ideal realistic drama in the plays of the Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen, who ushers in a new epoch in the history of drama. In fact, in his thoughtful perception of the greatness of Ibsen's drama, Howells was able to foresee the direction American drama has to take, as it did in the 20th century, in order to emerge as an effective medium of cultural reflection. Howells, writes

The problem which a play of Ibsen hinges upon is as wide as the whole of life, and it seeks a solution in the conscience of the spectator for the future rather than the present: it is not an isolated case; it does not demand what he would do, or would have done in a given event. ⁶

Ibsen's play *Ghosts* charts out the course of 20th century European and American drama. It de-emphasizes the preeminence of man and makes him a mere human person predestined to toil against the forces of nature, and in the specific context of the play, the force of biology that appears in the form of the dreaded disease, syphilis. Howells not only defends Ibsen against the charge of degeneration in making human predicament so loathsome, but asserts Ibsen's role as a moralist in exploring the ailments of society.

A great many good, elderly minded people think it dreadful Ibsen should show us that the house we have lived in so long is full of vermin, that its drainage is bad, that the roof leaks and the chimney smokes abominably ; but if it is true, it is not well for us to know it is dreadful because it is so, not because, he shows it so, .. It is not by the solution of the problems that the moralist teaches, but by the questions that his handling of them suggests to us expecting ourselves....what he can and must do ethically, is to make us think of ourselves, and look to it whether we have in us the making of this or that wrong, whether we are hypocrites, tyrants, pretenders, shams, conscious or unconscious; whether our most unselfish motives are secret shapes of egoism; ... this is what Ibsen does; he gives a pause; and in that bitter muse he leaves of us thinking not of his plays, but of our lives; not of his fictitious people, but of ourselves. ⁷

Howells had no illusion about the fact that Ibsen would readily catch the imagination of the American theatre – goes but he was sure that "*for Ibsenism there is already great acceptance and there will be greater and greater for he is the master who has more to say to our generation in the theatre than any other*".

Nonetheless, American theatre haltingly moved towards realism in the last decades of the 19th century and the first of 20th century in its concern for the topical social issues of the time – Benson Howard's *A Texas Steer* (1896), *The Banker's Daughter* (1873) and *Henrietta* (1887), *A Trip to China Town* (1891), Edward Harrigan's *Dan's Tribulations* (1884), Benman Thomson's *The Old Homestead* (1886). James A. Herne kindles the hopes of Howells in attempting an Ibsenite drama of sorts in his plays like *Margaret Fleming* (1890), *Shore Acres* (1892) and *Griffith Devenport* (1899). Dealing with infidelity and double standards in marriage, *Margaret Fleming* comes down heavily on the patriarchal order of society. It explodes the fiction, common to melodrama, of the ever forgiving wife in the well-drawn character of Margaret. The play was too bitter for American tastes of the times like Ibsen's *Ghosts* was to the European tastes of the time. If Ibsen's play was banned for considerable periods of time, Herne faced serious problems in getting his plays staged.



James A. Herne

Besides the ruthless realism of Ibsen's type, the play triumphs in mastering realistic art. Gary Richardson points out the significance of the play for American drama:

The points to which the general public most objected are, of course, the very elements that set this play apart as "unequalled in realism by any other known American drama of its century". Here are demonstrably real characters in an emotionally charged but non-Melodramatic action. Here is dialogue which is plain and direct and avoid the excess of Melodrama. Here is an action that can be represented through understated acting and performed within simple sets while using the technical resources of the theatre only to facilitate a greater understanding of the characters and the situation rather than as a substitute for such exploration. Finally, here is a play which focuses squarely on an important issue. For the first time on the American stage, a playwright chooses to question seriously the assumptions of the dominant patriarchal social and moral codes⁸

Margaret Fleming falls short of only one quality - literary drama, that Howells associates with great realist drama. Howells' dissatisfaction with American drama was that it has never been good literature. Theatrical preponderance never allowed American drama to emerge as literature and it is this failure that puts American drama in poor light when compared with American fiction or poetry. Theatrical preeminence notwithstanding, it was difficult for the literary drama to emerge on the American stage which was basically a commercial proposition, more so by the end of the century catering to the easily excitable tastes of the American public. Literary drama to register itself effectively on the stage required, greater inherent, intellectual and artistic strength and a more discerning public. America had to wait for another two decades at the turn of the century, until the emergence of Eugene O' Neill that synchronized with the growth of literary drama as well as the maturing of American critical temper. There begins the truly great American drama. Realistic literary, insightful and critical - what William Dean Howells dreamt and visualised.

1.12 SUMMING UP

The growth of American drama since the sixteenth century upto 1920 is the history of America as a nation, culture, art, literature and intellect. As a nation, America progressed from the settlement of European immigrants, through the British colonial rule, the struggle for independence and its triumph, civil war and the westward expansion. As a culture, America journeyed from the values of British aristocracy to a sort of Darwinian capitalism. In art and literature, it embraced romanticism, melodrama and realism. In intellect, what began as a search for an identity emerges as a scientifically tempered American eclecticism.

1.13 REFERENCES

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4. Bernard Hewitt. *Theatre USA 1665 to 1957* McGraw Hill, New York, 1959 p.227
5. Ibid pp.237
6. Willian Dean Howells *Criticism and Fiction : And other Essays*. Ed. Clara Marburg Kirk and Rudolf Kirk New York. New York Univ. Press. 1959 p.146
7. Ibid. pp.160-1
8. Gary A. Richardson. *American Drama: From The Colonial Period Through World War I : A Critical History* . p.192

1.14 KEYWORDS

Genre:	Class or category of artistic endeavors having a particular form, content or technique. Genre particularly means a distinctive literary type.
Puritan:	A section of people in the 16 th century England who believed that Roman Catholics had perverted Christianity from its doctrines. A puritan is a purist who rejects the compromises of everyday life. The puritans were the early settlers in America.
Pageantry:	An elaborate and spectacular display on stage, quite often concealing a lack of real importance or meaning. During the Renaissance period, it came to mean a dramatic performance staged for a civic occasion.
Anathema:	A person or a thing detested or loathed.
Romanticism:	A literary movement in the later 18 th and early 19 th centuries with its emphasis on imagination and feeling. It expresses the uniqueness of self and believes in the innate goodness of man who is

corrupted by civilization. Hence its admiration for the primitive and the child and opposes anything strictly rational.

Histrionics:	A behavior deliberately affected or self-consciously emotional. Any exaggerated experience of an emotion on stage for the sake of impressing the audience is called histrionics.
Regisseur:	A person who exercises total control on the production of a play.
Syphilis:	A venereal disease affecting particularly genitals and often congenital.
Eclecticism:	An attitude that avoids dependence on a particular idea or belief and seeks to take dynamically the best from everything and combines different things for optimum use and benefit.

1.15 QUESTIONS

1. Examine the growth of American drama during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
2. Discuss how the nationalist spirit of the early American playwrights weakened their dramatic instincts.
3. The success of the American Melodrama was at the expense of the values of the dramatic medium. Discuss.
4. What exactly is the difference between dramatic and theatrical traditions. Discuss how the lack of mature American drama contributed to the growth of the actorly tradition in America.
5. Discuss how theatrical realism qualifies the actorly tradition in America.
6. Discuss how Henrik Ibsen contributed to the growth of modern American drama.
7. Discuss Henry Dean Howells' ideas on realistic drama.
8. Examine the salient features of a romantic play, melodrama, well-made play, problem play and a realistic play.

1.16 SUGGESTED READINGS

Craik T.W. Ed. *The Revels History of Drama in English. Volume VIII American Drama*. Methuen New York 1977. Discusses American drama and theatre since its beginnings to 1961 with a distinct focus on actors, managers, producers, directors and playwrights during the different periods of national history.

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Murphy, Brenda. *A Realist in the American Theatre*. Ohio Univ. Press. Athens 1992. Presents Howells Drama criticism as it appeared in several periodicals and assesses his contribution to American drama.

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UNIT 2 THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY IN *THE HAIRY APE*

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction: Eugene O' Neill
- 2.2 *The Hairy Ape* and the America of the 1920's
- 2.3 The Tragic Problem of Identity in *The Hairy Ape*
- 2.4 Scene I & II: *The Hairy Ape*: Elusive Identity and the Tragic Illusion
- 2.5 Scene III: Tragedy of Situation
- 2.6 Scene IV to VII: Tragic Conflict: Fluctuating Identities
- 2.7 Scene VIII: Tragic Denouement and the Predicament of Human Identity
- 2.8 The Problem of Identity: Naturalistic Fixity and Expressionistic Revolt
- 2.9 Summing Up
- 2.10 References
- 2.11 Keywords
- 2.12 Questions
- 2.13 Annotations
- 2.14 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit examines the problem of identity in Eugene O' Neill's play, *The Hairy Ape* and analyses the problem in terms of the limitations of the human situation and also in terms of the human inability to accept the limitations of his situation.

2.1 INTRODUCTION: EUGENE O' NEILL

Eugene O' Neill is William Dean Howells' dream come true in America - the first major American dramatist who gave the nation powerful drama besides good theatre. He made drama, as Howells wanted, a literary medium in America. Secondly, he made drama powerfully realistic, not in a literal sense but as an interpretative mode of social reality - an effective medium of cultural reflection. O' Neill, like Ibsen in the 19th century Europe, is the first playwright thinker in 20th century America.

Eugene O' Neill's father, James O' Neill was an actor. His career as an actor was dominated by the role of the protagonist, Edmund Dantes which he played in the stage version of Alexander Dumas' novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844). James played the role for more than six thousand times. In spite of his great talent, he was never acceptable in any other role. The play defined not only James' life and career but shaped the lives of all the members of the O' Neill family. Eugene O' Neill was, in fact, born into the theatrical ethos of the play in particular, that his father lived. There was the whole tradition of the late 19th century American theatre that went with the play- sentimental melodrama, its stage tricks and facile rhetoric. Eugene acquired an intimate knowledge of theatrical practice and a keen sense of theatre in the theatrical environment of his family. Theatre and playwriting came to him naturally though, he did not think of it, initially for a career. O' Neill has to be primarily understood as a theatre practitioner - writing and producing plays. O' Neill the dramatist is a later development in his career or rather the maturing of his theatrical talent. Though O' Neill did not relish the theatrical ethos of the 19th century melodrama, he could not escape being shaped up by that tradition which

Howells William Dean. *Criticism and Fiction And other Essays*. Rudolf. Kirk ed. N. Y Univ press. 1959. Howells' writings on Euro-American drama and fiction with a focus on the growth of realistic art in drama and fiction.

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UNIT 2 THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY IN *THE HAIRY APE*

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction: Eugene O' Neill
- 2.2 *The Hairy Ape* and the America of the 1920's
- 2.3 The Tragic Problem of Identity in *The Hairy Ape*
- 2.4 Scene I & II: *The Hairy Ape*: Elusive Identity and the Tragic Illusion
- 2.5 Scene III: Tragedy of Situation
- 2.6 Scene IV to VII: Tragic Conflict: Fluctuating Identities
- 2.7 Scene VIII: Tragic Denouement and the Predicament of Human Identity
- 2.8 The Problem of Identity: Naturalistic Fixity and Expressionistic Revolt
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2.0 OBJECTIVES

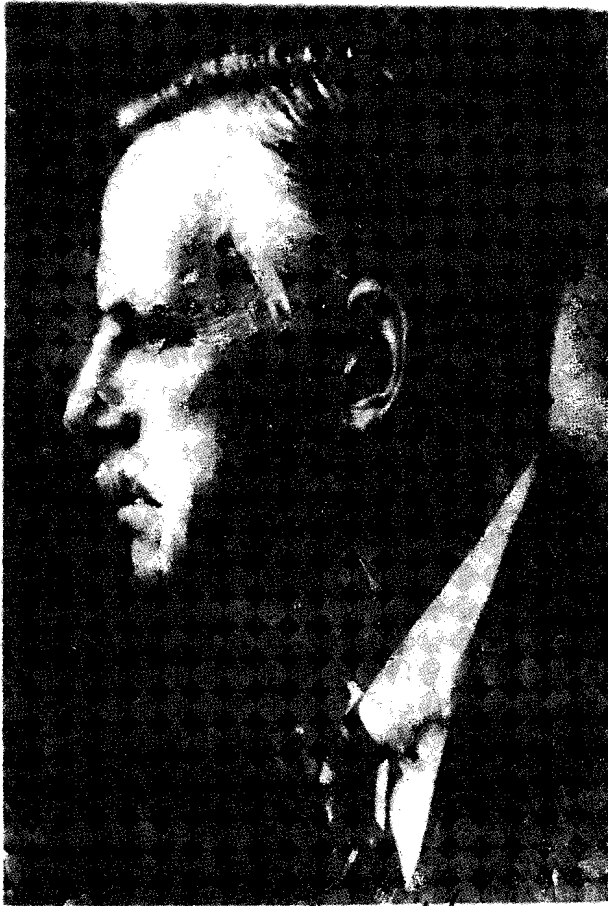
This unit examines the problem of identity in Eugene O' Neill's play, *The Hairy Ape* and analyses the problem in terms of the limitations of the human situation and also in terms of the human inability to accept the limitations of his situation.

2.1 INTRODUCTION: EUGENE O' NEILL

Eugene O' Neill is William Dean Howells' dream come true in America - the first major American dramatist who gave the nation powerful drama besides good theatre. He made drama, as Howells wanted, a literary medium in America. Secondly, he made drama powerfully realistic, not in a literal sense but as an interpretative mode of social reality - an effective medium of cultural reflection. O' Neill, like Ibsen in the 19th century Europe, is the first playwright thinker in 20th century America.

Eugene O' Neill's father, James O' Neill was an actor. His career as an actor was dominated by the role of the protagonist, Edmund Dantes which he played in the stage version of Alexander Dumàs' novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844). James played the role for more than six thousand times. In spite of his great talent, he was never acceptable in any other role. The play defined not only James' life and career but shaped the lives of all the members of the O' Neill family. Eugene O' Neill was, in fact, born into the theatrical ethos of the play in particular, that his father lived. There was the whole tradition of the late 19th century American theatre that went with the play- sentimental melodrama, its stage tricks and facile rhetoric. Eugene acquired an intimate knowledge of theatrical practice and a keen sense of theatre in the theatrical environment of his family. Theatre and playwriting came to him naturally though, he did not think of it, initially for a career. O' Neill has to be primarily understood as a theatre practitioner - writing and producing plays. O' Neill the dramatist is a later development in his career or rather the maturing of his theatrical talent. Though O' Neill did not relish the theatrical ethos of the 19th century melodrama, he could not escape being shaped up by that tradition which

came to him as a family inheritance through his father and had a rather constrictive influence on him during his growing years both as a man and a playwright. O' Neill's obsession with the revenge motive, and a certain historical context in several of his plays, the scenic designing of his early plays, preoccupation with family as an ambiguity or mystery, a hallmark of even his best plays, use of asides, soliloquies, disguises and masks, could be traced to O' Neill's prolonged exposure to the staging of *The Count of Monte Cristo* and through it to the whole tradition of 19th century melodrama. To an extent, O' Neill's success as a playwright, even as a modern dramatist in rebellion against the 19th century tradition of melodrama, lay in his being rooted in the popular theatrical tradition, however outdated it may have become by his time. The association with the popular tradition helped him to modernize tradition and, thus, change the course of American drama. It also assured him an easy theatrical reach to the audience which would have been difficult for him if he were to emerge totally as a modern dramatist.



Eugene O'Neill

O' Neill the dramatist, particularly the modern dramatist, emerges, partly in his restlessness with the theatre of his time, and, partly, in his feverish desire to use the medium of drama to understand himself. In thirty years of his dramatic career, very few plays emerged which did not reflect O' Neill's own quest for an identity. He brought intense subjectivity to the dramatic medium which he strove to make objective or realistic.

Though sufficiently well-educated in Catholic boarding schools, and at Princeton and Harvard Universities for brief periods, O' Neill taught himself more than he was ever taught. His convalescence at a Connecticut's sanatorium in 1913 for tuberculosis was a crucial period in his life and career. Illness and an attempt at suicide, drove him into a life of solitude and deep learning. It is during this period, O' Neill reads avidly August Strindberg, Henrik Ibsen, Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer, a

reading that shaped his thought and dramatic art. In fact, O' Neill's early plays like *Servitude* (1914), *Before the Breakfast* (1916), *The Web* (1914) are directly modeled after the plays of Shaw, Ibsen and Strindberg. In fact, Ibsen and Strindberg's realism diversifies the direction of O' Neill's early plays of Sea, or what are called, plays for their setting of the Glencarin deck like *Bound East far Cardiff* (1916), *The Moon of the Carribees* (1918) presenting atmospheric realism. In these plays, O' Neill's inspiration was Joseph Conrad's romantic belief in nature. O' Neill's struggle with continental realism began with his full length play *Beyond the Horizon* (1920) and *Anna Christie* (1924). O' Neill's first dramatic success *The Emperor Jones* (1920) bears witness to his continued belief in the primacy of nature over man, and at the same time, reflects his growing acceptance of the human drama in the continental mode of realism and expressionism.

The 1920's was a great period of experimentation and innovation in American theatre. At the outset, it was a period of intellectual sensitivity to European drama and the theatrical trends like naturalism and expressionism it initiated. For the first time in the American theatrical history, non-commercial theatre, given to art than profit, sprang up - *The Chicago Little Theatre* (1914), *The Washington Square Players* (1915) which later became *The Theatre Guild* and *The Provincial Players* (1916) in New York. O' Neill's early plays were produced by the provincial players while the production of the later plays was done by the Theatre Guild. However, what is important, more than the particular theatre, was O' Neill's association with particular theatre personalities who shaped O' Neill's dramatic imagination considerably. The leader of the *Provincetown Players*, George Cram Cook and his wife Susan Glaspell searched for native talents in American drama and found and established O' Neill as a representative of the significant American drama in the 1920's. The editor of *Theatre Arts*, Sheldon Cheney, charts out the direction the new American drama and Eugene O' Neill should take. Cheney visualised, among other things, a psychological drama stimulating both emotionally and intellectually, which is neither the old melodrama nor the new photographic sort of naturalism. Until the end of his dramatic career, O' Neill cherished Cheney's ideals.

Besides, Cheney's idealism, O' Neill owes much to the drama critic, Kenneth Macgowan and his collaborator, Robert Edmond Jones. Excepting the last few plays, O' Neill not only produced most of his plays in association with them but was deeply influenced in his dramatic imagination by them.

Macgowan and Jones mark the experimental, and, particularly, the expressionist, phase of O' Neill's dramatic career. Macgowan believed in a refusal to be merely realistic i.e. making theatre totally representational of the objective reality. Theatre has to be anti-realistic or expressionistic in order to penetrate the psychological and spiritual truth. He believed in the collaborative effort of the designer, the director and the playwright in the creation of the theatre that would not totally depend on dialogue and the actor but would strive to capture on the stage the inner form of the play. Theatre should be presentational, an ensemble emerging freely in color, design, scenic setting and in, what is called, the choreographic acting. O' Neill's plays, *The Hairy Ape* (1922), *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), *The Great God Brown* (1926), and *Lazarus Laughed* (1928), belong to this phase dominated by Macgowan. The growing expressionist stance of the plays is a process of internalization of the American socio-familial situation of his time.

Beginning in 1928, O' Neill begins a highly individualist phase of dramatic writing with plays like *Strange Interlude* (1928), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), *The Iceman Cometh* (1946), and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1955). Powerfully realistic in dramatising the socio-familial situation, the plays however, acquire the quality of an intensely felt personal statement by O' Neill, characterized by a skeptical attitude to life, rather than self-sustaining drama. O' Neill's skepticism elevates the tragic ethos of his plays and makes the genre of tragedy distinctly O' Neillian just as the tragedies of Shakespeare were distinctly Shakespearean.

A great popular playwright with unparalleled success on the American stage, O' Neill gained equally in critical estimate. His first full length play, *Beyond the Horizon*, *Anna Christi* and *Strange Interlude* were awarded the coveted Pulitzer prizes. O' Neill was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1936, crediting him with the distinction of elevating American drama to the heights of great literature.

Hairy Ape

2.2 THE HAIRY APE AND THE AMERICA OF THE 1920'S.

Though *The Hairy Ape* was written for the stage in 1921, a short story with the same title was done regarding the revolt of a stoker who joins the I.W.W. Where the earlier sea heroes of the Glencarin plays, were products of nature, the stoker in *The Hairy Ape* is a product of American industrial capitalism. While the sea heroes were committed to nature, the stoker in this play is committed to steel that makes the ship. The change of ambience within the unchanged setting of O' Neill's plays brings out the burden of the growth of the nation, from its agrarian beginnings to a highly industrialized capitalist state by 1920's. What should have been a prosperous and self-confident nation, however, displays a sense of cultural poverty in the aftermath of the first world war. Fredrick Hoffman sums up the decade. "*The American was an industrial giant, an emotional dwarf*"¹. Puritanism that dominated the growth of the nation was accused to have "*drained away all its spiritual resources in the struggle to survive and that continues to struggle in the midst of plenty because life itself no longer possesses any meaning*"². Hoffman pinpoints a threefold failure of the nation as it presents itself in the 1920's – Failure of communication, failure of social meaning and, a failure of morality³.

O' Neill occasions his tragedy, *The Hairy Ape* to synchronize with his sense of cultural failure amid material success of the nation – O' Neill writes to McGowan about what he tried to do in the play

.... I have tried to dig deep in it, to probe in the shadows of the soul of man bewildered by the disharmony of his primitive pride and individualism at war with the mechanistic development of society...⁴

The mechanistic development of society or the progress of science *per se* is not the undoing of man but the specific materialist values man associated with the development or progress. Hard work and individualism that brought about the ever-vibrant American character and society should usher in a human society lest its own success should be its tragic undoing. Responding to an optimism that tragedy and American character are incompatible, O' Neill answers

Suppose some day we should suddenly see with the clear eyes of a soul the true valuation of all our triumphant brass band materialism: should see the cost – and the – result in terms of eternal verities! What a colossal, one hundred percent American tragedy that would be ... Tragedy not native to our soul? Why, we are tragedy, the most appalling yet written or unwritten⁵

2.3 THE TRAGIC PROBLEM OF IDENTITY IN THE HAIRY APE

O' Neill presents a specific socio-economic situation in the play in an authentic portrayal of the capitalist culture of the 1920's in America. The protagonist, Yank and the female opposite, Mildred are representative characters of the hard-working

industrial labor and the parasitic (as the Marxist would call) proprietary capitalist class. The dramatic conflict, as it begins in the play, is an inescapable social conflict of a capitalist economy. Mildred, inspite of her best intentions, abhors Yank and provokes him to abhor her, and Yank, without intending to do so, begins a class struggle. Nevertheless, the class conflict is not the burden of the play but the failure of the capitalist economy to promote an interacting society based on human worth and dignity. For O' Neill, the problem is, at once, immediate as it exists in the American capitalist society of 1920's and also a universal one in that, in the whole process of civilization, man has been alienating himself from others and also alienating himself from his own being. O' Neill explains:



Louis Wolheim as Yank in *The Hairy Ape*



A Scene from Provincetown Players' production of
The Hairy Ape

" **The Hairy Ape** was propaganda in the sense that it was a symbol of man who has lost his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not acquired in a spiritual way. Thus, not being able to find it on earth nor in heaven, he's in the middle, trying to make peace, taking the worst unches for both of them " ⁶.

What O' Neill plans to do in the play is to delineate the human condition that is blessed with an endless creativity by virtue of which he creates structures: God, religion, society, capitalism and socialism etc but none of them can subsume him totally. Greater the structures of creativity, as in the present day civilization in the 20th century, greater is the alienation of man from his fellow beings, from the very accomplishments of his civilization, and also from himself. More than anything else, self-alienation characterizes the human situation in the 20th century. O' Neill writes about the play

The subject here is the same ancient one that always was and always will be the one subject for drama, and that is man and his struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with the Gods, but is now with himself, his own past, his attempt to "belong" ⁷.

Belonging definitively is a human impossibility for what man can belong to is often his own creation which does not subsume him. Hence the problem of human identity.

2.4 SCENE I & II. *THE HAIRY APE*: ELUSIVE IDENTITY AND THE TRAGIC ILLUSION

Hairy Ape

The setting of the play is a transatlantic liner sailing from New York. The crew of the ship have a reductive appearance and behavioral patterns and, dramatically are simply voices. Contrastively, there is one character, Yank who is "*broader, fiercer, more truculent, more powerful and more sure of himself than the rest*"⁸. Yank is a highly accentuated human being compared to the rest of the people. He "*represents to them a self expression, the very last word in what they are, that most highly developed individual*"⁹.

The contrast between Yank and the fellow stokers is significant. Yank is, a naturalistically drawn representative stoker, with the necessary self-confidence and expression whereas the other stokers are not only robbed of representational strength but are made caricatures of hard-working stokers. Even Yank is contemptuous of them. Notwithstanding Yank's naturalistic strength, and the essential realism of the situation on the deck, O' Neill forbids any naturalistic treatment of the scene, for O' Neill was keen to make the possible realistic strength of the situation as well as of Yank an alterable tentative premise. Peter Egri explains:

In *The Hairy Ape*, the dramatist's personal participation is fairly obvious; the factual representation changes into emotional presentation. Descriptive pictures are substituted by images involving or implying a simile:... The final outcome of the stage directions, supported by the title of the play, suggests a dramatic contrast between wild animals trapped, captured and caged and explosive energy imprisoned, compressed and contained:¹⁰

Long and Paddy are the other two stokers in the scene besides Yank, who are developed as characters but function as a critical comment on Yank's strength. Yank has a sense of belonging to the ship. Ship is home for him. For others, it is a sinking ship, a hell. They are not born into it, but, Long would say, are dragged into it by the capitalist class. Yank rejects Long's Marxist division into the exploiters and the exploited or alienators and the alienated. He would consider the people on the upper deck, the upper strata of society, as just a "*baggage*". They don't belong to the stokehole whereas the stokers belong.

Long is sarcastic about their belonging to the ship. Paddy joins Long's sarcasm.

We make the ship to go, you're saying? Yerra, that almighty God have pity on us¹¹

For him, belonging was a thing of the past when they were sailors and belonged to the sea.

'Twas them days men belonged ships not now. It was them days a ship was a part of the sea, and the man was a part of the ship, and the sea joined all together and made it one. (Scornfully) Is it one wid this you'd be. Yank-, black smoke from the funnel's smudging the sea, smudging the decks – the bloody engines pounding and throbbing and shaking – wid divil a sight of sun or a breath of clean air – choking our lungs wid coal dust – breaking our backs and hearts in the hell of the stockhole ... I am thinking caged in by steel Is it to belong that you are wishing?¹²

For both Long and Paddy, through differing perspectives, consider Yank pursuing something that is elusive. Long would say the ship belongs to the capitalist class, and Paddy would say that the steaming ship alienates the stoker and itself is alienated from the sea. Industrialism has created, on the one hand, a non-working proprietary class and a destructive life-taking machines on the other. For them, Long's sense of belonging is illusory. Long himself displays youthful fancy in his belonging.

Sure, Sure, I'm the part of the engines' ... Twenty five knots a hour... I am steam and oil for de engines;.. And I am what makes iron into steel ! Steel ! dat stands for de whole ting...And I'm steel.. Steel...Steel.....¹³.

Scene II, presents Mildred, at the opposite end. While Yank cherishes his youthful manliness, Mildred bemoans her female inanities.

I am a waste product in the Bessemer process— like the millions or rather, I inherit the acquired trait of the by-product, wealth, but none of the energy, none of the strength of the steel that made it¹⁴.

Mildred, the daughter of the president of Nazareth Steel and Chairman of Board of Directors would like to "*discover how the other half lives in the stokehole on the ship and would like to be of some use in the world, like to be sincere, to touch life somewhere*". However, she has neither the "*vitality nor integrity*" that her grandfather as a puddler had, which, down the generations, got burnt away in the affluence they had come to possess. Even her earnest desire to see the world of vitality and integrity, she is aware, sounds ridiculous like a leopard complaining of its spots.

Industrialism has recklessly thrown her into a class as the hardworking stokers were thrown into another class. As Long would complain, they are not born but driven into the class they are in. Mildred also bemoans her predicament.

2.5 SCENE III : TRAGEDY OF SITUATION

Mildred wants to undo, at least partially, an identity she has come to inherit, while Yank cherishes an identity he has come to acquire and possess. There is an in-built tragedy of aspirations, as O' Neill would view, in the human situation. There is a determinism of human instincts, attitudes or of the forces in the objective situation beyond human control or, what O' Neill would himself call, a determinism of fate, that will simply undo the most judiciously felt human aspirations or desires.

Mildred's encounter with Yank has, thus, the determinism of human instincts and attitudes, besides that of the situation wherein both Mildred and Yank are forced into identities other than the ones they seek and cherish.

As Mildred enters the stokehole, even before her encounter with Yank, she "*turns paler*", and "*shivers with fright inspite of the blazing heat*". She finds it difficult to retain her enthusiastic appearance, which according to her aunt, who accompanies her, is affectation and a "*pose of eccentricity*". She is what her class has made her to be. Attempting to be different from what she is, does neither any good to her nor to those to whom she is sympathetic as she already made the poor on the New York's East side "*so much poorer in their own eyes*". The aunt's words prove prophetic. On seeing Yank, Mildred is

paralyzed with horror, terror, her whole personality crushed, beaten in, collapsed, by the terrific impact of this unknown, abysmal brutality, naked and shameless¹⁵.

Hairy Ape

In a reversal of all her sympathy for the "*other half*", that lives in the stokehole, she calls him a "*filthy beast*" and unable to bear the very sight of the "*other half, she faints*". Intellectual understanding is one thing and bringing her own person into that understanding is totally a different matter and, it is at the level of the person, our identities lie. Mildred proves that she as a person, whatever be her aspirations, belongs to her class, the affluent and the beautiful, who cannot interact with the poor and the ugly.

2.6 SCENE IV TO VII : TRAGIC CONFLICT; FLUCTUATING IDENTITIES

Where Mildred's story of seeking a humane identity ends, Yank, who proudly thought he belonged to the world of steel and industry, begins to wonder about his identity. Furiously angry at being called a filthy beast, nonetheless, beneath the anger, there is the fear whether he is a beast, since the physical strength he is proud of also belongs to a beast. As the fourth scene begins, Yank is a brooding figure "*seated on a bench*" in the "*exact attitude of Rodins The Thinker*" and, what he himself says "*try to think*".

Mildred's insulting remark makes him unsure of himself. Earlier, Paddy and Long couldn't stifle his sense of pre-eminence in the industrial world. When Long repeats his socialist analysis of them being the slaves of the capitalist class, Yank looks at him "*bewilderedly*", and asks whether it is all true – "*is all dat straight goods*" – though he continues to be contemptuous of Long's assertion of socialist power and equality in the eyes of God. It was Paddy's reminder that Mildred looked at him as if he were a "*hairy ape escaped from the zoo*" raises an agonizing doubt about himself.

Hairy Ape , huh, Sure ! Dat's de way she looked at me, aw light.
Hairy Ape, so dat's me...¹⁶. Worse for his self-awareness is the charge that he scared Mildred I scared her? Why de hell should I scare her? Who de hell is she? Ain't she de same as me¹⁷.

Yank's problem was that Mildred who called him a beast, is totally unknown to him, a mystery.

What is she? What's she come from? Who made her? Who give her
de naive to look at me like dat?¹⁸

Though Yank swears revenge on her, he is fearfully aware that there is another world, another set of values defining him and the world of the ships, engines and steel where he is pre-eminent and his set of values, of strength, hard work and productivity may mean nothing. Even when Paddy tells him that he is foolish in paying so much attention to Mildred, who is a trifling, Yank is painfully aware, not so much of Mildred but of what she has done to him and what has happened to him through her.

Scene V presents an accentuation of Yank's tragic conflict and the problem of fluctuating self - identity. Throughout the scene, Yank is in a flight from himself. He is more a reaction to what Mildred calls him than his own self. Even after three weeks, when Long brings him to the Fifth Avenue, Yank's obsession with what Mildred had done to him not only remains but becomes acute. Long tries to induce a class awareness in Yank but he is unable to target Mildred.

Aw Hell! I don't see no one, see – like her. All dis give me a pain.
It don't belong.....It gives me a pain ¹⁹.

Long succeeds in diverting Yank's attention from Mildred to an extent though he can not convert him to the peaceful socialist struggle. The affluence and the reckless spending of the affluent class at the expense of the starving poor does not provoke Yank but Yank is insulted by the expensive monkey fur on display in a shop's window. He is not only called an ape but even his skin seems to have been torn away from him for a display. The animal skin on display, at once, objectifies Mildred's charge of his being a beast. What he feels is the forced identity becomes him. Where Long wanted peaceful action against the class enemies, Yank chooses beastly action. He bumps into a gentleman, accosts a lady and stops a fat man from getting into the bus. A policeman is called and Yank is arrested.

Yank's violence is more psychological than physical. Mildred's insulting remark inverts the process of self-assurance and congratulation into a process of self-degradation. Yank's mental state resembles what R.D. Laing characterizes as the schizoid state of mind, a state of mind becoming increasingly characteristic of our time. A schizoid person experiences a rupture in his relationship with the world and also a disruption of his relation with himself. He "*experiences himself in despairing aloneness and isolation*". Facing an "*ontological insecurity*", he is more preoccupied with preserving than gratifying himself. He is psychologically destructive towards others though outwardly he conceals his destructiveness purely as an existential strategy. It is this ability to cope up with anxiety about oneself and restrain the acutely felt destructiveness towards others saves many a maddening tragedy in our time.

Yank's outbursts on the fifth avenue show his singular incapacity to live even like a schizoid in the world.

Scene VI presents Yank's increasing self-depredation not only of himself as an individual but of all the values of much cherished identity as a champion of the new industrial culture. The steel bars of the prison cell represent Mildred, her father and their attempts to degrade him:

Sure – her old man- president of the steel trust – makes half de steel
in world – steel – where I taught I belonged – driven' from - movin –
in dat – to make her and cage me in for her to spit on He made
dis – dis cage ! Steel ! It don't belong, dat's what! Cages, cells,
locks, bolts, bars – dat's what it means ! hardin! me down wit him at
de top! But of will drive trou! *Fire that melts it !* ²⁰

Steel that was home becomes an enemy. He would be a fire and melt steel. The champion of machines and industrial culture becomes its bitterest foe.

In the seventh scene, Yank seeks internal subversion of the world of steel. One who always thought of "*straight goods*", Yank joins industrial workers of the world (I.W.W) in the hope that they are industrial wreckers of the world, as they were accused of. In traversing from a totally positive to the negative identity, Yank proves that his own ego, his own sense of individual is more important than any set of values that he fondly cherished for long. All human identities are subordinate to the identity of one's own ego. Human identity is primarily psychological, not essentially social or economic. Man has to buy peace at this level and the lack of it results in a war with oneself. When I.W.W doesn't serve the purpose of a wounded ego, and is further called a brainless ape, an identity Mildred already gave him, Yank keeps brooding about himself.

So dem holds don't tink I belong, neider. Aw, to hell
wit'em!.....Gimme a dollar more a day and make me happy! Tree

square a day and cauliflowers in the front yard – ekal rights a woman and kids – a lousy vote – and I am all fixed for Jesus, huh! Aw, hell! what does dat get yuh? dis tings in your inside, It is way down – at de bottom.. yuh can't grab it and yuh can't stop it. It moves and everything moves. It stops and de whole world stops.....I am a busted Ingersoll ... ²¹

Hairy Ape

2.7 SCENE VIII: TRAGIC DENOUEMENT AND THE PREDICAMENT OF HUMAN IDENTITY

The last scene presents the tragic denouement. From I.W.W, Yank lands himself in a Zoo, as if he were driven into it by the world of capitalists and socialists. The human world rejected him because he tried to possess it, instead of being possessed by it. The gorilla in the zoo looks better in its predicament than a man. It is champion of its world. It belongs, a belonging denied to man. The human world is 'hell' for it which never allows any sense of the self or identity. In a despairing sense of self-condemnation, Yank seeks to belong to the gorilla and as if to cement this bond of belonging, he goes to embrace it. But the gorilla simply does not trust Man, a man who is not trusted in his own world. The gorilla crushes him to death in an act of self-defence, repeating the story of man in his world in the world of animals as well. When man cannot belong to man, how can he belong to the animals? Yank queries: Christ: where do I get off at? Where do I fit in ? ²².

The truth, finally, dawns on him. The only way to belong is to be possessed either by the world or by the animals. Yank welcomes his final fate.

No quittin; get me ! croak wit your boots on! ladies and gents, step forward and take a slant at the one and only – one and original – Hairy Ape from the wilds of – ²³.

And perhaps, The Hairy Ape at last belongs - the tragedy of belonging and of seeking an identity.

2.8 THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY: NATURALISTIC FIXITY AND EXPRESSIONISTIC REVOLT

Yank's restless anxiety for an identity or for a gratifying self-image, the resulting mental anguish and conflict and, finally, his tragic death bring us to the question of O' Neill's vision of man, his struggles and his predicament. Why didn't Yank continue to be satisfied with the much cherished sense of belonging? Why did he allow a total stranger, Mildred to hurt his pride and why did he go riotous on the Fifth Avenue and land himself in jail? Why did he choose to be the destroyer of the world of steel of which he was proud? Why did he descend down to the level of gorilla and embrace it to his own death?

The answers lie in O' Neill's vision of man and his predicament, as influenced by naturalists like Ibsen and Strindberg and his vision of the nature of human struggles as influenced by German expressionists like George Kaiser and Ernest Toller. In O' Neill's naturalistic view, there is no escape from Yank's problem of identity in the situation as he was placed. Naturalism, as originally formulated by Emile Zola under inspiration from biological sciences, de-emphasized human individuality and made him one of the living animals with no scope whatsoever for an identity, significance and individualist action. Man suffers from the fixity of his socio-psychological situation. However hard he fights against the fixative situation, there is no escape from it.

In spite of boundless strength of character, Yank meets a tragic end. O' Neill, however, subtitles *The Hairy Ape* as a comedy of ancient and modern life in eight scenes. For O' Neill, Yank's predicament is tragi-comic. In fact, in calling Yank's predicament tragi-comic, O' Neill reflects the belief of the naturalists, that human experience is so versatile that to call it comic or tragic would be inauthentic. Hence, human experience is essentially tragi-comic, as the comic incongruity and irrationality always contribute to the tragic rhythm and irony of life and the attritive tragic struggle and defeat give rise to comic ludicrousness. The concept of tragedy, both among the classical and Elizabethan playwrights, was an instrument to celebrate the freedom, heroism and grandeur of a select individual and to reaffirm the preconceived moral order. The new bourgeois of the 19th century which becomes popular in Ibsen, Chekhov and Strindberg dispenses with the idea of individual heroism, the irreplaceable moral order and locates the tragedy in the individual's attritive struggle with society. In the place of pessimism, on account of the determinism of fate and God and the final moral affirmation, modern bourgeois tragedy presents a state of ennui and affirms only skepticism, for the nature of his struggle and experience quite often unbecomes him and the final denouement, if it could be called so, since his struggle is endless, remains tentative. His denouement becomes final, only when the individual, out of sheer attrition, inflicts a definitive defeat or death on himself.

Yank's is, definitely, a modern naturalistic tragi-comedy. For all his self-confidence and pivotal role in the new industrial order, he cannot have any individualistic identity. All attempts at a distinct identity are situationally impossible and foredoomed to fail.

O' Neill however, does not aim, primarily to present his naturalistic predicament. He aims to dramatize Yank's inability to accept the deindividualization forced on him by the industrial order. Being human is to fight for a distinct identity, however frustrating and self-defeating it could be. It is this struggle that characterizes humanness. O' Neill dramatizes the self-expressive human struggle in the play.

The Hairy Ape is significant for this expressionistic revolt. Throughout the play, as the stage directions indicate, O' Neill was keen to present this expressionism of setting, scene and characterization. In the stage directions to scene I of the play, O' Neill writes:

The treatment of this scene, or of any other scene in the play, should by no means to be naturalistic. The effect sought after is a cramped space in the bowels of a ship imprisoned by white steel.....The ceiling crushes down upon the men's heads. They cannot stand upright ²⁴.

Naturalism builds up a scene or character by objective description. Scenes and characters derive strength from the objectivity of the situation. O' Neill robs the workers in the stokehole, excepting Yank, of the naturalistic strength. Even the naturalistic build up of Yank in the first scene is exploded gradually in the later scenes. The explosion of a scene, setting or character by a riotous use of noise, color or by a physical or mental reduction or accentuation for the purpose of objective distortion to present a mental state that comes to exist in opposition to the objective reality of the situation is called expressionism.

Basically, expressionism is a revolt against the dehumanization of man by science and society. It believes in expressiveness as against a communicativeness of the cognitive and emotive process. It presents the essentials of things instead of the things themselves. Normal consciousness is dissolved and the dense core of one's passion is climaxed. All naturalistic detail and logical transitions between things are eliminated. The expressionistic perception concretizes itself in the formation of

certain images and these images just stop at expressing the intensity of the perception or emotion, and never evolve themselves symbolically.

Hairy Ape

In drama and theatre, expressionism involves an emotive concentration in words, dialogues, scenes, and other individual parts eroding the structural unity and ethos of the plays. It was anti-literary in that it tried to destroy the elaborate structure of Latin Grammar of the European languages to facilitate the thrust of human urges through a sort of telegraphic style of writing linking one peak of emotion with another. As dramatic art, expressionism aims at freeing drama of the Aristotelian absolutes of plot, language and character. As theatrical art, expressionism attempted to destroy representational stage reality and theatrical illusion. Initially, expressionism arose in postwar Germany. George Kaiser's *Morn to Midnight* (1920), Ernest Toller's *Man and the Masses* (1920) attempted a revolution to free man from slavery to the established system of values.

O' Neill was only fascinated with the German expressionists. McGowan's belief in expressionist theatre largely shaped the writing of *The Hairy Ape*. O' Neill uses expressionism for a rather limited purpose of characterising Yank's revolt against the societal identity forced on him before he accepts, in his tragic end, the naturalistic limitations of his situation. O' Neill tries to balance the naturalistic strength of his character with the expressionistic undoing of his revolt. O' Neill writes:

The newest thing now in playwriting is the opposite of the character play. It is the expressionistic play. For expressionism denies the value of characterization For expressionism tries to minimize everything on the stage that stands between the author and the audience.....I personally do not believe that an idea can be readily put over to an audience except through characters... the real contribution of the expressionist has been in the dynamic qualities of his plays. They express something in modern life better than did the old plays. I have something of this method in *The Hairy Ape*. But the character Yank remains a man and everyone recognizes him as such ²⁵.

Until Scene V, Yank is presented in naturalistic strength, notwithstanding Long and Paddy's critical comments on his individualism, while the first scene and the other stokers are rendered totally expressionistic in their dehumanized existence. The scene presents images of a cage or a prison and Yank's self-confidence is the only liberating image. Scene III further reinforces this image through "dim lighting", tumult of noise and the gorilla appearance of the blackened faces of the stokers. In scene V, the crowd is presented as "a procession of" gaudy marionettes. Yank's self-confidence is hurt by Mildred's remark. He is furious yet controlled. In Scene V, on the Fifth Avenue, Yank's controlled fury explodes expressionistically in revolt against people on the avenue. The violence is not against the people as such but against the image forced on him. The sight of the monkey fur in the furriers' aggravates his rage as if the skin in the window is a personal insult. Intensely raging with anger, Yank bounces back against Mildred. Here, Yank is in total flight from himself, a state of characterlessness. In Scene VI, in the prison in Blackwell island, Yank dissolves his character into a revolt against the world of steel, which once represented but now appears to represent Mildred and her father. In the next scene, Yank seeks an expressionistic destruction of the world of steel through I.W.W. Frustrated, Yank chooses to accept, expressionistically, the identity of gorilla and in a similar expressionistic gesture embraces gorilla to his death. But this frustrating death that does not give him a sense of belonging, either to the world of steel or to the world of gorilla, Yank admits the naturalistic impossibility of a human identity in the world. In recognizing this fact and also in recognizing the inescapability of his tragic expressionistic revolt, he re-emerges as a human character, a mature and a thoughtful one that he was not at the beginning of the play. As a play, *The Hairy Ape* structures

a continual human revolt against a fixative human situation. Peter Egri sums up the nature and design of the play:

The structure of *The Hairy Ape*, like the character portrayal of the play, is also Janus-faced. It is made up of a sequence of scenes as in expressionist drama. On the other hand, the scenes are specifically organized both internally and externally. Practically, each of them shows a short story-oriented pattern of a scaled down one actor having a miniature exposition, plot, development and climactic crisis.....At the same time, the scenes do not fall apart into isolated units but constitute an organic whole.....the structure of a play then displays a transitional quality that calls for an elucidation from the viewpoint of the poles between which it represents a transition ²⁶.

2.9 SUMMING UP

Though O'Neill claims that the human problem he presents in the play is both ancient and modern man's struggle with his fate or predicament, it is particularly O'Neill's story of modern man in the 20th century. To be modern is to be proud of oneself for having created a great civilization of science but his own creation, the industrial civilization, renders him insignificant and alienates him from others as well as from himself. Yet there is no escape from struggling to be himself - distinctively human. This struggle is man, both to create a civilization and to be himself.

The Hairy Ape is the first 20th century play to present what becomes a man in this century. Several plays, very significant ones, in the course of the 20th century go back to the problem posed by O'Neill in his play - the predicament of man in the 20th century industrial civilization - Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1928), Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman* (1949), Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* (1960), Sam Shepard *The Operation Sedewinder* (1970) and David Mamet's *Glengary GlenRoss* (1984). The problem is the same one of human identity. Where does man stand in relation to the new industrialized world and where does he stand in relation to his own humanness?

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2.11 KEYWORDS

Choreographic:	Refers to an acting that consists of dance-like movements, gestures and other movements on the stage which, instead of dialogue, attempt to convey meaning and also present dramatic action.
Capitalism:	Though capitalism, as an economic system in which capital is privately owned goes back to early historical periods, it normally refers to the industrial capitalism of 20 th century wherein there is a monopolistic control of industries and individual enterprise is limited to the top few and the large working class has only a limited or marginal role or identity.
Denouement:	(French) unknotting. Denouement refers to events that follow the climax of the plots. It also means ultimate predicament.
Ingersoll:	An inexpensive watch widely used during the 1920's.
Janus-faced:	Having two faces, one looking forward, one looking backward like the Roman deity, Janus. It also means having two contrasting qualities.
Leopard complaining of its spots:	As spots of black markings are an inseparable feature of a leopard, it cannot complain of its spots; so too a person cannot complain of the characteristic features of his or her class or situation.

2.12 QUESTIONS

1. Briefly discuss the influences that marked O' Neill's career as a playwright.
2. Discuss *The Hairy Ape* as a play of the 1920's.
3. What are the distinguishing features of O' Neillian tragedy as illustrated in *The Hairy Ape*.
4. Illustrate the title of the play, *The Hairy Ape: A Comedy in Eight Scenes*.
5. Discuss *The Hairy Ape* as a naturalistic tragedy of human identity and explain how a naturalist accounts for what O' Neill calls the comedy in the play.
6. Critically comment on O' Neill's use of expressionism in *The Hairy Ape*.
7. Could you call *The Hairy Ape* an expressionistic comedy or tragedy? Give reasons for and against such a description.

2.13 ANNOTATIONS

Annotate the following passages with reference to the context.

1. We lives in ' ell, comrades – and right enough we'll die in it. And who's ter blame, I arks yer?
2. Dis is a man's job, get me? It belongs. It runs distub.
3. Hell, sure, dat's my fav'rite climate. I eat it up! I git fat on it! It's me makes it hot!. It's me makes it roar !
4. But I'm afraid I have neither the vitality nor integrity. All that was burnt out in our stock before I was born.
5. Pardon me for my outburst. When a leopard complains of its spots, it must sound rather grotesque.
6. And you and me, comrades, we' re is slaves! And the skipper and mates and engineers, they're is slaves too ! And she's is bloody daughter and we're all' er slaves too!
7. Votes , hell ! Votes is a Joke, see. Votes for women! Let dem do it.
8. You mean change the unequal conditions of society by legitimate direct action or with dynamite ?
9. He got me, aw right I am trou. Even him didn't tink, I belonged .

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A discussion of O' Neill's plays as characteristically American tragedies.

UNIT 3 *DEATH OF A SALESMAN* AS TRAGEDY

Structure

- 3:0 Objectives
- 3:1 Arthur Miller and The American Milieu
- 3:2 Arthur Miller's concept of Tragedy
- 3:3 Death of a Salesman: Analysis of the text
- 3:4 Death of Salesman as Tragedy: An Assessment
- 3:5 Summing Up
- 3:6 References
- 3:7 Key Words
- 3:8 Questions
- 3:9 Annotations
- 3:10 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit discusses the cultural milieu in which Arthur Miller writes, his concept of tragedy, *Death of a Salesman* as a Miller tragedy and an assessment of the play as a tragedy both in terms of Miller's formulations and, also, in terms of the norms of tragedy formulated from the times of the Greeks to the present.

3.1 ARTHUR MILLER AND THE AMERICAN MILIEU



Arthur Miller

Eugene O' Neill established Modern American Drama as a powerful genre of American literature. In doing so, he brought both the American nation and the dramatic medium into sharp critical reckoning. The playwrights who followed him, Elmer Rice and Clifford Odets explored the cultural milieu and the dramatic medium in order to define and redefine the changing American cultural situation and psyche. What is significant about the dramatic endeavors of these playwrights is their keen

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concern for the societal condition of man under the repressive technology and industrial capitalism. Technology and industry, themselves do not posit any antagonism to man but the economic determinism it imposes on human lives puts a heavy premium on what have been characteristically American aspirations and convictions, individualism, struggle and achievement through honesty, enterprise and hardwork. Equally frustrating is the position of man in the family either on account of the puritanic irresolution of the sexual conflicts or on account of mutual expectations, individual infirmities, grievances and failures. Family acquires a primacy in the American cultural situation both as a major preoccupation of the American individual and, more importantly, as the significant determinant of the individual's socio-economic goals. Culturally, familial concerns and socio-economic goals tend to merge indistinguishably into each other, so much so, that what has become popular as a cultural ideal known as "the American Dream", has come to explain both the American family as well as the society.

In its basic premise, "the American Dream" goes back to the early puritan settlers in America who considered themselves "*to be God's special emissaries on a mission into the wilderness*", with the task of establishing "*a Jerusalem renewed*" – In practical terms, it meant establishing an economic civilization in the wilderness of the American continent. In the given situation, the puritan piety came to reside in "*industry, thrift, social responsibility and avoidance of sensuality*". The religious aspirations and economic endeavors acquired a singularity of purpose. Thomas. E. Porter writes:

Virgin land, undeveloped resources..... all allowed scope for enterprise and imagination. The successful man became the idol of the public; the road to success was pointed out from the pulpit, in the marketplace, by the family fireside.....It is possible to trace the unique American attitude toward "success" to roots in our puritan past, to see this ideology as a secularization of the Protestant ethic.¹

The transformation of an essentially religious urge into a secular socio-economic dream motivates the making of the nation from a virgin land in the 16th and 17th centuries into an industrial giant in the 20th century. Max Weber believed that the growth of capitalism in the West has much to do with the Protestant Calvinism's encouragement of individual enterprise and accumulation of capital in the hope of being favored or be the '*elect*' of God. This was nowhere truer than in America. The work ethic and the success motive were championed by every thinker who exercised a decisive influence on American cultural attitudes. "*Early to bed and early to rise make a man healthy, wealthy and wise*" : Benjamin Franklin drilled the aphorism endlessly into the ears of the Americans in the 18th century. Ralph Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance reinforced the Protestant work ethic.

The growth of American capitalism has also raised the fervor of the religious doctrine of material success. The Baptist preacher, Russell H. Conwell, in his celebrated lecture *Acres of Diamonds*, first delivered in 1861 but repeated thousands of times in the next fifty years, asserted that one need not travel world over to find diamonds but could create wealth in one's own backyard, provided one has the will to do it. One need not be apologetic about making wealth, for it is not simply for one's own happiness but for common good, that could be achieved only through individual efforts.

Making wealth, thus, emerged as a religio-social passion. Horatio Alger's novels, during the last decades of the 19th century immortalised a rags to riches story. The Horatio-Alger hero is a poor boy who emerges a millionaire through sheer hard work and honesty. As the nation progressed into the 20th century, The American Dream, the ideals of freedom, democracy and equality of opportunity by which the nation defined itself came to mean, rather exclusively, economic success and material

happiness. As capitalism progressed from an era of abundant opportunities during the 18th and the 19th centuries, where one had to simply pick up an opportunity and reach success through honest hard work, to an era of stiff competitiveness in the 20th century, attention has come to be focussed on what gives success other than honesty and hard work. One has to succeed with people to gain success – the days of succeeding with the virgin land are long over. The aphorisms of Benjamin Franklin worked in the 18th century, Conwell's and Alger's hero in the 19th century. The 20th century America presented stiff human challenges where they have been only material challenges earlier. Dale Carnegie comes with answers for the human challenges in business and industry in his book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936). For Carnegie, personality is the major ingredient of success in business or industry. The impersonality machines and technology imposed on human beings could be fought back through a carefully nourished cult of personality. The worker, the entrepreneur and the salesman succeed not through hard work and honesty alone but largely through the force and strategies of human personality.

Arthur Miller shapes his plays in this techno – human cultural ethos of mid 20th century America. Born in 1915, in a New York Jewish family, Miller witnessed, during the great depression in the nineteen thirties, the sudden explosion of the economic myths of American capitalism built over the century. Miller dramatises the tragic denouement that inevitably awaits any carefully built cultural myth. In *All My Sons* (1947), Miller's first significant play and in *Death of Salesman* (1949), Miller locates his heroes in two traditional American institutions, the American family and the American business enterprise, the values of which have either, alternatively, synchronised or collided with each other. As to O' Neill and Odets, so also, for Miller, family, as a structure of elemental human relationships, is the fulcrum of society. Miller's Jewish ethnic values of familial authority and responsibility make family a formidable determinant of social values as well. With a non-ethnic perspective, Miller, however, views human condition in a continuum, "with familial relation at one extreme" and "a primarily social relationship at the other", where the problem faced by man and the demands made on him tend to be of one kind. In his essay on *The Family in Modern Drama*, Miller sets out the broad human problem characterizing the American socio-familial scene.

How may a man make of the outside world a home? How and in what ways must he struggle, what must he strive to change and overcome within himself and outside himself, if he is to find the safety, the surroundings of love, the ease of soul, the sense of identity and honor which, evidently, all men have connected in their memories with the idea of family? ²

The American milieu Miller reckons with is an interactive flux of the socio-familial scene wherein the social forces have acquired an unprecedented economic pressure and the familial values have to withstand this pressure and also retain social identity and significance since the failure at a social level entails a two fold failure – social as well as familial.

3.2 ARTHUR MILLER'S CONCEPT OF TRAGEDY

Eugene O' Neill predicted that the price of triumphant materialism would be a hundred percent American tragedy, "most appalling yet written or unwritten". This is only one aspect of O' Neill's vision of the tragic predicament of America. There was also a tragic irresolution of puritanized sexual and egoistic conflicts burdening the American soul with avoidable guilt and pessimism. Elmer Rice presented a horrifying comic pull of the technocratic industrial America which is far more tragic in its presentation of human predicament. The leftist playwrights of the nineteen

thirties like Clifford Odets, draw a despairing picture of the American family and the capitalistic economic system. Barring Odet's call for revolutionary action, the images of American society, presented were essentially one of negation of American individualism and of economic paradise. The focus shifts from individual to society, from what the individual aspires to what society could do.

The shift has much to do with the growth of the naturalistic vision of life since the late 19th century. Naturalism has not only shifted the dramatic conflict from the interplay between different human elements to the interaction between the individual and society within the context of a dynamic and historical change but also has come to look upon environment as the chief determinant of individual's socio-psychological being. M.W. Steinberg writes:

As the twentieth century approached, various forces were making for realism in drama with its emphasis on people and situations drawn from ordinary life perhaps an even more important aspect of the new drama was the post-Darwinian emphasis on environment as a shaping force in life. Man was seen as the product and from one point of view the victim, of his surroundings. Increasingly, writers became preoccupied with social institutions, political and economic issues..... The primary concern was with the external factors that operated on the protagonist rather than with the inner crisis experienced by him when challenged by his conditions.³

The implications of such a deterministic view is the formulation of a concept of a social play and the problems such a social play presents for a notion of tragedy. Arthur Miller describes the gap between a social play and a tragedy.

In all of them, from O' Neill's through the best of Anderson, Sidney Howard, and the rest, the underlying log jam, so to speak, the unresolvable paradox, is that, try as he will, the individual is doomed to frustration..... The image is that of the individual scratching away at a wall beyond which stands society, his fellow men. Sometimes he pounds at the wall, sometimes he tries to scale it or even blow it up, but at the end the wall is always there, and the man himself is dead or doomed to defeat in his attempt to live a human life..... The tragic victory is always denied us because, I believe, the plays cannot project with any conviction what the society, in the playwright's view at any rate, has failed to prove.⁴

The unmitigated individual failure, for Miller, denotes our contemporary distance from tragedy, for tragedy does not lie in individual failure, *per se* but in our education or learning, the failures afford us. Further, the individual's disjuncture with society in contemporary times, as envisioned in social drama or in naturalism, precludes a positive action or understanding that alone makes us capable of tragedy. Drawing inspiration from the Greeks for a concept of tragedy, Miller writes:

The preoccupation of the Greek drama with ultimate law, with the Grand Design, so to speak, was therefore an expression of a basic assumption of the people, who could – not yet conceive, luckily that any man could long prosper unless his polis prospered. The individual was at one with society; his conflicts with it, were, in our terms, like family conflicts the opposing sides of which nevertheless shared a mutuality of feeling and responsibility..... Religion is the only way we have any more of expressing our genuinely social feelings and concerns, for in our bones we as people do not otherwise, believe in our oneness with a larger group. But the religiousness of the Greek drama of the classical time was more worldly; it expressed a social concern, to be sure, but did so on the

part of a people already unified on earth rather than the drive of a single individual toward personal salvation.⁵

"The debilitation of tragic drama", Miller writes, is on account of "the fracturing and the aborting of the need of man to maintain a fruitful kind of union with his society"⁶. In the place of a fruitful relation, which entails a perseverant struggle, modern man seeks a facile adjustment with society – "we have set up a goal which can best be characterized as "happiness" – namely, staying out of trouble"⁷ where we have to fight meaningfully and fruitfully, we make a "truce" with society. The result is a withdrawal from conflict, struggle and affirmation that characterize tragedy.

For deep down we no longer believe in the rules of the tragic contest: we no longer believe that ultimate sense can be made of social causation, or in the possibility that any individual can, by a heroic effort, make sense of it. Thus the man that is driven to question the moral chaos in which we live ends up in our estimate as a possibly commendable but definitely odd fellow, and probably as a compulsively driven neurotic.....In the heroic and tragic time the act of questioning the way things are implied that a quest was being carried on to discover an ultimate law or way of life which would yield excellence; in the present time the quest is that of man made unhappy by rootlessness and, in every important modern play, by a man who is essentially a victim⁸

Tragedy in modern times, Miller views, has not transcended the state of pathos. In fact, pathos has come to appropriate tragedy – "We have abstracted from the Greek drama its air of doom, its physical destruction of the hero, but its victory escapes us".⁹

The reason for the pathetic predicament of man in the contemporary industrial state is not so much because of the power of the state but largely on account of the under valuation of the human worth of an individual to which the individual consciously subjects himself.

In short, the absolute value of the individual human being is believed in only as a second value; It stands well below the needs of efficient production. We have finally come to serve the machine. The machine must not be stopped, marred, left dry, or outmoded.....Our pity for the victim is mixed, I think. It is mixed with an air of self-preserving superiority.so long as modern man conceives of himself as valuable only because he fits into some niche in the machine – tending pattern, he will never know anything more than a pathetic doom.¹⁰

Though close to the Greeks and the Elizabethans, in characterizing tragedy as a self-elevating human endeavor and understanding, Miller looks upon the Greek and the Elizabethan tragedy as restrictive and partisan in limiting the tragic ability to the aristocratic few. Miller's tragedy encompasses everyone in society, in tune with the historical democratisation of society characteristic of our times – "the common man is as apt a subject of tragedy in its highest sense as kings were",¹¹ for modern psychiatry which derived its insights from Greek tragedy, finds no distinction between a king and a common man as far as the tragic proclivities are concerned. Further, the common man would never have been able to appreciate tragedy, if he were not capable of it.

For Miller, what is required for tragedy is a person "who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity"¹². The tragic struggle is the compulsion experienced by man "to evaluate himself justly". The destruction of man in the process of the struggle "posits a wrong or evil in his environment" and

there emerges "*the morality of tragedy and its lesson*" - "*The discovery of the moral law, which is what the enlightenment of tragedy consists of, is not the discovery of some abstract or metaphysical quantity*"¹³ but the essence of all that is pre-eminently human.

Death of a Salesman: Tragedy

In an age of democracy and freedom, which is also the age of brute technological power and mass hysteria, Miller looks upon tragedy, through which man can rest in eminence.

The tragic right is a condition of life, a condition in which the human personality is able to flower and realise itself. The wrong is the condition which suppresses man, perverts the flowing out of his love and creative instinct. Tragedy enlightens and it must, in that it points the heroic finger at the enemy of man's freedom. The thrust for freedom is the quality in tragedy which exalts. The revolutionary questioning of the stable environment is what terrifies"¹⁴

Miller, thus, contemporizes the concept of tragedy, that characterized the Greek and Elizabethan cultural and dramatic imagination, to meet the challenges of industrialism, technocracy, and democracy in mid 20th century America.

3.3 DEATH OF A SALESMAN : ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

The play opens in Willy Loman's house. Miller describes the unfolding tragedy - "*An air of a dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality*"¹⁵. The particular tragedy of Willy Loman, and many like him, is that reality is not confronted on its terms but with a perspective of dream that, at best, confounds both. The play has a two fold movement, the mundane economic struggles of Loman and his family and his dream world through which he tries to prospectivise his daily struggles.

As a salesman, Loman is "*tired to death*" as he "*couldn't make it, and couldn't drive anymore*". But as he drives, he is "*dreaming again*" and has "*strange thoughts*". There is no escape from journeying for he is a '*New England man*' not required in New York. The problem is not him but his son, Biff. So much of "*personal attractiveness gets lost*", but "*he could be big in no time*". But what future he has always having "*to get ahead of the next fella*" and that's how one "*builds the future*". He remains a boy at thirty four, unable to grow into a job or marriage. Loman's second son, Happy is no better but he has good dreams. "*apartment, car, and plenty of women*". Their problem is, as Biff says, that they "*weren't brought up to grub for money*" and they just "*don't know how to do it*". Nonetheless, they plan big, a corporation like Loman Brothers even though Biff compulsively steals little things. For Willy, '*who is tired to dream*', the road ahead of him is that of his sons. He is lost in thoughts about Biff. Biff has to finish his schooling, be careful with girls, his stealing the football for practice is the strength of his initiative, Bernard who complains against Biff's indifference to studies, probably, does not have the charismatic appeal of Biff.

Bernard can get the best marks in the school, y' understand but when he gets out in the business world, y' understand you are going to be five times ahead of him. That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes the appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want, you take me, for instance, I never have to wait in a line to see a

buyer "Willy Loman is here !" That's all they have to know and I go right through. ¹⁶

The tragic fallacy unfolds itself forcefully - the simple industry of Bernard doesn't take him far in business, but the personal magnetism of his son would guarantee him five times greater success than Bernard's. Loman has the Dale Carnegie vision of success through sheer force of personality for his sons. He would reinforce Carnegie's vision by unabashedly lying about himself. While he failed miserably in his job, he claims to have succeeded eminently. Instead of cautioning his children against the kind of failure he experienced, Willy tries to motivate his children, with his obsessive belief in the cultural myth of personality syndrome.

Willy alternates between unabashed lies and inescapable confessions: "*I am tellin' you*", "*I was sellin thousands and thousands*" but "*people don't seem to take to me*", "*they just pass me by*" and "*I get the feeling that I will never sell anything again*" ¹⁷. Similarly, there is, on the one hand, a total, even a self-effacing, commitment to the family and, on the other hand, an infidelity to Linda which he would rationalize as one necessary to fight his loneliness and failures of a travelling salesman.

Willy's tragic error is that he does not view his lies or infidelity as failures of his character but as necessary evils an individual has to cope up with in pursuit of the cherished cultural ideals. The reality of his life, his inability to drive long distances, dwindling income and mounting bills, and ever failing sons need not be faced squarely but be fought with a sense of what would have been missed opportunities or with an incurable hope or optimism in future possibilities.

As he talks to Linda about his failing appearance, he lapses semiconsciously into recollecting the amorous affections of the woman he meets on his journey. As he thinks of the near fatal accident in Yonkers, he remembers his brother, Ben and regrets why he didn't go to Alaska and make big like him who "*started with clothes on his back and ended up with diamond mines*". When Charley enquires from him whether he wants a job and offers him one, in view of his miserable plight, Willy resents his offer. Willy gets into reminiscing about Ben and his own early days as he talks to Charley. Ben is the ideal for Willy, a Horatio Alger story of rags to riches. He would not so much regret for not having been a Ben in spite of occasional thoughts of missed opportunities and being "*temporary*" in life, for that would mean a dilution of his belief that personality would do wonders but he very much wishes his sons to succeed like Ben.

As Willy lied about his success as salesman, so would he lie about his sons cherishing him as an ideal father and obeying him blindly. Biff understands Willy's deceptions and would never credit him with any character. Linda describes the socio-familial tragedy of Willy Loman.

I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made lot of money... He is not the finest character ever lived. But he's a human being... The man is exhausted.....A small man can be as exhausted as a great man. He works for a company thirty six years.... opens up unheard of territories to their trade mark and now in his old age they take his salary away" ¹⁸

To Biff's charge that those who threw him away were "*ungrateful bastards*", Linda replies.

Are they any worse than his sons. When he brought business, when they were young, they were glad to see him..... Now he takes his valises out of the car and pulls them back and takes them out again and he's exhausted..... And you tell me he has no character ? The man who never worked a day but for your benefit ? ¹⁹

Willy was not unaware of his place in the family. But what matters to him is success, or the myth of success. He would delude himself to be a successful salesman, so also he would delude himself to be a much respected and successful father. What matters to him is the dream he has for his sons.

When Happy informs him that Biff is going to see Oliver for some help in their "*great idea to sell sporting goods*" and establish "*a Loman line*", Willy's dream for his sons is enlivened again.

For Willy, the "*Loman Line is a one million dollar idea*" and Biff should conduct himself in all dignity, when he goes to see Oliver. He sees "*great things*" for his sons and their "*troubles are over*". They should "*start big*" and "*end big*". Biff "*who always started low*" should not be "*modest*" and "*undersell himself*" and should demand "*no less than fifteen thousand dollars*"²⁰.

Willy would not allow his dream for his son to be affected by anything - his own failure, Biff's failure and even by Biff's low estimate of him. Biff has to be both a Horatio Alger hero of adventure and a Dale Carnegie leader of human challenges.

Act I presents "*tired to death*" Willy Loman and his ever failing sons graduating themselves through nothing but their limitations and failures into mythical heroes of incorrigible optimism and self-congratulatory hopes.

Act II begins in this airy atmosphere of expectations. Willy would go to Howard and seek work in New York itself and Biff would meet Oliver to seek his help for what is planned as the "*Loman Line*" of enterprise. The sons, cocksure of their success, plan "*to blow*" Willy to a "*big meal*" at six o'clock at Frank's Chop House as a victory celebration.

Willy's meeting with Howard is traumatic for Willy's request for work in New York is not only rejected, he is thrown out of his job for being old and unproductive. The service rendered by Willy does not earn rewards when he cannot serve anymore. For Howard, business is business and no room for sentiments. He pays no attention to Willy's bitter complaint: "*You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away - a man is not a piece of fruit*"²¹. Unfortunately, in the impersonal logic of industrial capitalism, there is no scope for human values. Willy does not, nor cares to, understand how the economic system works. He simply cannot unlearn his faith in human ability working wonders in capitalist enterprise. Even Ben's story of rags to riches in the countryside is trivial compared to what is possible in industrial America.

It's contacts, Ben, contacts ! The whole wealth of Alaska passes over the lunch table at the Commodore Hotel and that's the wonder, the wonder of this country, that a man can end up with diamonds here on the basis of being liked.²²

As a part of his faith, he still thinks Biff would make up with Oliver,

He wants Biff very badly. Called him in from the West. Long distance, Carte Blanche, special deliveries.²³

Willy doesn't have the same faith in Biff. He cannot understand why Biff doesn't make the grade anywhere. He confesses to Bernard that Biff's failure has been haunting him like a ghost for fifteen years and wonders whether it was his fault. But Willy as he shaped himself can never comprehend either his or Biff's failure. His obsession with his individual ability is so debilitating that he would not do the most obvious - accept Charley's offer of a job in New York, a thing for which he begged Bernard. As Charley taunts him, Willy will never "*grow up*" and Willy as a salesman

fails to understand that what matters in the world is not what he is or what he thinks of himself but "*what you can sell*".

Oliver's indifference brings Biff to his senses and makes him realize the "*ridiculous lie*" his life has been and for fifteen years he has been living on dreams and lies Willy has been feeding him with. When Biff goes to Willy to share the facts of his life, Willy has no use for facts. What he requires is "*good news*" to tell Linda, for he is left with no more stories to tell her. In spite of Biff's frantic efforts to make Willy see the facts, Willy would like to delude himself with the dream he has for Biff. He would rather recognize Biff's lesser evils like failing in Mathematics and stealing Oliver's pen. He is less uncomfortable with these failures for which he is not directly responsible but he cannot reckon with Biff's bigger failure in life for which he is more responsible than Biff himself.

Biff's around failure makes him sympathetic to Willy, a sympathy he wasn't capable of earlier – "*A fine, troubled prince. A hardworking, unappreciated prince..... A good companion. Always for his boys*"²⁴. What Linda pleaded earlier with him for Willy, Biff goes to plead with Happy, "*you could help him – I can't! Don't you understand..... He is going to kill himself*"²⁵. Biff partners Willy's guilt, for he failed in everything, while Willy failed him with his biggest dream.

But Biff would not forgive him for his infidelity to Linda. His sympathy for Willy turns into aversion when he finds him in the hotel room with a woman. He condemns Willy as "*fake*", for if he could deceive Linda, his mother, he could do anything. His phoney dreams for him could be forgiven but not his dishonoring their very relationship that subsists through the mother.

Through his dreams, lies, failures and marital infidelity, Willy has reached the end of his road. After Biff's condemnation, Willy could only look up to a withdrawal from his socio-familial aspirations and functions. He would regress to a state dominated by nature's creativity.

Oh, I'd better hurry. I've got some seeds..... Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground²⁶.

As he plants carrots in his compound, Ben comes back to his memory. He always maintained a posture of superiority – of Dale Carnegie type of success in the city over Ben's Horatio Alger type of success in the country. He has to protect his superiority and also live down Biff's condemnation and hand down a legacy to the family they could live by – the insurance policy of 20 thousand dollars they would get in case of his death which may partially undo all the wrongs he did to the family.

What a proposition, ts ts. Terrific, Terrific 'cause she's suffered'. Ben, the woman has suffered. You understand me²⁷.

There is an alternative to socio-familial success – self-sacrifice though it is an inversion of his cherished dreams: "*A man can't go out the way he came in, Ben, a man has got to add up to something It is a guaranteed twenty thousand dollar proposition*"²⁸.

Willy gains a new self-assurance that at least through his death he would regain Biff's respect.

Oh, Ben, that's the whole beauty of it! I see it like a diamond, shining in the dark, hard and rough, that I can pick up and touch in my hand. Not like an appointment. This would not be another damned fool appointment, Ben, and it changes all the aspects. Because he thinks I'm nothing, see, and so he spites me. But the funeral..... that funeral will be massive... he will see it with his eyes

once and for all he'll see what I'm. Ben! He is in for shock, that boy!.... why can I give him something and not have him hate me ²⁹.

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Having decided on a course of action that would lift Biff from his miserable plight, Willy would not accept Biff leaving the house and doing what he is capable of. He would not accept that he undid Biff through his dreams nor does he agree that they are "*dime a dozen*" but distinctly Lomans. Biff is deliberately underrating himself just to "*spite him*". When Biff breaks down and pleads that he doesn't spite Willy anymore and begs him to understand that he is "*nothing*" and let him go before Willy's phony dream harms them further, Willy gains the assurance, that Biff likes him and if Biff likes him, his dream for him would succeed though perversely. Success matters to him, genuine or perverse.

Oh, Biff! Staring wildly: He cried! Cried to me. He is choking with his love, and now cries out his promise: That boy – that boy is going to be magnificent! Loves me.....always loved me. Isn't that a remarkable thing?.....he will worship me for it can you imagine the magnificence with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket ³⁰.

Willy for the first time in his life, is not dreaming of success but senses it – "*I gotta go..... when the mail comes, he will be ahead of Bernard again*"³¹.

Willy goes, to his death by driving his car to the wall.

Requiem sums up Willy's tragedy. His funeral has only his family members and his only friend, Charley. No salesman was present, for the world of salesmen is indifferent, impersonal and "*rough*". Willy cleared all the instalments, and left the family "*free and clear*". He just required a little salary to live on but he died because, Charley says, "*no man only needs a small salary*". He was a wonderful father but, Biff says, "*had the wrong dreams. All, are wrong*". Happy would try to prove that "*Willy did not die in vain*". He would try to win Willy's dream for him. If Willy's was a tragedy, it was not an individual's tragedy, a failure of Willy's ability or character but is, inescapably, that of his profession and the country. Charley sums up the socio-economic tragedy Willy represents for his nation.

Nobody dast blame this man. You don't understand: Willy was a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you law or give you medicine. He is a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back – that's an earthquake A salesman is got to dream.....It comes with the territory ³².

If Willy didn't dream he would have undone the salesman that he was. In dreaming, rather tragically, he makes the salesman *par excellence*.

3.4 *DEATH OF SALESMAN AS TRAGEDY: AN ASSESSMENT*

Traditional critics are not inclined to credit *Death of a Salesman* as a tragedy, for Willy Loman, even if one were to admit that a common man could be the subject of tragedy, lacks tragic stature. Willy lacks both the outstanding qualities, and grievous faults that make one a tragic hero. The charge against Willy is that he is more pathetic than tragic. Suffering has not earned him any insight into the illusory nature of his ideals – he remains at the end what he was in the beginning. Willy dies for a cause but chooses death at a point of alround failure. Moreover, the cultural myths, the Horatio Alger story, or Dale Carnegie type of success, Willy cherishes are found in their rejection in the play where as a tragedy is a structure of affirmation of a cultural myth.



Kernit Bloomgarden's production of *Death of a Salesman* (1949) - Mildred Dunnoek as Linda,
Arthur Kennedy and Camelon Mitchell as Biffard Happy and Leej-Cobb as Willy Loman

In his Introduction to **The Collected Plays**, Miller sets out the ideas that went into making *Death of a Salesman*. Firstly, he did "not set out to write tragedy but to show the truth as he saw it"³³. He meant the play "less a play than a fact". Secondly, the stature of the tragic hero is not dependent upon his rank in society but the availability of alternatives in whose choice he could play a heroic role. Miller's hero, Willy Loman, sets out as a salesman fighting out failure in his career, a failure determined in terms of the norms of success. The norms of success are set by the American cultural myths that are a part of his nationhood. Willy's problem is that in his mental make-up and aspirations, he is a quintessential American who could only live and die on Americanism. The failing salesman has to desperately and even hopelessly, struggle to succeed for, Miller says, success in American cultural myth is a right to live and "a failure in society and business has no right to live". Additionally, success in society is an ideal of fatherhood in family. A failure in society or business is a still greater failure in the family.

Even if Willy were to discard the societal norms of success, he has to live as a father in the family, a task that would have set him again into society. The social and the familial are bi-polar and oppositional though their struggles are often, inseparably, intermixed. Willy acquires a tragic stature in fighting a desperate and hopeless social role to uphold a familial value. Miller gives exactly this tragic role to Willy Loman.

My attempt in this play was to counter this anxiety with an opposing system which, so to speak, is in race for Willy's faith and it is the system of love which is the opposite of the law of success.³⁴

Consequently, much of the dramatic action in the play takes place in Willy himself struggling to remind and enthuse himself about the familial value and role. Success in this role is not written off, for he could succeed in this role through the success of his sons. The end of his social role would deprive his sons of a role model for them to follow.

Miller does not limit the meaning of the play to Willy Loman's struggles in spite of the attention he pays and the force he lends to his characterization. Miller intends Willy Loman to be totally consumed by the inexorable logic of the social conditions and the pressures it creates on the individual. Throughout the play, Willy Loman is driven, rather ritualistically towards his tragic end which has all the force of a preordained predicament, no matter how self-willed and positive may be the end on the part of Willy Loman. The force of tragedy in *Death of Salesman* emerges largely from the ritualistic pattern of the play and the sheer preponderance of the plot over individualist action as visualised by Aristotle. As in a Greek play, what emerges through the play is a greater understanding of the working of society. If, in Greece, the tragic story consisted in demonstrating that "the polis - the whole people had discovered some aspect of the grand design which also was the right way to live together", *Death of a Salesman* presents a similar logic in the working of the industrial, capitalist America. It was a "ritual enactment" in a Greek play, that "throws light on 'the metaphysical order' wherein the society sacrifices some man in order to reach its 'basic and fundamental laws' and justify its existence". Tragic form is a "ritualistic gesture" that helps in a reconciliation with existence. *Death of a Salesman* is an exercise in this tragic form, where Willy Loman is a tragic premise though in terms of the forces he encounters and in terms of his own inability to face up to the forces, he is a pathetic figure.

The strength of *Death of a Salesman* as tragedy emerges when attention is shifted from the predicament of the protagonist, Willy to the impact of the play on the audience. Thomas E. Porters points out where the significance of *Death of a Salesman* as tragedy lies.

In *Death of a Salesman* Miller taps a popular formula for the structure of the drama. Although the Dale Carnegie approach, the cult of personality is on the wane in the present generation, the drive for success is very much alive. Willy's plight, grounded in the excesses of the previous generation, but fostered by attitudes still shared by the present generation draws from audience both recognition of the illusion and sympathy for the visionary. Willy's suffering is real and deep. America cannot accept the success myth – "Horatio Alger" is now a term of derision – but there is no real substitute for it. Because Miller has built his play around an American dream, he strikes deep into the consciousness of the audience. The contemporary American, because he cannot solve the dilemma either, becomes involved in the sufferings of Willy the person as he watches the death of Willy the Salesman.³⁵

The tragedy of *Death of a Salesman* emerges partly from the audience's critical recognition that the myths cherished by Loman hold no more good in mid 20th century America and partly, from its empathy, not withstanding its critical recognition, for Loman who suffers both for wrong dreams and also for the lack of alternative cultural ideals to live by. Both in the pursuit of outdated ideals and also in the lack of alternative ideals, the average American partakes Loman's predicament though many may not have driven themselves to a pathetic or tragic end as Loman does. It is in the totality of audience response, critical as well as empathic, *Death of a Salesman* generates powerful tragic feelings. Unlike the Greeks and the Elizabethans, Miller is writing a realistic tragedy. The realistic tragedy since Ibsen chose to be critical in a spirit of Modern Science and representational in a democratic sense, while asserting a contemporariness in its cultural attitudes and ideas. The sense of immediacy that characterizes realism forces it to put every cultural attitude or idea to the strict test of time. Cultural attitudes look askance at themselves in the march of time. Realism derives its strength and power in exposing the sheer irrelevance, if nothing else, of the persistence of the past, however recent it could be. The present and the realistic tragedy dramatizes the pathetic conflict between what has been and what requires to be. *Death of a Salesman* is a tragedy of 19th century individualism, in the mid 20th century capitalist America. Individualism succeeded in the making of the nation but in an impersonal culture of the highly developed capitalist, technocratic society, it is a tragedy.

3.5 SUMMING UP

Death of a Salesman perfects the genre of realistic tragedy that began with Eugene O' Neill. The realistic tragedy, unlike the earlier forms of American drama in the 18th and the 19th centuries, is an instrument of cultural reappraisal. The play appeals to the common man even today. Salesman is the primary cultural icon of the industrial, and more so of, the contemporary post-industrial America. The icon does not stand any more for mere cultural aspirations. It stands for the burden of the aspirations and, possibly much more, for the price one has to pay for the failure of the aspirations. *Death of a Salesman* is the existential ethic of the millions and millions of Americans. Drama was never rhythmically so close to the American lives in the last two to three centuries as the realistic tragedy of Arthur Miller.

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33. "Introduction to Collected plays". *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller*. p.144 & 146.
34. Ibid p.149
35. Thomas E. Porter *Myth and the Modern American Drama* p.152.

Death of a Salesman:
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3.7 KEYWORDS

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|--|---|
| Max Weber (1864-1920): | German social scientist who in his classic work, <i>The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism</i> (1905) argued that both Protestantism, Protestant Calvinism in particular, and Western capitalism idealize economic struggles and material happiness. |
| Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790): | American author, scientist and philosopher. He was associated with the making of the American constitution. (1706-1790) |
| Russell H. Conwell (1843-1925): | The American Baptist clergyman who founded Conwell Temple University. |

Horotia Alger (1832-1899):	The American novelist whose pet theme was the rags to riches story.
Dale Carnegie (1888-1995):	American author and teacher.
Depression:	The great financial crisis in America during 1930's marked by Stock Market crash, low production, low retail sales, business failures and mass unemployment.
Adonis:	In Greek mythology, Adonis is a handsome young man loved by Aphrodite, Goddess of love and beauty.
Empathy:	The projection of one's own personality into the personality of another in order to understand him better. Theatrical empathy consists in the audience seeing themselves in the character on the stage.

3.8 QUESTIONS

1. Examine the American milieu in which Arthur Miller emerges as a dramatist.
2. Discuss Arthur Miller as a theorist of tragedy.
3. Examine Miller's distinction between Greco-Elizabethan tragic hero and the modern tragic hero.
4. Discuss how *Death of a Salesman* attempts to go beyond the boundaries of social drama to emerge as a tragedy.
5. Critically examine *Death of a Salesman* as a realistic tragedy.

3.9 ANNOTATIONS

Annotate the following passages with reference to the context.

1. The grass don't grow anymore, you can't raise a carrot in the backyard. They should've had a law against apartment houses.
2. There's more people! That's what's ruining this country! Population is getting out of control. The competition is maddening.
3. And whenever spring comes to where I am, I suddenly get the feeling, my God, I am not getting anywhere!
4. That man was a genius, that man was success incarnate! What a mistake! He begged me to go.
5. At that age I had a faulty view of Geography, William. I discovered after a few days that I was heading due south, so instead of Alaska, I ended up in Africa.

6. Great inventor, Father with one gadget he made more in a week than a man like you could make in a lifetime.
7. I just can't take hold, Mom. I can't take hold of some kind of life.
8. Like a young god. Hercules – something like that. And the Sun, the Sun all around him.
9. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today, it's all cut and dried, and there is no chance for bringing friendship to bear – or personality. You see what I mean.
10. Remarkable proposition, but you you've got to be sure you're not making a fool of yourself.

3.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

Harold Bloomed. *Arthur Miller's Salesman. Critical Interpretations*. New York. Chelsea House publishers 1988. Contains four significant essays, Esther Merle Jackson's "Death of a Salesman: Tragic myth in the Modern Theatre," Ruby Cohn's "The Articulate Victims of Arthur Miller," William Heyen's "Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and The American Dream" and William Aarnes "Tragic form and the possibility of meaning in *Death of a Salesman*."

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UNIT 4 THE NOVEL USE OF STRUCTURE IN *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

Structure

- 4:0 Objectives
- 4:1 Dramatic Structure: 20th Century Perspectives
- 4:2 Arthur Miller and the Concept of Dramatic Structure in *Death of a Salesman*
- 4:3 *Death of a Salesman*: Structural Analysis
- 4:4 The Novel Use of Structure in *Death of a Salesman*
- 4:5 Summing Up
- 4:6 References
- 4:7 Key Words
- 4:8 Questions
- 4:9 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit discusses the notions of dramatic structure in the 20th century and Miller's idea of dramatic form with particular reference to *Death of a Salesman* and also presents a structural analysis of the play.

4.1 DRAMATIC STRUCTURE: 20TH CENTURY PERSPECTIVES

Dramatic structure in the Greco-Elizabethan tragedy essentially conforms to the Aristotelian formulations of tragic form like *Chorus*, *agon pathos*, *thernos*, *anagnorisis*, *peripeteia* and *theopany*. The basic premise underlying the Greco-Elizabethan tragedy is the existence of an unfaltering communal order to which the tragic individual ascribes after questioning the order and revolting against it. The communal experience of the tragic individual and also of the movement of the play is ritualistic. There was a uniformity and universality of the tragic experience as well as of the tragic form. Drama was a matter of traditional absolutes in form and content. Under the influence of the Renaissance ideas, Elizabethan Drama began an implicit questioning of the traditional absolutes even as it accepted them.

The advent of modernism brought about relativism in human thinking, a relativism that refuses to accept the traditional absolutes. Matei Calinescu points out what it is to be modern.

From the point of view of modernity, an artist whether he likes it or not – is cut off from the normative past with its fixed criteria, and tradition has no legitimate claim to offer him examples to imitate or directions to follow. At best, he invents a private and essentially a modifiable past. His own awareness of the present, seised in its immediacy and irresistible transitoriness appears as his main source of inspiration and creativity. In this sense, it may be said that for the modern artist the past imitates the present far more than the present imitates the past¹.

The significance of modernism is that it recognizes the self-consciousness of the artist and the objective validity of his situation and emphasizes their mutual

6. Great inventor, Father with one gadget he made more in a week than a man like you could make in a lifetime.
7. I just can't take hold, Mom. I can't take hold of some kind of life.
8. Like a young god. Hercules – something like that. And the Sun, the Sun all around him.
9. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today, it's all cut and dried, and there is no chance for bringing friendship to bear – or personality. You see what I mean.
10. Remarkable proposition, but you you've got to be sure you're not making a fool of yourself.

Death of a Salesman:
Tragedy

3.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

Harold Bloomed. *Arthur Miller's Salesman. Critical Interpretations*. New York. Chelesa House publishers 1988. Contains four significant essays, Esther Merle Jackson's "Death of a Salesman: Tragic myth in the Modern Theatre," Ruby Cohn's "The Articulate Victims of Arthur Miller," William Heyen's "Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and The American Dream" and William Aarnes "Tragic form and the possibility of meaning in *Death of a Salesman*."

Arthur Miller *Theater Essays of Arthur Miller*. Robert A. Martin Ed. New York: Viking Press. 1978. Contains essays which has Miller's views on tragedy like "Tragedy and the Common Man," "The Nature of Tragedy," "On Social Plays," "The Family in Modern Drama" and "Introduction to the Collected plays."

Thomas E. Porter *Myth and Modern American Drama* Ludhiana. Kalyana Publishers 1969. "Analysis of *Death of a Salesman*" and other popular plays of 20th century in terms of American myths.

Joseph A. Haynes. "Arthur Miller and the Impasse of Naturalism" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 62,3. 1963. 327-334. Discussion of naturalism in Miller as a serious limitation of Miller's dramatic art and imagination.

Clinton.W.Trowbridge "Arthur Miller: Between Pathos and Tragedy" *Modern Drama* 10, 3 December 1967. 221-32. Discussion of Miller's plays in terms of the elements of pathos and tragedy.

Centola R. Steven "Family Values in *Death of a Salesman*"
CLA Journal. 1993. September – 37:1 29-41 presents the view that *Death of a Salesman* affirms the American family values.

UNIT 4 THE NOVEL USE OF STRUCTURE IN *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

Structure

- 4:0 Objectives
- 4:1 Dramatic Structure: 20th Century Perspectives
- 4:2 Arthur Miller and the Concept of Dramatic Structure in *Death of a Salesman*
- 4:3 *Death of a Salesman*: Structural Analysis
- 4:4 The Novel Use of Structure in *Death of a Salesman*
- 4:5 Summing Up
- 4:6 References
- 4:7 Key Words
- 4:8 Questions
- 4:9 Suggested Readings

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The significance of modernism is that it recognizes the self-consciousness of the artist and the objective validity of his situation and emphasizes their mutual

perceptual dependence. Modernism has an epochal significance for dramatic art. Modern Drama, basically a structure of what is called '*Dramatic realism*' shifts the focus of the western dramatist from the universal context of human predicament to an interaction between the individual and society within the context of a dynamic social and historical change. Consequently, much of the tragic conflict in modern drama has a historical perspective. Though the individual is perennially in conflict with society, the conflict tends to be largely between two visions of time. The rapidly changing society in 20th century finds the individual lagging behind historical change. The individual suffers either from the burdens of the past or from the unacclimatized rigors of the present. More than the interactional inability to cope up with the immediate pressures of his situation is an intense sense of crisis in his mind which accounts for much of the pathetic or tragic predicament in his individuality more than in society.

Consequently, Modern Drama "*removes the ground of the tragic conflict from outer event to inner conflict*". Dramatic form becomes an imitation of consciousness or dramatization of a point of crisis in the human mind in a substantial departure from Aristotle who insisted that drama, particularly tragedy, is an imitation of human action. Though the internalization of dramatic conflict existed to an extent in classical drama and in Shakespeare, it gained currency in the romantic period. Esther Merle Jackson writes:

The concept of tragedy as a crisis within the consciousness appears to have emerged clearly in the Romantic period, particularly in the **Sturm und Drang** movement in the theatre of Goethe, Schiller, Coleridge, Wagner and Nietzsche. Oddly enough, the idea continued to dominate the theatre of the so-called "Realists". It gained a "systematic dramaturgy in Expressionism"; It has, throughout this century, intensified its hold upon the contemporary imagination. We may, thus, read the Western drama – Classicism, Neo-classicism, Romanticism, Realism, and Expressionism – as a continuous development; the gradual narrowing of theatrical focus upon the movement of crisis within the individual consciousness. The adoption of this concept by modern dramatists has accounted for major alternations in form. The new form is not a representation of ordinary modes of action, an imitation of events in themselves. It is, rather, concerned with the representation of consciousness, with the limitation of a single moment of experience ².

The initial impulse behind modern drama and its realism is a rejection of established values and realism, in the sense of conforming to objective reality as a means of dramatising obsolete values. Robert Brustein characterizes the movement of modern drama as essentially a '*theatre of revolt*'. Even the further development of realism in naturalism, based on Emile Zola's belief that literature is an extension of biological sciences and, as such, has to be ruthlessly scientific, felt the need to reach out to the subjective needs of the human mind. Martin Esslin points to the 20th century perspectives of naturalism:

Once it is realized that the view of Naturalism as a mere attempt to create photographic reproductions of external reality is a very superficial one, and that, indeed, the essence of the Naturalists endeavor was an existential value-free scientific and experimental exploration of reality in its widest possible sense (including the subjective reality of the artist's temperament through which he perceives external reality) and that this approach logically led to the rejection of all ready-made formal conventions and implied the acceptance of organic form dictated by the nature of subject matter Naturalism opened the floodgates for a new stream of poetic possibilities in the theater ³.

Significantly, 20th century naturalism recognized the need for expressiveness as against mere representationality. The inadequacy of naturalism in dealing with the essentially dynamic and emotive relationship between the human mind and the objective world gave rise to postwar expressionism firstly in Germany and, later on the continent. Ralph Freedman points out the similarities as well as the differences between naturalism and expressionism:

Expressionistic style, then, is more than expressive language; It is a particular kind of expressive language. Indeed, it exists as a pivot between two phases of style which had emerged from the nineteenth century. One is the "underground" style of heightened romanticism: The other is the style of naturalism i.e. a heightening of realistic depiction, in which the poet is suppressed. Expressionism partook of both these styles, and worlds, at once. Not only concerned with the self's 'remarkable visions', refusing to absorb objects into dream but intensifying them by dream, the expressionistic style focussed attention on the world of things. Distortions were not to lead to formations of symbols; Sensations were not to be frozen into golden birds of heraldic significance. Rather, the world of objects was distorted to reveal its essential meaning. And "essential" is a value term imported by people. Expressionism, therefore, described the relations between man and object; it commanded engagement ⁴.

Both naturalism and expressionism posit an antagonism between man and society. While the former limits itself to presenting the pathos or tragedy of the individual in the technocratic industrial culture of the 20th century, the latter presents the irrepressible revolt of the individual against dehumanization in such culture.

For dramatic structure, the differing perspectives of naturalism and expressionism make a substantial difference. Naturalism delineates a linear progression of dramatic action in the manner of Greco-Elizabethan tragedy. The distinction of the naturalistic dramatic form is the evolution of a powerful theatrical illusion of the external world. The play is a '*slice of life*' and the artistic value is a total verisimilitude on the stage. In fact, stage verisimilitude and theatrical illusion tend to be so rigorous that the playwrights like Ibsen and Strindberg left powerful traces of a concealed or repressed subjectivity of the characters in their plays, even as they strove to uphold the naturalist norms of total objectivity. In fact, expressionism seeks to unburden the concealed or repressed subjectivity of a naturalistic play. The unburdening of the subjectivity is done by a positive disregard to the linear progression of dramatic action, and its spatio-temporal framework. In addition, there is an emotive concentration in words, dialogues, scenes presenting both a syntactical explosion and an erosion of the organic structural unity of the play. Further, expressionism distorts the objective reality to make the distorted reality synchronize with the emotive agitation being experienced by the character (please refer to 2:4, for expressionistic delineation of scenes and characters, and 2:8 for expressionistic revolt in Eugene O' Neill's *The Hairy Ape*).

Expressionism alters, substantially, the dramatic form in the 20th century from an individualist perspective. Naturalism and expressionism sought focus on the individual at a particular point of historical change but did not contemplate the possibility of a continual historical change the individual experiences. Further, there was the rejection of individualism itself by the powerful currents of Marxism in 20th century Europe. Bertolt Brecht seeks a renewal of the very notion of dramatic art from the standpoint of continual historical change. Brecht rhetorically poses the problem for dramatic art in 20th century:

Can we talk about money in the form of iambs?... Petroleum rebels against the five acts.....To clarify a figure today by character traits, an action of today by motives which would have been sufficient in our father's day is impossible⁵.

Death of a Salesman:
Structure

Traditional theatre as well as the modern theatre of individualism, for Brecht, promote the Aristotelian notion of dramatic art with its total focus on individual experience. Brecht writes:

The great individuals were the subject matter, and this matter produced the form of these dramas. It was the so called dramatic form, and "dramatic" meant: wildly agitated, passionate contradictory, dynamic.....In Shakespeare you see this precisely: through four acts Shakespeare drives the great individual this produces the form..... The first sentence of the tragedy is only written for the second one, and all the sentences exist only for the last sentence. It is the passion which keeps this machinery in motion and the purpose of the machinery is the great individual experience⁶.

Brecht rejects the very notion of an individual experience – "*The notion of a continuous I is a myth. Man is a constantly disintegrating and self-renewing atom*"⁷. Hence "*the human essence must be conceived of as an ensemble of all social relationships*"⁸ and the dramatic form as it has grown over the centuries with its focus on individual experience fails and "*the new epic form that Brecht conceives is the only one capable of compassing those processes which serve dramaturgy as the material for a comprehensive picture of the world*"⁹.

Theatrically, naturalism with its one point formula of theatrical illusion emerges as the enemy of Brecht's epic theatre. Traditional theatre's focus on empathy and the naturalist's on theatrical illusion seeks to draw the spectator both emotively and intellectually into stage action precluding any critical response on the part of the spectator. The theater of illusion seeks an immediate effect on the audience glossing over their social differences. It attempts to reduce the audience into an artificial collective whereas the contemporary society presents so much of difference in terms of class distinctions and interests. Hence the need for an alienation effect in the place of a '*cathartic effect*' or illusionism.

With a firm belief in Einstein's epistemological relativism and Marxian dialectical understanding of human reality in historical terms, Brecht struggles to revolutionize the dramatic art by replacing the categories of traditional theater by his epic theatre: plot is replaced by narrative and the significance of the character is submerged in the significance of the idea. The progression of the story through action, character development and a linear sequence to a climax at the end is replaced by a montage of scenes, each independent of the other and at times, counterpoised against one another. The thematic suggestiveness of the dramatic theatre becomes the objective ideological argument of the epic theatre. The dramatic sensation, feeling and experience give way to a dialectical understanding of the interacting processes of reality.

The spectator must be distanced from the play and the actor from his role. This alienation, a structuring principle of the play is meant to historicize both the character and the incidents of a play for giving the spectator a specific perspective of time and place of the dramatic character and action. Darko Suvin sums up Brecht's 20th century perspectives on dramatic art.

By the 19th century, bourgeois aesthetics had wholly forgotten the traditional implications of mimesis – reacting with a sterile denial of any relation between art and nature. In most of the 19th and in the early 20th century, it rested on the two axioms of individualism –

conceiving the world from the individual as the ultimate reality – and illusionism taking for granted that an artistic representation in some mystic way directly reproduces or “gives” man and the world. Against this, Brecht took up a position of a productive critique, showing the world as changeable, and of what I shall for want of a better term call dialectics: conceiving the world as a process and man as emergent..... No existing social relations (including the ones in the first communist states) are unique or final: all of them should be met by dialectic critique, keeping in mind the possibility and necessity of change. Art is not a mirror which reflects the truth existing outside the artist..... Brecht sees art as a dynamo, an artistic and scenic vision which penetrates nature’s possibilities, which finds out the “co-variant” laws of its processes, and makes it possible for critical understanding to intervene in them. This attitude attempts to raise art to an ontologically – or at least epistemologically – higher plane of creative significance than illusionism¹⁰.

Besides the tremendous influence of Brecht not only on Euro-American drama but on dramatic art all over the world, the implications of Brecht’s formulations are immense for a playwright. He does not have to feel, anymore, constricted either by the traditional theatre or by the naturalistic or expressionistic drama. So too is his freedom in terms of socio-psychological ideas. Brecht heralded an era of eclectic thinking both in the realms of ideas and dramatic forms or structures.

4.2 ARTHUR MILLER AND THE CONCEPT OF DRAMATIC STRUCTURE IN *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

There was a rich and varied history of dramatic experimentation for Arthur Miller to look back to when he wrote *Death of a Salesman*. For Miller, *Death of a Salesman* is not only a matter of tragic socio-economic experience, but a dramatic experience that transforms the manifold human life into a highly perceptive and enlightening structure. The form of a play, for him does not “spring” from ‘nowhere’ nor from the “temperamental choice of the playwright”. The form emerges instinctively from the subject itself. Every dramatic form expresses a particular human relationship “each of them suited to express either a familial relation at one extreme, or primarily social relation at the other”¹¹. The familial and the social have forced dramatic art into structures of realism and expressionism – “the force or pressure that makes for realism, that even requires it, is the magnetic force of the family relationship within the play” and expressionism “is a form of play which manifestly seeks to dramatize the conflict of either social, religious, ethical or moral forces per se, and in their naked roles, rather than to present psychologically realistic human characters in a more or less realistic environment”¹². This split between the private and the social life of man makes it difficult for dramatic form to present human reality comprehensively in any particular structure.

Miller presents contending structures of realism and expressionism in *Death of Salesman*. Realism is dictated by the conformist role Willy Loman seeks to play both in the family and society, accepting and cherishing both the familial and social codes. Nevertheless, he is forced into a social struggle by a temporal maladjustment. He tries to live by an increasingly non-existent socio-familial code. Consequently, the expressionistic thrust in the play is a pressure of time both at the thematic and structural levels – “*Death of a Salesman explodes the watch and the calender*”¹³. Miller writes:

The compacting of time destroys the realistic style not only because it violates our sense of reality, but collapsing time inevitably emphasises an element of existence which in life is not visible or ordinarily felt with equivalent power, and this is its symbolic meaning¹⁴.

Death of a Salesman:
Structure

The collapsing of time, particularly of the past and present, in the mind of Willy Loman creates an expressionistic structure within the broad realistic form of the play. Miller explains:

..... a method one might call linear or eventual in that one fact or incident creates the necessity for the next. The salesman image was from the beginning absorbed with the concept that nothing in life comes "next" but that everything exists together and at the same time within us; that there is no past to be "brought forward" in a human being, but that he is his past at every moment and that the present is merely that which his past is capable of noticing and smelling and reacting to¹⁵

The reductivity of Loman to a temporal flux shapes the dramatic thrust of the play. The temporal flux is, thematically, a contradiction of images and ideas. The first scenic image Miller wanted to create on the stage was *The Inside of His Head* "and inside of his head was a mass of contradictions". Within a realistic structure, Miller wanted to dispense with the very ingredients of realistic structure – firstly, the notion of a stable and consistent dramatic character – Miller aimed at an expressionistic internalization of socio-familial issues in the mental processes of the character and, thereby, create a new structure of a play where the human mind rather than society emerges as the primary social premise. – "I wished to create a form which, in itself as a form would literally be the process of Willy Loman's way of mind"¹⁶.

Listing out several images that occur in the play, Miller says that the play exists in the "structural images". Miller recalls what he wanted to do in the play:

It came from structural images. The play's eye was to revolve from within Willy's head, sweeping endlessly in all directions like a light on the sea, and nothing that formed in the distant mist was to be left uninvestigated. It was thought of as having the density of the novel form in its interchange of viewpoints, so that all roads led to Willy, the other characters were to feel it was their play, a story about them and not him¹⁷.

Willy is the centralizing force of the play in that only the play's nucleus is located within him. Equally central to the play's structure is the fact that Willy's point of view is one among the many, presented in the play's structure of images, that he has to contend with. With all the centralizing focus, Willy is not so much intended to present an individual but a world of individuals and its interactional dynamics. Miller intended a dramatic structure that presents a deindividualized focus on the individual.

Above all, in the structural sense, I aimed to make a play with the veritable countenance of life. To make the one the many, as in life, so that "society" is a power and a mystery of custom and inside the man and surrounding him, as the fish is in the sea, and the sea inside the fish, his, birth place and burial ground promise and threat.¹⁸

Clearly, the very dramatic structure is intended to be coextensive with the dramatic vision. There is no particular human experience to be dramatized as such for all experiences fall into broad existential patterns. Hence, the play ends with what it has begun with.

The ultimate matter with which the play will close is announced at the outset and is the matter of its every moment from the first....The play was begun with only one firm piece of knowledge and this was that Loman was to destroy himself. How it would wander before it got to that point I did not know and resolved not to care. I was convinced only that if I could make him remember enough he would kill himself, and the structure of the play was determined by what was needed to draw up his memories like a mass of entangled roots without end or beginning. In dramatic terms the form, therefore, is the process, instead of being a once-removed summation or indication of it: ¹⁹.

Death of a Salesman is Miller's attempt at evolving a dramatic structure that does not exist independently but resides in the very dramatic experience which the play presents.

4.3 *DEATH OF A SALESMAN: A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS*

In terms of what Miller had to say about *Death of a Salesman* the notion of structure has to be culled from what is presented in the play. The basic dramatic premise in that Willy would destroy himself by what he is made to remember. Memory is the chief antagonist in the play. It determines the predicament of the protagonist and through him the predicament of others dependent on him. Memory intrudes into the present and blends with it, thereby distorting the present and generating a conflict between two moments in the present – one present as it stands on its own and the second as shaped by the past. This conflict has several levels and dimensions in the play.

First, the polyscenic setting of the play. Loman's house is the main set of the play where much of the action takes place and the other scenes are played on the forestage. Within the house, different rooms are separated by imaginary wall lines. When the action is in the present, the imaginary wall lines are observed and in the memory scenes, these wall lines are forgotten. The polyscenic set with imaginary wall lines and their absence in memory, at once centers the play in Willy. Willy is rooted in the house and, concomitantly in the family and his forays both into the outside world and into the flights of memory are not only secondary but are also adversial to his stable familial position. Throughout the first Act, Willy, and members of his family, are at home and they are visited by the family friend, Charley and his son, Bernard.

The familial drama in the first Act begins with Willy's return from a business trip and ends with Willy's plan to meet his boss, Howard and Biff with his expected benefactor Oliver, the next day. Willy returned after narrowly missing an accident on the road, lost as he was observing the beautiful scenery around in his own dreams. At sixty, Willy is at loggerheads with himself, either physically over working, or, mentally, cannot keep himself to what he is doing. When he is not lost in himself, he is seiged by his failure to make enough money or by his eldest son, Biff's failure, at thirty four, to make any money. As if to compound his problems, there is the claustrophobic feeling of being 'boxed' in the apartment house, where there is no feel of nature.

As Willy goes out to breathe fresh air the scene opens up in the boy's room where Biff and Happy are lost in their own dreams. For a while, two scenes are simultaneously presented- Biff and Happy talking in their room and Willy mumbling to himself in the parlor. As Willy enters the kitchen, mumbling to himself, he is joined by Happy and Biff. Even before they join him, Willy keeps talking about his sons as if he is in conversation with them. His earlier frustration is suddenly lost in

his bright hopes for himself and his sons. No sooner, Bernard enters to remind Biff of his exams and the possibility of his flunking if he weren't to study Maths. Willy would not be disillusioned by what Bernard says but, on the other hand, would gloat over Biff's supposed superiority over Bernard and, as if that were not enough, boasts about his own wonderful salesmanship. He continues to do so even after the boys leave but gradually comes down to admitting to Linda that he hardly makes money and that people simply ignore or laugh at him. However, he would still like to delude himself that he fails because he is not dressed to advantage.

Linda assures him that he is handsome and the suggestion simply drives him into recollecting an amorous escapade with a woman during his road journeys. The memory withdrawal is gradual and the woman is first called Linda, in continuation of his conversation with her. As if he were talking with Linda, he justifies his relationship with the woman during the business trips. The woman who emerges from darkness to the brightening area on the stage disappears into the darkness leaving Willy with Linda and promising her "*to make it all up*".

Willy's memory of his guilt-ridden unfaithfulness to Linda in the face of her unremitting love, polyscenically presented, is an early indicator of his tragic undoing since in spite of being rooted in the family, he has an inclination and tendency to uproot himself. More than his unfaithfulness, his memory's fond indulgence in it to the extent of confusing Linda with the woman, is scenically highlighted in the emerging play's structure of the spilt present where a present dominated by a repressive past goes to annihilate the present, bright and rooted in itself.

Willy's unfaithfulness extends itself indirectly to Biff who suddenly becomes an easy object of his guilt and anger from being a hero of his deluded aspirations a little while ago. Memory brings back his hypocrisy in the form of the laughter of the woman. Willy asks her to shut up. However, the 'her' incidentally becomes Linda who was about to say something. Willy continues to live simultaneously in the past or in the present dominated by the past and in the present of the play.

Again, when Bernard comes to complain against Biff, Biff is back in admiration, more as a prelude to his admiration for Ben, his model of success that Biff should follow. But, his own and his sons' failure simply glare at Ben's success. Charley, who comes to visit him and offers him a job dramatizes the wide gap between his aspirations and achievement. It is not Charley that can enthuse him but Ben and Memory replaces Charley with Ben causing an initial confusion in Willy between the two. As Willy and Charley keep playing cards, Willy talks to Ben simultaneously in memory. Irritated, Charley goes away leaving Willy to Ben. Willy gets deeply engrossed in Ben's tales of adventure, even when Bernard and Charley come back to him to tell him that the watchman is chasing Biff for stealing. Willy is not only unmoved, but keeps gloating over his sons' skills forcing them to leave Willy to his dreams. Even after Ben disappears from memory, his ideas continue to have a grip on him.

The scene that follows, between Linda and Biff, presents a stark contrast between Ben made Willy, wanting to conquer the world, and Willy the father, in whom the son finds no character. Linda extends the contrast to the sons: adoring children when the father was successful and ungrateful ones when the father is old and unsuccessful. Again when a dream proposal comes before them, of seeking Oliver's help in starting a business in sports goods, the contrast dissolves – they are a respectful father and obedient children.

Within the broad structure of a spilt present, Act I presents alternating forms of character, viewpoints and mutual estimates. The point of the play in the first Act is a Brechtian exploration of character - character not as a thinking and behavioral concept but as a dialectic of differing selves to be understood as such by the other characters as well as by the audience. One could see Linda and The woman as Willy's own character traits. So also the adventurous Ben and the pragmatic Charley in Willy. Willy himself could be seen in Biff, both in his self – confidence and

despairing states and Biff in his faithful and unfaithful stances in Willy's attitude to Linda. The whole of the first Act, plays out time and character possibilities, both realistically and expressionistically.

Act II begins charting out the dream proposals arrived at, near the end of the first Act. Willy is to meet Howard for a position in New York and Biff is to meet Oliver to seek his help for his project. Through the various convolutions of hopes and failures, the first Act ends on a optimistic note. It is the dream that triumphs over the ever-failing reality. But, in a reversing trend, the second Act, within the continuing structure of the spilt present, dramatises the total failure of the dream.

In the breakfast scene, Willy foresees a cosy future arriving through their dream projects. But in the following scene at Howard's office, played on the forestage, Willy has the most shattering experience of his life. He is not only denied a position in New York but is fired from his job for being too old to carry on. This is the most powerful naturalistic scene in the play. Willy bitterly complains that he is eaten like an orange and thrown away like its peel. Willy fights back the frustration the only way it could – a fall back on Ben in the past. Willy fights the present failure with the self-confident rejection of Ben's offer in the past. In the next scene at Charley's office, Willy attempts and gains a realistic understanding of his and Biff's situation though he would not accept Charley's offer of a job. In the next scene, at Frank's Chop House, Willy's understanding of reality deepens when he learns that Biff failed to even talk to Oliver, much less win over him. In the following scene at the hotel room, where Biff finds him in the company of The woman, he stands condemned as a 'fake' by Biff. Scene after Scene in the second Act forces Willy to admit the hypocrisy of the social façade of success and, finally, even the familial façade of a devoted father is brought down by Biff.

The progression of the Second Act is Willy's eventual admission of reality and a withdrawal into himself, a self-battered by the world, rather than the self enthused by Ben, though an interaction with Ben inevitably follows. He wants to succeed like Ben – though not in the way he did – bequeath a legacy to his son in the form of an insurance amount of 20 thousand dollars through self-inflicted death.

The last scene in the house belongs to Biff's intense self-recognition, though much of it should be Willy's. Having decided to succeed in his own way, there is no need for a self-appraisal for Willy as there is for Biff. Self-appraisal comes in a different way for Willy by driving his car to the wall and to his death.

Structurally, the Second Act builds up a realistic understanding on the part of Willy and Biff and also a realistic triumph through Willy's self-willed death. The First Act presented a triumph of dream over reality and in the second Act, reality triumphs over dream through understanding, recognition and self-willed sacrifice and death. As in the First Act, there is a Brechtian exploration of character as a dialectic of different selves to be understood as such by the other characters as well as by the audience. In a structural progression from the First Act, the characters come to recognize and resolve the dialectic of selves within themselves. Willy and Biff gain a Brechtian understanding and recognition of themselves. The polyscenic stage plays out human drama, with powerful realism and subtle expressionism.

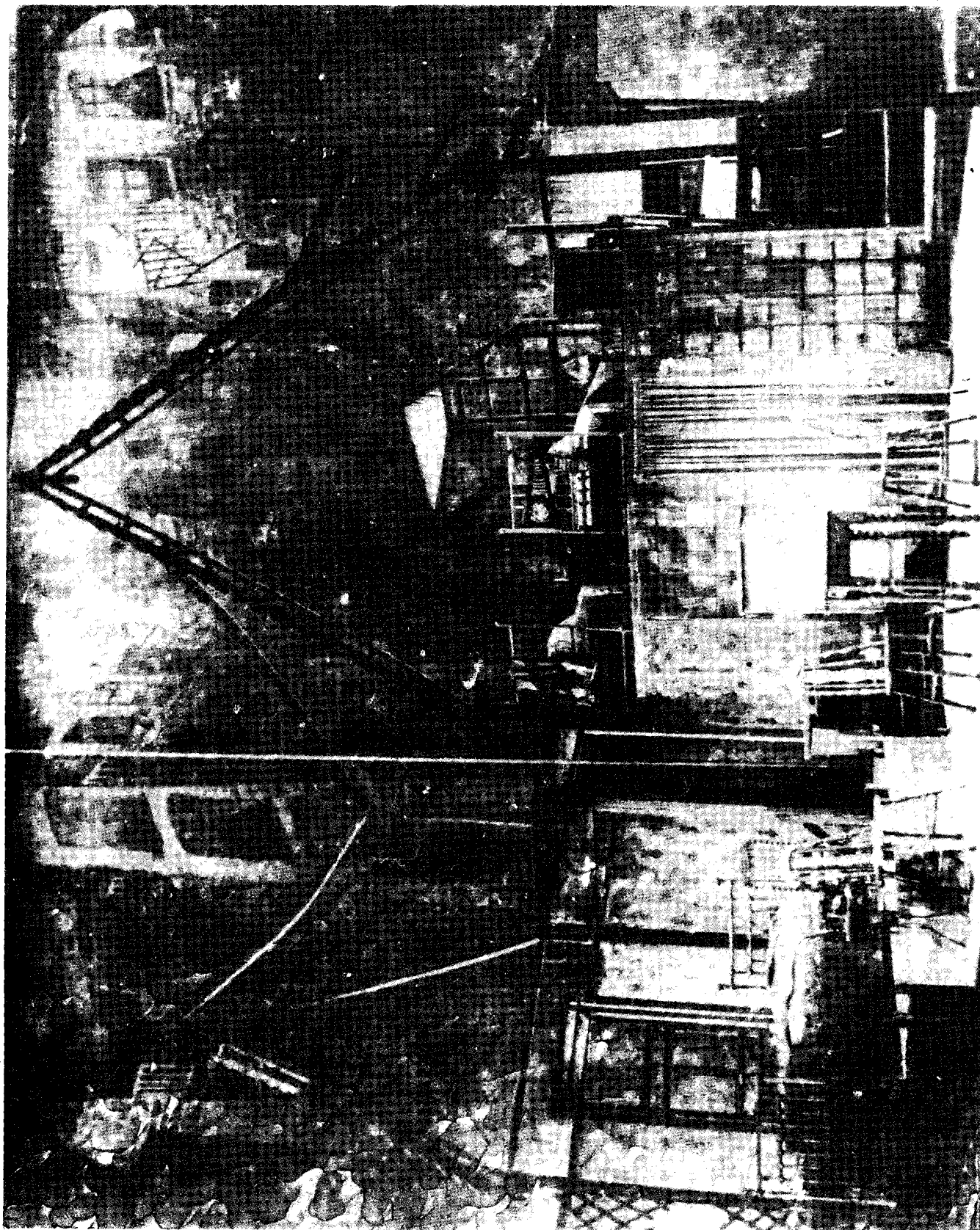
Requiem, at the end of the play, sums up what Miller attempted through the two Acts, presenting Willy, and through him the whole socio-familial order in America for an understanding of the audience – that they, like Willy, are not individuals but a compendia of diverse socio-familial values and dreams. Their inescapable but optimistic struggles for these values, irrespective of success or failure, provide the existential ethos for society.

Dramatic structure, as Miller attempted to shape it, is a compendium, abstracting the multiple elements of a human situation.

4.4 THE NOVEL USE OF "STRUCTURE" IN *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

Death of a Salesman:
Structure

Structurally, *Death of a Salesman* has a certain precedent in Ibsen's flashback techniques which Miller used in his earlier play, *All My Sons*. Peter Szondi sums up Miller's unique structural achievement in *Death of a Salesman*.



Joe Mielziner's setting for *Death of a Salesman* (1949)

Miller had, while following in Ibsen's footsteps, come to understand the manner in which the dramatic form resists this thematic and the costs attached to making the former serve the latter..... the contradiction between a remembered past conveyed by the thematic and the spatio-temporal present postulated by dramatic form; the resulting need to contrive a supplementary action with which to motivate the analysis; Miller tries to escape these contradictions by surrendering dramatic form. Fundamental here is the fact that he does not disguise the analysis as action. The past is no longer forced into open discussion by a dramatic conflict....Instead, the past achieves representation in the same way that it emerges in life itself – of its own accord... In **Death of a Salesman**, on the other hand, the past is not played as a thematic episode; the present and its action constantly overflow into the play of the past. No troupe of actors enters: without saying a word, the characters can become actors enacting themselves because the alternation between the immediate personal and the past remembered events is anchored in the epic principle of form operative here. The dramatic unities are likewise abolished – indeed, abolished in the most radical sense : memory signifies not only multiplicity of times and places and also the absolute loss of their identity. The temporal spatial present of the action is not simply relativised in terms of other presents; on the contrary, it is in itself relative²⁰.

Without Brecht's ideological perspectives, Miller uses his epic form to avoid the formalistic thrust of the given dramatic forms. **Death of a Salesman** makes any dramatic form tentative in terms of the given dramatic experience. In making the given dramatic concepts and categories relative to dramatic needs, the play makes the notion of form or structure a concomitant proposition to dramatic experience.

4.5 SUMMING UP

At a time, when dramatic forms gained specific points of view structuring dramatic experience to a particular end, **Death of a Salesman** expands the horizons of dramatic experience by the sheer multiplicity of human experience and open-ended structures. The novel use of structure in **Death of a Salesman** consists in Miller's use of dramatic structure eclectically to suit the complexity of human experience.

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4.7 KEY WORDS

Chorus:	In Greek drama Chorus is a group of performers who sing and dance at regular intervals. Chorus sometimes functions as a character representing humanity and standing as a foil to the hero.
Agon:	A debate or a contest in a Greek play, normally between the protagonist and the antagonist.
Pathos:	Suffering experienced by the people who are in no way responsible for the suffering.
Thernos:	Lamentation or ode. It normally takes the form of a choral dirge.
Anagnorsis:	Disclosure, discovery or recognition. The term includes the tragic hero's recognition of his tragic condition and also the ultimate nature of the world.
Peripeteia:	A sudden reversal of situation often occurring in a tragedy. It also occurs as an irony when an action produces the opposite of what was intended.
Theopany:	A manifestation or appearance of God. It also refers to a realization of God by a man.
Dialectics:	Juxtaposition or interaction of conflicting ideas or forces.
Sturm and Drang Movement:	Storm and Stress. A German literature movement in the later 18 th century, that rejected the rational doctrines of Enlightenment and looked forward to turbulent emotions.

Verisimilitude:

The quality of a work of art that gives the reader a feeling that it is close to life or that it is an acceptable representation of reality.

4.8 QUESTIONS

1. Critically examine the various notions of dramatic form in the 20th century.
2. Discuss Miller's views on dramatic realism and expressionism.
3. Discuss Miller's views on the dramatic structure of *Death of a Salesman*.
4. Discuss the problem of the spilt present in *Death of a Salesman*.
5. Examine the nature of realism and expressionism in *Death of a Salesman*.
6. Examine *Death of a Salesman* as a Brechtian play.
7. Miller abolishes dramatic form in *Death of a Salesman*. Discuss.
8. How do you explain the novel use of structure in *Death of a Salesman*.

4.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

Harold Bloom ed. Arthur Miller's *Salesman*. *Critical Interpretations*, New York. Chelsea House Publishers. 1988.

Contains Peter Szondi's "Memory and Dramatic Form in *Death of a Salesman*" which discusses Miller's innovations in dramatic structure in *Death of a Salesman*

Leah Hadomi "Fantasy and Reality: Dramatic Rhythm in *Death of a Salesman*" in *Modern Drama* 188. June 31:2 pp 157-174 Structural analysis of *Death of a Salesman*.

Brenda Murphy Miller: *Death of a Salesman : Plays in Production*. Cambridge University Press. 1995. Discussion of different productions of *Death of a Salesman*, particularly that of the Broadway Production in 1949.

UNIT 5 A COMPARISON BETWEEN EUGENE O' NEILL AND ARTHUR MILLER

Structure

- 5:0 Objectives
- 5:1 Post I First War and Post Second War Drama
- 5:2 Drama of Social Reality
- 5:3 Psychological Drama
- 5:4 Towards a Dramatic Vision
- 5:5 Autobiography and Drama
- 5:6 Dramatic Art
- 5:7 Theatricality
- 5:8 Summing Up
- 5:9 References
- 5:10 Keywords
- 5:11 Questions
- 5:12 Suggested Readings

5.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit discusses the points of dramatic convergence as well as of divergence in the plays of Eugene O' Neill and Arthur Miller. An attempt is made in this unit to see the 20th century American drama as one broad phenomenon.

5.1 POST I WORLD WAR AND POST II WAR AMERICAN DRAMA

Curiously enough, the two of the greatest American dramatists, Eugene O' Neill and Arthur Miller emerged on the scene in the aftermath of the world wars. Wars create, culturally, conditions of dislocated psyche for a sensitive artist. The dramatic endeavors of Eugene O' Neill in the 1920's and of Arthur Miller in the 1940's respond, primarily, to a certain sense of dislocation or alienation. Though the alienation presented by the playwrights emerges in the socio-familial order in the growing industrialism of the nation, and not directly traceable to the wars, world wars provide a context for the drama of alienation. The ambience makes the dramatic endeavors of O' Neill and Miller gain a particular historical perspective which, but for the world wars, they would have lacked.

The changing natural and social environment generating alienation at the level of the human self and society is the basic dramatic impulse in O' Neill and Miller. O' Neill begins his dramatic career by exploring the problem of human unrelatedness in a fast changing world while Miller begins by exploring the growing lack of correlation between the private and the public worlds. For both, the shrinking of the human space in the societal canvas is the major dramatic preoccupation. The only difference in their worlds of shrinking human space is that early O' Neill heroes experience the estrangement with the world as something happening suddenly with a catastrophic effect whereas Miller's heroes, throughout, have to reckon with the ever-failing interactional dynamics between the individual and society. The social matrix of the 1920's, and that of the 1940's present a difference of dramatic ethos and tasks for both the playwrights.

Both O' Neill and Miller grew enormously in their dramatic vision over the decades — O' Neill from 1920's through 1950's and Miller from the 1940's through the 1960's. A comparison of their early and late plays, and also those intersecting in the forties presents points of dramatic convergence as well as of divergence.

5.2 DRAMA OF SOCIAL REALITY

An important characteristic of O' Neill's early sea plays and significant plays like *The Hairy Ape* (1922) and *The Emperor Jones* (1922) and Miller's first significant play *All My Sons* (1947) is the pressure of the social reality of the times impinging on the dramatic world. O' Neill presents powerful images of the miserable plight of the underdog in the new industrial order- the hapless industrial worker, sailor and the farmer. Further, there is the plight of the Negro in the condition of utter racial inequality. Miller presents the self-degrading immorality in the business world in his time where, for sheer profiteering, defective engines are supplied to the war planes causing the death of the several pilots in the war.

Early in his dramatic career, O' Neill conceived theatre as life — *"the substance and interpretation of life"* and would interpret *"life in terms of lives, never just lives in terms of character"*¹. Dramatic art has to be approached from the perspective of life and dramatic character from the perspective of the people as they are. Miller similarly wanted dramatic art emerge from the lives of the people — *"the present, always the present, to which the dramatic form must apply and forms do die when they lose their capacity to open up the present"*². It is the concern for the people around them, their lives, problems and their concerns that motivates the dramatic careers of O' Neill and Miller.

The course of the dramatic careers of both the playwrights is a process of deepening their understanding of the contemporary human lives, psychologically and situationally. O' Neill proceeds with his dramatic imagination centered on a universalizing context. Miller looks up, equally, to universalizing contexts but for Miller, the universal is intensely socio-economic or socio-familial.

5.3 PSYCHOLOGICAL DRAMA

As O' Neill moves into the 1930's and Miller into the 1950's, their social concerns gain a psychological dimension. O' Neill comes to reckon with a tremendous complexity in human nature, and Miller with the difficulty of moral choice for man as the very condition of freedom. Both come to locate human predicament within the conflictual complexity of human impulses rather than in the adversarial position of man in society. The popularity of the insights of modern psychoanalysis, following Sigmund Freud's formulations on human nature, in America since the 1930's brings this shift of focus. O' Neill planned to create a modern psychological drama based on Greek legend in *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1932) and the central impulse in Miller's writing of *The Crucible* (1953) was not *"social but the interior psychological question"*³ at the back of all human motivation. The point of attack in both the plays which have a new England setting, is what has come to characterize American attitudes to private and public issues — puritan moral hypocrisy and the irresolution of psychic conflicts. O' Neill's purpose in the play is to prove that human nature in the reckoning of modern psychology is as deterministic as the Greek idea of fate. In what he calls a structure of *'unreal realism'*, O' Neill tries to decipher the inner realism of human nature through its apparent unrealism of the surface action. His play presents an unending series of human relationships, solely governed by, what Sigmund Freud calls, the basic Oedipus and Electra complexes in human

nature. Characters in the play are dramatic approximations of Freudian concepts. Lovelina is her father's girl and Orin is his mother's boy. Their puritanical but sensuous mother, Christiane incites both their libidinal and puritanical frenzy that contributes to the murders of Erza Mannon and Adam Brant and to her own suicide. The loss of the parents leads to a dangerously incestuous intimacy between Orin and Lovelina leading to Orin's suicide and Lovelina's mental agony. The characters have always been aware of what ails them but feel entrapped in a repressive psychological situation.

Miller, with a differing social perspective, explores the same unreal realism of the characters. The 17th century Witchcraft trial in Salem presented in the play is a telling commentary on the compulsive McCarthyism of the 1950's responsible for the trial of the several leftist intellectuals in America. With a non-existent witchcraft in the play, as was the incident concerning witchcraft in the 17th century Salem, the trial of the accused for practicing witchcraft dramatises the particular motivation of every character either in defense of, or in testimony against the accused. The protagonist, John Proctor, cherishes his profession as a minister, loves his life, and, above all, cares for his social respectability and, as such, his inability to protect law and its innocent victims has a justifiability in terms of his emotional and social self. T.E. Porter writes:

This emotional factor in the case is not accounted for by the rules. It is irrational, allogical but very real. Once the witchcraft scare has spread through the town, it becomes the channel by which fear, greed, sexual repressions, irresponsibility can be sublimated into "evidence". The law can help create a scapegoat on which the secret sins of the community can be visited ⁴.

The much adored American law in *The Crucible* like the much avowed Puritanism in *Mourning Becomes Electra* inverts the cherished values of individualism.

5.4 TOWARDS A DRAMATIC VISION

O' Neill's plays belonging to the final phase of writing, like *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Days Journey into Night* written around 1940 but produced in 1946 and 1956, respectively, invite comparison with *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and *After The Fall* (1964). Both *The Iceman Cometh* and *Death of a Salesman* have salesmen as their protagonists, and more importantly, they are the champions of the cherished American dream. Both make the salesman a representative American figure, for there is a growing belief that all Americans, at bottom, are salesmen. The difference between the salesman is that O' Neill's salesman, Hickey is "adrift in the universe" while Miller's Willy Loman is "adrift in contemporary American society". Christopher Innes sums up the difference in the dramatic perspectives of O' Neill and Miller.

Where Hickey's "smile of self-confident affability and hearty good fellowship.....makes everyone like him on sight", Willy jokes "too much" and his claim to be "well-liked" is a symptom of insecurity.....Where O' Neill makes his salesman a death figure, Willy is a reversed Haratio Alger.....Hickey is the archetype, "the Iceman of Death", while Willy is typical – a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash-can like all the rest of them.....But where O' Neill presents dreams as a common denominator of humanity being in essence "the pursuit of happiness" Miller deals with only those dreams that relate to the egoism of success and the cult of personality. *The Iceman Cometh* focusses on the product peddled,

happiness in the present or personal improvement, and the pseudo-religious nature of the ideal of progress. **Death of a Salesman** deals with the motivation, the myth of success and its effect on the salesmanIn O' Neill it is the recognition of the reality created by the Protestant work ethic with its burden of guilt that is deadly, driving men alternately to suicide, existential despair, or the debilitating drink of "pipe dreams", Miller presents only one "phony dream", the ethos underlying American commercialism⁵.

O' Neill gives a metaphysical dimension to the American dream while Miller dramatises the immediate social context of the dream. For O' Neill, the American dream is a broad existential predicament, and, for Miller, it is an impracticality or a failure in mid-century America.

O' Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and Miller's *After The Fall* are summative in design of the total dramatic output of the playwrights. The plays present a definitive vision of life, partially realized in the earlier plays. The focus shifts from a sense of failure to an admission of one's own responsibility, choice, and guilt. O' Neill's play is a familial drama, of New England's Irish Catholicism presenting a tragedy of mutual expectations, infirmities, grievances and failures. Miller's play is a play of marital cruelties and ungrateful friendships. The symbol of German concentration camp emerges intermittently in the play highlighting human cruelty and suffering, characteristic of the Jewish experience of holocaust and survival guilt. Both the plays have the format of self-trial but the existential strategies adopted by the characters in O' Neill and Miller's plays are radically different. For O' Neill's Mary Tyrone, a regressive escape into the past is an ecstatic flight whereas grappling with the present is a slow agonizing march of time. Each of the Tyrones is an ocean of thought and feeling presenting a complex world of his being. Every one of them becomes an existential problem for others. James Tyrone's miserliness, Mary's addiction, Edmund's tuberculosis and James' jealousy of his brother afflict them all, more than their individual frustrations. Nevertheless, Mary's ecstatic flight into the past is no escapism. There is an acute awareness of life's limitations and also a determination to live through life's limitations. Mary tells her husband:

James ' We've loved each other ! We always will ! Let's remember only that, and not try to understand what we cannot understand, or help the things that cannot be helped – the things life has done to us we cannot excuse or explain⁶.

Miller's Quentin in *After The Fall*, with two marital failures behind him and about to enter a third marriage, painfully realizes that people's concern for others is always egoistic and causes so much of eventual oppression and violence in the human relationships that no societal force could inflict the same on any individual. Understanding others where spontaneous love is not forthcoming, a sense of responsibility towards others and also a responsibility for one's choices and decisions would obviate much of the human failure and frustration. Looking into his personal life, Quentin finds that early in life, his self-centered mother made him an accomplice in her unmotivated cruelty towards his father. He and his second wife, Maggie are the victims of a similar cruelty towards each other. He also recognizes how he made a virtue of innocence out of his evasion of responsibility towards his friend, Mickey in not defending him before the committee on un-American activities. For Miller, the human predicament is a life after the fall, a life condemned to guilt and evil. There are no remedies to this predicament other than an awareness of the predicament of evil and guilt and a constant attempt to limit and transcend it and bring an element of sanity and peace to the human world.

In their own ways, O' Neill and Miller present an enormous progression in thought and vision from their early dramatic endeavors. Beginning with either an

individualist perspective on society or with a societal perspective on the individual, both come to locate the human world within the individual itself. Though O' Neill began in a Strindbergian fashion seeking a theatricalized dramatic power, he succeeds like Ibsen in making the dramatic medium an instrument of critical reflection. Miller was an Ibsenite throughout, a rather faithful one to begin with and finally an Ibsen *par excellence*. In coming to focus on continual human struggle and a necessary will to sustain the struggle, O' Neill and Miller reflect the existentialist vision of Arthur Schopenhauer and Albert Camus.

5.5 AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND DRAMA

O' Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and Miller's *After The Fall* are the playwrights' autobiographies transmuted into powerful drama, a transmutation achieved through a lifelong struggle to come to terms with themselves in their familial and social environment. Dramatic art resolved their socio-personal conflicts and intellectual dilemmas, a resolution that would have been, possibly, difficult to arrive at, unaided by their dramatic imagination.

Long Day's Journey into Night is not so much significant for the outright parallelism between the dramatic story and the playwright's life. What is more significant is the maturity O' Neill displays in understanding his own familial story and his own human and intellectual self with which he struggled in play after play from the beginning. Edwin A. Angel points out how O' Neill resolves the familial conflicts in *Long Day* and how the play is a culmination of his lifelong dramatic endeavors to come to terms with his familial world.

The portrait of Edmund, the playwright as a young man, is a replica of familial O' Neillian heroes early and late. Like Smitty of *The Moon of the Caribbees*, he is a melancholy, self-pitying inebriate. Like Robert Mayo of *Beyond The Horizon* and Stephen Murray of *The Straw*, he is a victim of tuberculosis. Like Michael Cape of *Welded*, he is suicidal because he finds life "intolerably insulting". Like Dion Anthony of *The Great God Brown*, he is a forlorn, mocking ironist. Like Richard Miller of *Ah, Wilderness!* he is an irreverent adolescent, given to quoting Victorian poetry. Like John Loving of *Days Without End*, he is a skeptical son of catholic parents. Like Larry Slade of *The Iceman*, he is a purgatorial ghost, paying off sins that he never committed.....The Father, up to a point a facsimile of the many fathers with whom O' Neill had dealt so harshly in the past, is raised at last to something human and pitiful..... Whereas the father is forgiven, the mother is not quite; for she remains an enigma to O' Neill..... "It is as if, inspite of loving us, she hated us" !....The play is one of self-discovery and spiritual victory ⁷.

The tragic world of O' Neill's play is the tragedy of his own life. Norman A. Chaitin points out how O' Neill himself was the tragic premise of his plays:

"O' Neill lived all his life with death in his body. Death was with him all the time, inside him. He feared it, in the end was "a little in love" with itO' Neill was born with what Unamuno called the tragic sense of life" ⁸.

Long Day..... transcends the normal theatrical power and appeal of a play in theatre. Travis Bogard points out:

Verisimilitude does not necessarily lead to a universal statement. However, when *Long Day's Journey into Night* is played, another

dimension opens. In the theatre, the suffering of the playwright is more real, if that is possible, than that of his characters. The audience shares them both.....Pain exists in a double layer, one that can seem a fiction, one that must be a truth as the truth of suffering has seldom been stated. An emotion appropriate to an aesthetic experience and an emotion evoked by reality join to create in the spectators a capacity for pity that extends well beyond the boundaries of theatre.....⁹.

While O' Neill attempted a self-discovery in *Long Day's Journey into Night*....., Miller attempted a self-analysis in *After The Fall*. If the dramatic instinct in O' Neill is a certain restlessness at the despairing human condition, the dramatic instinct in Miller is a state of dilemma as to how this despair can be eliminated or reduced. If Nietzsche and Schopenhauer enthused O' Neill, Marxism and liberalism enthused Miller. Before *After The Fall*, Miller never invested himself in his plays; he was not temperamentally equipped to do so. The compulsion to be confessional or self-critical on the part of Miller is partly because of the new self-critical mood of the 1960's and partly his own realization that his heroes in the earlier plays like Joe Killer in *All My Sons*, Willy in *Death of a Salesman*, John Proctor in *The Crucible*, Eddie Carbone in *A View From The Bridge* struggled with images forced on them in society with the consequence that they lived and died without ever, substantially grappling with themselves. Miller's own societal vision of man or his firm belief in man's rootedness in society precluded a serious self-struggle on the part of his heroes. It is the collapse of this social vision that accounts for the self-searching playwright and his protagonist. Quentin in *After The Fall* is the self-searching Miller. Maggie, Quentin's wife, is his own estranged wife, Merlin Monroe, the famous American film actress. Mickey, Quentin's friend, is Miller's own friend and associate, Elia Kazan. Quentin's arraignment before the committee on un-American activities was Miller's own arraignment before the committee. More importantly, Miller, for the first time in his play comes to reckon with his own Jewishness in the place of his erstwhile Americanism. Harold Clurman writes:

It is the first of Miller's plays where the main emphasis is almost entirely personal.....Still *After The Fall* is not only an extension of the themes to be found in Miller's previous plays; It is a reaffirmation through a reversal..... He not only confesses, he accuses himself. The Jury is his alter ego - in the audience; the evidence is provided by the testimony of his memory..... *After The Fall* is the signal step in the evolution of Arthur Miller as man and artist. The play's auto-criticism exposes him to us; it also liberates so that he can go on free of false legend and heavy halo ¹⁰.

The dramatic self-analysis of O' Neill and Miller, possibly, follow culturally nourished view points - O' Neill's Catholicism and Miller's moralistic Puritanism. O' Neill achieved a capacity for love and forgiveness and Miller satisfied his puritan conscience - "*The Puritan conscience is a complex phenomenon. Even while it holds fast to its conviction of rightness, it is haunted by a need for the expiation of its own sins*" ¹¹.

Long Day's Journey into Night is a religious play - one of "self-discovery and spiritual victory". *After The Fall*, which is Miller's own *Long Day's Journey into Night*, is a play of ruthless conscience and puritan moralism.

5.6 DRAMATIC ART

O' Neill and Miller have fashioned the realistic tragedy in 20th century America in the same way Ibsen and Strindberg had fashioned the European realistic tragedy in the 19th century. In the evolution of the tragic form, O' Neill and Miller display a greater

fascination and admiration for the Greek tragic form than, possibly, Ibsen and Strindberg, and passionately endeavored to capture the spirit of Greek tragic form in a totally different cultural and historical ethos. The Greek tragic myth is the structuring principle of O' Neill's plays like *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Desire Under the Elms* and the secular myths that dominated Miller's plays structured his plays in a similar manner. The Greek idea of fate or preordained end explains plays like *The Hairy Ape* and *Death of a Salesman* though the end does not affirm the communal myths but present a critical questioning along with the assertion of the worth of the individual rebel. Dramatic or human experience, for O' Neill and Miller, as it was for the Greeks, is ritualistic with little scope for individual choice and action, for society, as Miller would say, is a "God like power" in contemporary society and O' Neill would believe not "in relations of man to man but of man to God"¹². Hence tragedy is the limitation of man against God-like powers and O' Neill and Miller, like the Greeks, would locate tragedy in the human limitations and the tragic action in the refusal to accept the limitation. Given the nature of modern society where individual tragic action leads to no communally gratifying relationship as it happens in Greek tragedy, the question O' Neill and Miller had to address was the possibility of tragedy, intellectually and morally, in modern society. Would the unrewarding individual struggles in our society, be simply pathetic, falling short of a tragic condition or victory? It is the Greek concept of tragic victory that motivates O' Neill and Miller in visualizing what a modern tragedy should aim at. Miller writes:

The social drama in this generation must do more than analyze and arraign the social network of relationships. It must delve into the nature of man as he exists to discover what his needs are, so that those needs may be amplified and exteriorized in terms of social concepts. Thus, the new social dramatist, if he is to do his work, must be an even deeper psychologist than those in the past and he must be conscious at least of the futility of isolating the psychological life of man lest he fall always short of tragedy and return again and again to the pathetic swampland where the waters are old tears and not the generative seas from which new kinds of life arise.¹³

It is this explorativeness of tragedy that elevates the realistic tragedies of O' Neill and Miller. Realism and tragedy are built in oppositional points of view. Much of 20th century realism and naturalism have rarely enabled drama to go beyond the untragic pathos. O' Neill and Miller presented a versatile dramatic imagination and experimentation to make the realistic dramatic medium, which historically locates their dramatic endeavors, as comprehensive an art as any art form to date. It is a remarkable achievement for both the playwrights not to feel constricted by the demands of the realistic form, and register with the audience the contemporaneity of dramatic action and thought. At times, realist axioms like verisimilitude, dramatic illusion and spatio-temporal framework came in the way of dramatizing what they felt as the realism of human lives. They dispensed with the axioms and used anti-realistic devices to promote, what they considered, authentic realism. O' Neill used anti-realistic devices like asides and masks and Miller enlarged the concept of the dramatic present to include the recurring past. Character stability and consistency, the cornerstones of realistic art, have been de-emphasized by both to project the recurrent cultural destabilization characteristic of the modern times. Both felt the need for dramatic expressivity even as they envisioned the unchanging realism of human lives. The use of dramatic expressionism, which arose ideologically to traumatize the unchanging human condition, is functionally used by O' Neill and Miller to dramatize possible states of mind rather than to create states of characterlessness as expressionism endeavored to do.

O' Neill and Miller have vastly enlarged and sophisticated the concept of realistic aesthetic to grapple effectively with the complexities of contemporary life, both representationally and presentationally. It is this achievement that excludes the

constrictive division in American theatre between realism and expressionism that, at times, characterizes European drama and it is this achievement that explains the stability of realistic art in America over the decades, unlike Europe where it suffered traumatic reversals.

5.7 THEATRICALITY

O' Neill and Miller, revolutionized American theatre, to make it a powerful medium of cultural expression in America. "*The theatre to me is a life – the substance and interpretation of life the one true theatre is a theatre returned to its highest and sole significant function as a temple where the religion of a poetical interpretation and symbolic celebration of life is communicated to human beings*"¹⁴, O' Neill declared. In fact, O' Neill's primary contribution is the evolution of literary drama to the actorly dominated American theatre but O' Neill's greater contribution lies in making the script and the production of the play implicit in the very act of writing the play. As such, the '*essentially symbolic or the masked*' drama of O' Neill emerges in many plays as a sort of plastic theater relying on the non-literary elements on the stage for a dramatic statement. Beginning with the use of drums, dance and pantomime in *The Emperor Jones* (1921) O' Neill endeavors to perfect theatrical devices like masks to illustrate the reality of human lives lurking under surface appearances in plays like *The Great God Brown*. O' Neill's contribution to theatre through plays like *The Great God Brown* (1925) and *Lazarus Laughed* (1926) is a concept of theatrical reality based on the multi dimensionality of human nature. Human interaction, as illustrated by the insights of modern psychoanalysis, is more a means of distortion and concealment of human impulses and thoughts than their expression. Theatre, as it is used to a one-dimensional presentation of human nature, must evolve a theatrical structure of communication that illustrates the processes of communicative distortion and concealment. Like asides O' Neill uses in *Strange Interlude* to present the interior monologue of the characters on the stage, masks theatricalize the vicariousness inherent in contemporary living and as O' Neill goes to explore this vicariousness further in plays like *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day.....* the theatrical symbol becomes redundant as the roles the characters play themselves becomes masks. The characters do not require masks since the character, as dramatically and theatrically conceived, is simply a point of departure for role playing. O' Neill struggled to bring a multidimensional human reality to the theater, a reality that does not admit theatrical illusion on the stage but succeeds, within a broad sequential and logical structure, in reaching out to the audience with all the intimacy and power with which realistic theatre intends to reach the audience.

Similarly Miller, relied on theatrical communication for the success of his plays – "*the lessons of a play, its meaning and theme, had to spread out like a contagion if they were to be aesthetic, in which case few would be aware they were even infected*"¹⁵. The power, Miller's play, *Death of a Salesman* derives is no less from its theatrical production than from the power of the literary text. If the peculiar dramatic structure of the play constituted its thematic force, its presentation on the stage, through the evolution of scenic images, and theatricalizing the expressionistic time and space constituted a substantial process of the writing of the play itself. Miller had only a minimal text and the play took final shape through the creative collaboration of Miller the playwright, director, Elia Kazan and the designer, Joe Mielziner and the actor, Lee J. Cob. "*A play waiting for a directorial solution*"¹⁶ – This was how *Death of a Salesman* presented itself to the director, Elia Kazan. The point, absolutely, is not the dramatic incompleteness of the play in the hands of Miller but simply an illustration of the fact that Miller's dramatic achievement lay in making the play emerge through its own theatrical primacy. The sheer theatrical ingenuity of *Death of a Salesman* could be seen in its failure to succeed as a film. Miller writes:

.....(*Death of a Salesman*) failed as a motion picture.....(because) the dramatic tension of Willy's memories was destroyed by transferring him, literally, to the locales he had only imagined in the playThe horror is lost – and drama becomes narrative – when the context actually becomes his imagined world The setting on stage was never shifted.... Indeed, his terror springs from his never-lost awareness of time and place.....The movie's tendency is always to wipe out what has gone before, and it is thus in constant danger of transforming the dramatic into narrative ¹⁷.

Death of a Salesman belongs to a period when mass media like television had not yet elbowed out theatre as a popular medium of art, a phenomenon that took another two to three decades to happen and, theatre has had to struggle to exist, leave alone survive, ever since. Through his theatrical triumph in *Death of a Salesman*, Miller asserted, not only in his time but for the decades to come, the relevance of theatrical art in an age of mass media and also the indispensability of theatrical art in contemporary times to dramatize the complexity of the human mind.

5.8 SUMMING UP

In their distinct individual ways, O' Neill and Miller present a broad similarity of dramatic endeavors, imagination and vision. Where they differed, it is either a difference of points of view or a difference of particular dramatic concerns, to which they respond. They made much of the 20th century American drama and they made it a formidable medium of American art and cultural expression. Without them, one would have heard very little of American drama.

5.9 REFERENCES

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10. Harold Clurman "Arthur Miller's Later Plays" in *Arthur Miller. A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. Robert Corrigan. New Jersey, Prentice Hall. p.150 & 151.
11. Ibid p.148
12. Eugene O' Neill. Quoted by Miller in "The Shadow of Gods" *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller* p.181.

13. Arthur Miller "On Social Plays" *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller* p.61-2
14. O' Neill Quoted in Cargill's *O' Neill and his plays*. pp.107 & 121-22.
15. Arthur Miller "Author's Foreword: Sorting Things Out" in *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller* p XLIV.
16. Brenda Murphy. *Miller. Death of a Salesman* Cambridge University Press, 1995 p.10.
17. Arthur Miller - "Introduction to Collected Plays" in *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller* p.139.

5.10 KEY WORDS

Oedipus Complex:

The term is used in Freudian psychology to denote a psychological condition in which a male develops an excessive love for his mother accompanied by a corresponding hatred for the father. The term is derived from Sophocles' Oedipus the King where Oedipus kills his father and marries his own mother.

Electra Complex:

Feminine equivalent of Oedipus complex. Sexual attraction of a girl to her father. The term is derived from a character in Greek trilogy by Aeschylus, known for her abnormal fascination for her father.

McCarthyism:

The term, derived from the controversial U.S. Senator, McCarthy refers to the feverish anticommunism that gripped America in the aftermath of the second world war.

Arthur Schopenhauer:

Eighteenth century German philosopher who rejects Schopenhauer's materialism and subjective idealism and focusses on *Will* which is both the human *Will* as well as that of the objective world. It is this *Will* in the sense of a strong determination for action that accounts for the continual existence of man and the objective world.

Albert Camus:

French novelist, essayist and playwright who emerged as one of the greatest literary spokesmen of 20th century. One of the champions of philosophy of existentialism which rejects all kinds of idealism looking up to the essence of things than things themselves. Camus looks upon the human condition as one of irremediable absurdity but exhorts that man must come to grips with the absurdity of his condition by fighting it as heroically as he could. For him, there could be no other meaning or value in human life other than a struggle with the absurdity inherent in it. His most important works are *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), *Caligula* (1944) and *The Rebel* (1951).

5.11 QUESTIONS

1. Eugene O' Neill and Arthur Miller are postwar dramatists in America. Discuss.
2. Critically examine the early plays of O' Neill and Miller and point out how they reflect the respective periods in which they were written.

3. Examine myth as a structuring principle in O' Neill and Miller's plays.
4. The contribution of O' Neill and Miller lay in the field of psychological drama. Discuss.
5. Discuss *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *After The Fall* as autobiographical plays.
6. Examine the contribution of O' Neill and Miller to the evolution of American dramatic art.
7. Explain whether it is the dramatic medium or the stage that accounts for the popularity of O' Neill and Miller in America.
8. Dramatic convergence, rather than divergence in O' Neill and Miller is significant. Discuss.

5.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

Travis Bogard "*Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O' Neill*. New York Oxford University Press. 1972. Discussion of O' Neills plays mainly in terms of his theatrical effort.

Arthur Miller: *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller*. New York: Viking Press. 1978. Miller's views on several dramatists, his own plays and also his views on dramatic form.

Harold Bloomed: *Modern Critical Interpretations : Miller's Death of a Salesman*. New York. Chelsea House Publishers. 1987 (contains essays on *Death of a Salesman* by Esther Merle Jackson, Christopher Innes, Ruby Cohn, William Aarnes and others.)

C.W.E. Bigsby. *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*. Volume I 1900-1940. Cambridge University Press, 1982. A discussion of O' Neill's drama and the 20th century American drama upto 1940.

C.W.E. Bigsby. *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama* Volume 2, Cambridge University Press 1984. Discussion of the plays of Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee.

Block Conclusion: Tragic Perspectives in American Drama

As you have gone through these units, scanning American dramatic history, witnessing the emergence of modern American drama and its struggle, over the decades, with a sort of artistic and cultural ambivalence and its tentative triumphs in resolving these ambivalences, you would have surely grasped an essential artistic and cultural statement being made throughout.

Artistic eclecticism and comprehensiveness of the tragic form is the first premise of American drama. It cherished Greek tragedy but modified some of its basic norms and brought in mutually opposing dramatic styles to suit its own historical needs. The American realistic tragedy that emerges through the plays of Eugene O' Neill and Arthur Miller is the most comprehensive dramatic form to emerge in the history of dramatic literature.

Secondly, it makes a cultural statement about what it is to be a human individual in 20th century America. To be human is to be individualistic and both imply a tragic condition. To be tragic, or to be particularly capable of tragedy, one has to be several things – passionately aspiring, face frustration and failure on account of aspirations, and, finally grow into an understanding of one's own predicament and become capable of self-abnegating gestures that would enable one to succeed where they have failed.

An intensely human statement emerges from the discussion on American drama in the foregoing units of the block.