UNIT 1 AMERICAN DRAMA: AN INTRODUCTION

Structure

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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 1920s. 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 1920s 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 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 Adulterer* (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 or, 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 Poulding’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...
American Drama

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.

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 mustache-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..."
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.

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 variety.

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 Mackage 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.

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 proscenium 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 proscenium arch to create the realistic illusion.

*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, Oskar Brahms 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 flourished 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 Norwegien 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.

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 his 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.

Howells had no illusion about the fact that Ibsen would readily catch the imagination of the American theatre — goers 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 Bunker’s Daughter (1873) and Henrietta (1887), A Trip to China Town (1891), Edward Harringan’s Dan’s Tribulations (1884), Benman Thomson’s The Old Homestead (1886). James A. Herne kindles the hopes of Howells in attempting an Ibseine 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.
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 codes.

_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 not withstanding, 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 Howellsdreamt and visualised.
1.12 SUMMING UP

The growth of American drama since the sixteenth century up to 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

2. Ibid pp.114-15
5. Ibid pp.237
7. Ibid. pp.160-1

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 16th 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 18th and early 19th centuries with its emphasis on imagination and feeling. It expresses the uniqueness of self and believes in the innate goodness of man who is
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.

Hewitt Bernard Theatre USA 1665-1957. A very comprehensive theatre history and also of theatrical organizations.


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’s 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