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**Subject: Contemporary American Literature/ Master 01**

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**INTRODUCTION TO DRAMA**

**Definition of the Literary Genre Drama** : It is a composition written in verse or prose, usually designed to be performed on stage where actors act out their roles in front of an audience. It is usually a kind of communication in the form of a dialogue between the actors themselves or the actors and the audience (Arab, 2011).

The stage director relies on the stage directions that are provided by the playwright. These stage directions embody a detailed description of the visual elements (costumes, make up, lighting, scenery, music,…) which convey to the audience the general mood of the play ( ibid).

When the reader reads these stage directions, he will visualize the scene and the actions. Mostly, stage directions are written in *italics* (ibid).

Because a play is meant to be performed on stage in a limited time and space, it is mostly featured by its intensity and condensity. In addition, the structure of the play is usually composed of acts divided into scenes (ibid).

As a literary genre, drama is divided into three sub-genres, namely:

1. Tragedy: featured by its sad ending.
2. Comedy: featured by its humour and happy ending.
3. The tragi-comedy: a combination of both tragedy and comedy.

In a tragedy, the tragic hero fails and collapses not simply because of the circumstances over which he has no control, but because of a personal flaw and defect within his character.

The theme of the play is to be constructed not only through the analysis of the language, but also through characterization, action, setting, atmosphere and plot as well (ibid).

**AN OVERVIEW ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN DRAMA**

The early beginnings of the American drama go back to the early native American tribes that performed events, in addition to the plays written by European-born authors (Spaniards, Frenchmen, Englishmen).

The birth of the professional theatre in America may have begun when Lewis Hallan arrived with his theatrical company in Williams Burg in 1752. Lewis and his brother William were the first to organize a complete company of actors in Europe and bring them to the colonies. They bought a repertoire of plays that were popular in London at the time, including Hamlet, Othelo, Richard IV.

The first American mounted play goes with Thomas Godfrey’s play “The Prince of Parthia” in 1767.

The American Revolution had shed with its light on the theatrical scenery infusing it with plays for heroism, satire and political debates. Nevertheless, there were no professional dramatists until William Dunlap whose work as playwright, translator, manager and theatre historian has earned him the title ‘Father of American Drama’. With him, the amateur Royal Tyler (1757-1826) who produced a piece of play worth to be noted “The Contrast” in 1787. Though he was influenced by European theatres, the American character was present in his play.

By the late eighteenth century, ethnic theatres existed. They were established by the first settlers like the French and the Italians. Their existence brought new plays and theatres increased within the Jacksonian era (1820’s-1830’s). Thus, during the antibellum years, with new immigrants pouring into America, theatres appeared for each group: Italian American, Swedish American, Irish American, Ukranian American, Norwegian American which each group of them appealed to their own sensibilities and culture. As an example, the staging of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin brought into light issues of race and ethnicity ( Sbteir, 2005).

It is to note that within the same era, the first native American theatre which features Americans first appeared with John Augustus Stone’s Metamora (1829). Ultimately, after the Civil war, and with the rising immigration of the new plays portrayed the new realities on immigrants’ life, thus, emphasis on realism was noted. However, the influence of the European drama still shows up in these plays up to the late nineteenth century (ibid).

Among these ethnic theatres, the Yiddish theatre comes to be the most prominent from ethnic theatres in late nineteenth century. Jewish immigrants brought the most experienced theatrical tradition from Europe and creating at the same time a highly theatrical tradition from Europe and creating at the same time a highly theatrical style. The poet and lyricist Russian-born Abraham Goldfaden (1840-1908) was known as the father of the Yiddish theatre who introduced Yiddish drama into the realm of literature (ibid).

By the 19th century, though most dramas were imitations of European melodrama, they were native in content, appealing to popular nationalism by dramatizing current events and portraying American heroism. By the end of the 19th century, drama tends to be more realistic and less romantic.

In the modern times, like Europe, America was undergoing huge changes inside without being isolated from world changes as well. Particularly, the first half of the 20th century, as it was the age of innovation and technological advancement, it was also the age of conflicts in ideologies between communism and capitalism, in addition to the nuclear bombing of Japan, the two world wars and their consequences on the individual and the society. At the meantime, outside America, we can talk of the spread of fascism in Europe and the Reds in Italy.

In this context, the artist is in a position to look for other means of expression capable of translating this new reality characterized by its ambiguity, fragmentation, incoherence and fluctuation. In fact, two factors contributed in the development of the American theatre. They are the urbanization and the territorial expansion.

By the twentieth century, two types of theatres existed, i.e, the commercial and the avant-garde theatre as American theatre responded to new American industry. Thus, theatrical industry became a profitable enterprise ( Krasner: 2005; Gainor and Dickey: 2005). Two distinctive figures represented these two types of theatre. Susan Glaspell connects to the experimental theatre tradition and Sophie Treadwell to the commercial stage. Their engagement in modernism, feminism and politics informed their dramatology (Gainor and Dickey, 2005).

During the 1910s and 1920s, voices for a native Amercian drama were heard. American experimentalism is said to display in the 1910s. There was modern lyricism featured by rhythm, image and anxiety. American experimentalist plays did not feature magical creatures. It is suggested that Eleanor Gate’s The Poor Little Rich Girl (1913) as the earliest American experimentalist drama simply because is written by American. Alice Gerstenberg’s one-act Overtones (1913) is considered a good example of American experimentalism (Beard, 2005).

In literature or theatre, expressionism is defined as the external manifestation of an internal condition. Expressionism features American drama in the 1920s (ibid).

At the modern era, seminal literary figures come to shape the American drama like Eugene O’Neil.

**Eugene O’Neil (1888-1953)**: Scholars describe him as a key literary figure who introduced modernism into American drama with his enormous plays which combine between originality and emotional depth. His career as a playwright started in 1916 with his play “Bound East for Cardiff”. He produced around fourty theatrical pieces, including “Beyond Horizon” (1920), “The Iceman Cometh” (1946). He was honoured with the Pulitzer Prize in 1921, and the Noble Prize in Literature in 1939, and thus, he became the distinguished playwright of his time. He brought newness to the American theatre, realism and dream in a way that fascinates his audience. In his plays, he tried to abstract the nature of emotions, to discern the true reality without deceiving appearances. He also probed the American dream, race relations, class conflicts, human aspirations, alienation and psychoanalysis. His aim was to create a modern American drama that would rival the great works of European modernists.

In the spring of 1922, the play The Hairy Ape by Eugene O’Neil features expressionist drama. Following the success of this play, the American theatre enjoyed the trend of expressionism. In fact this play was considered as exemplar of American expressionism. ( Beard, 2005). It also displays in his play The Emperor Jones (1920). O’Neil rises to prominence in America and also reached an international stature. Meanwhile, other dramatists have also reached recognition: George S. Kaufman, Maxwell Anderson, Philip Barry, George Kelly, Sidney Howard, Elmer Rice (Londré, 2005). In line with them, women dramatists include: Zoe Akins, Rachel Crothers, Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell (Ibid).

Drama of the Harlem Renaissance (1917-1935) also contributed in the development of American drama. Playwrights worked hard to provide a portrayal of black life to black and white audience. In this context, four genres of plays are introduced: pageant, folk, social issue and historical ( Bean, 2005).

The African American theatre comes into prominence by 1940, with influential playwrights Frederick O’Neal and Abraham Hill.

The American drama is also transformed in the postmodern era by Tennesse Williams (1911-1983) and Arthur Miller (1915-2005). They emerged at the forefront of post world war II. They were concerned with psychological and moral dilemmas of individuals insociety.

Arthur Miller graduated from the university of Michigan and majored in English. He was active in politics. He was also president of PEN International on behalf of fellow writers subject to oppressive governments. He was awarded the Noble Prize for his play Death of a Salesman in 1949. He wrote about family trauma in Timebends (1987); depression in Price ( 1968); The great depression also in The American Clock (1980); and about the killing of the Jews in his play Broken Glass (1994) ( Biggs, 2005).

Furthermore, notable contemporary American playwrights include: Edward Albee, August Wilso, Tony Kushner, David Henry Hwang, John Guare and Wendy Wassers Tien.

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