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Recommended Citation

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We're Late; But We Made it: A Brief Analysis and Comparison of Characterization and
Storytelling in Pre and Post-World War American Theatre

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July 25, 2019

McNair Scholar Summer Research

Harding University

Abstract

As the effects of the World Wars hit the American people, playwrights responded to the grief and passion of the country with a new approach to theatrical storytelling. After World War I and II, American playwrights finally made it to the movement that had been sweeping through Europe for five decades: realism. Theatres began exploring real emotion, action, and characters in their stories. This research will explore the journey of transitioning from American melodrama to American modernism using characterization and storytelling methods. Critiques from contemporaries and the works from each movement will be used as primary sources.

Art has never existed in a vacuum. As a matter of fact, it is unreasonable to ignore the domino effect which leads from one artistic movement to another. American theatre developed primarily during the middle of the nineteenth century. As theatre began to grow and gain prominence artistic movements defined the development. Major shifts in many of these movements came about in response to the world events around the art. War, political turmoil, along with the rise and fall of social groups and economic upheaval all contribute to artists' view and portrayal of the world around them.¹ In the United States, socio-political factors caused Americans to reconsider what it meant to be a husband, a wife, and even a citizen. As a result of the American Civil War and the subsequent rise of the middle-class, melodrama was born. After World War II and during the Great Depression American expressionism came about; and, after the strife of those conflicts and one more major global brawl came one of the most significant movements, modernism. Although there were other artistic movements in the United States, these three movements were shaped by conflict and refined by a need for social awareness. Melodrama and expressionism originated from similar European theatrical movements; however, modernism came about as a genuinely American movement. Modernism was built on the history and society of the times and influenced by the strides made in these two previous artistic movements.

Aristotle said, "Life imitates art". The spirit of the theatrical artists during these times is a true embodiment of this idea. Artists provided coping devices with their work. They gave audiences an emotional outlet. While the American people struggled to accept a new identity, artists provided perspective and empathy. Artist taught audience to navigate intellectual and

¹ Gerald Clifford Weales, *American Drama since World War II*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 6-8.

industrial discovery in new social, emotional and interpersonal situations with theatre. Each movement embraced an agenda to move the audience forward. Whether providing an escape from the prosaic and natural disposition of daily life with grand spectacle or delivering complex insights into common struggles theatre was the vessel in which could get an outside view of themselves. American theatre slowly became a cultural driving force, built on the blocks of its theatrical and artistic predecessors. Theatre evolved with shifts in the way characters were formed and the way stories were told. These alterations moved the genre along. Characters, rather than plot, became the driving force of the stories and the emotions, passions, and challenges in these dramas were a snapshot of the world of that moment.

The comparison and analysis presented here responds to a need for an understanding of the evolution in American theatre. By comparing the plays and characters during three essential movements in American theatre: melodrama, expressionism and modernism. This paper hopes to provide connections and historical context. The hope of this work is to provide a more well-rounded understanding of how American theatre was refined into an artistic powerhouse, by sampling major and notable work from authors in each time period as primary sources. The research seeks to link the impact of playwrights from the modernist post-World War II era to two preceding artistic movements. And is to give a greater appreciation of the way playwrights after the World Wars changed the characterization and storytelling for the future of American theatre. It aims to give future interested parties a concentrated perspective on ideas, characters, and stories which continue to shape American theatre.

The defining factors of this analysis and comparison are the elements of characterization and storytelling. Characterization is defined by Merriam-Webster as “the artistic representation of human character or motives.” To put the definition in the context of American theatre,

characterization is the creation of a person from the script and the interpretation of the actor: physically, verbally and interpersonally. Characterization often serves the audience in relatability. Characters are a direct reflection of how the playwrights, and often the audience, perceive themselves and the society around them. Characters are also responsible for carrying the message of the story to current and future consumers. The other chosen framework, storytelling, is the nature of the narrative. The storytelling method becomes the fingerprint of each movement. Like character the storytelling acknowledges the world view of both the author and audience. Storytelling is also a gauge of the maturity and complexity of the times.

In the nineteenth century, the United States was a young nation on the global stage. Artistically, many of the significant events, movements, and ideas Europe arrived across the Atlantic a decade or two after their initial introduction to the European mainstream. Melodrama was one of the first significant moments in the beginning American theatre and the first step on the walk towards American modernism. However, before melodrama made its debut in America, a few significant events which occurred in Europe to spur on the eventual explosion of the movement. Europe, before melodrama, experienced a series of rather boring self-congratulatory works known as neoclassicism. Those works came as a response to a call for a return to the original days of theatre, referring to Greek and Roman theatre. Unfortunately, though the theatrical elites and patrons yearned for the neoclassical ideal, most mainstream practitioners did not find the movement enjoyable. For many reasons including a departure towards public appeal, political and financial pressure neoclassicism had very little mass appeal.² Playwrights and producers sought innovation and change. Enter melodrama.

² Michael Booth, *Hiss the Villain: Six English and American Melodramas*, (New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1964), 16.

Melodrama began in France but quickly swept westward to England. In England, however, the Licensing Act of 1737 restricted the number of theatrical venues available to produce theatrical work. The law restricted dialogue-based shows.³ The law's structure unintentionally opened up a new loophole which melodrama fit into perfectly. Melodrama, which linguistically means "music theatre", married orchestration and singing with dialogue, exposed an ambiguity when interpreting the law. The Licensing Act restricted dialogue only works, but melodrama did not fall into the category of a being singularly a dialogue works. It incorporated singing and a large musical numbers and therefore the law did not apply. Along with the musical aspect of melodrama, staging for these shows was fantastical with huge set pieces and elaborate costumes. Melodrama was able to take advantage of the new technology of the day and craved new ways to tell epic stories. Along with new technology and unique storytelling, melodrama appealed to a fresh audience. The rise of the urban middle class during the mid-nineteenth century was a significant factor of melodrama's popularity and financial success. Average people with disposable income and time could enjoy spending their new earnings on the previously social elite institution of the theatre. Similar to England, America was shifting away from the high society in favor of the growing urban middle class. It catered to these new patrons with morally simplistic, highly dramatic stories.⁴ Melodrama was a form of escapism from the everyday grind with stories that were relatable but not copies of their real life. Melodrama was not highbrow intellectual theatre. For example, a common convention of melodramatic theatre, encouraged audiences to verbally boo and cheer in response to the characters on stage. The villain's introduction music would play, and the audience would

³ Gerald Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1869-1914*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), Preface and 3.

⁴ Booth, *Hiss the Villain*, 19.

respond with booing and hissing. Audiences were easily conditioned in such response because of melodrama's reliance on stock characters. Most melodramas included six memorable stock characters: the mean villain, the sensitive hero, the persecuted heroine, the ridiculous clown, the faithful friend, and the villain's sneaky accomplice.⁵ Each of the stock characters were associated with an instrument incorporated into the orchestral scoring. The villain's music would make heavy use of the contrabass; the hero was associated with trumpet, while the heroine's scenes would often have flute accompaniment; and the clown was accompanied by the bassoon.⁶ The association aided audience members in character identification and understanding. Focusing on the villain in particular, he was often a larger than life character. Prone to violence, conniving, and scheming the villain was typically, a member of a higher class or in a position of authority over the hero and/or heroine. The villain was unmistakably evil, a character the audience wanted to see fail.

Regarding story, melodrama kept the audience on the edge of their seats with an abundance of suspense and magnificent effects. There were outrageous naval battle and chariot fights and trains on stage made possible by new technology. The suspense in the show often revolved around a violent act or the anticipation of the hero's endangerment or demise. However, no matter the extremity of the suspense, melodrama's ultimate convention involved a satisfying ending for the hero. At the end of the play, the hero would leave happy; the villain would get his comeuppance; and everyone effectively lived happily ever after. Though rather unrealistic the melodramatic plays addressed themes which were meaningful and personal to the audience members, including racism, social status, sexism, and the plight of the common man, thus becoming the first social dramas in the United States. The social drama would later be the

⁵ Booth, 10.

⁶ Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1869-1914*, 6.

hallmark of American theatre. Although the stock character structure did not carry through to the following movements, melodrama's story structure became the grandfather of the later theatrical movements that would define the country.

Augustine Daly was a playwright during most of the nineteenth century and was directly involved in the theatre scene for much of his career. He wrote several shows at the beginning of his career that did not gain mass appeal. *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1869-1914* by Gerald Bordman tracks Daly's rise and influence⁷. Bordman credits Daly for particular passion in the casting and staging of his melodramatic work. Although it took a while for him to gain his footing theatrically. Daly's works would later define American melodrama⁸. He was not only a playwright but also producer and director. Daly created a formula for American melodrama.

No example of Daly's work is a more quintessential example of a melodramatic play⁹ than, *Under the Gaslight*¹⁰. In this play, the sensitive hero, Captain Trafford, seeks to marry a lady, Laura Courtland. Laura's social status is called into question when it is discovered that she was adopted from a lowly people. Laura's criminal father, the mean villain, and her alcoholic mother, the villain's accomplice, do everything in their power to keep Laura from Trafford making her the persecuted heroine. Snookey, the faithful friend discovers the scheme and proves that Laura is, in fact, the lady she claimed to be all along. Laura's evil villain then kidnaps Snookey and ties him to a set of train tracks to prevent him from telling anyone else his discoveries. All hope seems to be lost as the train barrels toward Snookey and he will die without the truth being known. Suddenly, Laura emerges and saves him just in time. The story

⁵ Bordman, 4.

⁸ Bordman, 3-6.

⁹ Bordman, 6.

¹⁰ Booth, 275-341.

ends with the villain's accomplice death, the villain's arrest. Laura and Trafford are free to happily marry. Daly's story was very popular in its time. It had the suspense and satisfaction the audience wanted; with the kinds of characters they had learned to expect. *Under the Gaslight*, also addressed themes of poverty and status as they would affect the audiences who attended.

Although melodrama had considerable popularity in its time, as time continued it became far less appealing to practitioners in the future. Michael Booth, author of *Hiss the Villain: Six English and American Melodramas*, records in the introduction of his book, "Melodramas have been treated with contempt by dramatic historians and critics."¹¹ The formulaic, long narratives, outlandish violence, and implausible situations make melodrama unappealing to many contemporary critics. It was a necessary and even essential step to propel American theatre forward. The social nature of the stories and the mass engagement of the melodrama's audience greatly influenced storytelling for future movements.

In the early decades of American theatre, from the 1700s-1900s, many of the major achievements and movements were coupled with a war, major conflict, or political turmoil. Theaters existed in the United States but did not have a significant theatrical influence until the mid-nineteenth century. During the early days, meaningful artistic influences overcame the hurdles of war and significant disagreements with the religious groups. When American theatre arose from the ashes of socio-political conflict, melodrama flourished. The next theatrical movement came on the heels of World War I. The first international conflict was not only the war to end all wars but a catalyst for global artistic exploration. Theatre artists after the war drove into society and technology's effects on the individual. Meanwhile another influential historic event was on the horizon. The Great Depression exposed the nation to suffering and

¹¹ Booth, 9.

poverty on a scale previously unimaginable. In the wake of the tragic thirties', artists ceaselessly attempted to express the challenges of everyday life by providing work representative of their experiences and the tumult of the times. Simultaneously, the urban middle class, who fueled melodrama a few decades before, was now more concerned with feeding their families than spending time, money, and energy at the theatre. As a result of declining interest, theatre companies became smaller and venues more intimate. The newfound intimacy gave playwrights a platform for deep individual connection. Resulting in the next major theatrical movement, expressionism.

Expressionism in American theatre was an experimental form. It fell under the overarching artistic movement of abstraction, which gave the country an edge and grit to their theatre that had not occurred previously. Expressionism began in Europe, specifically Germany, as a break from realism and melodrama. However, in America, the movement took on a new life. The commercial success and formula of melodrama drove many of the large theaters in the states. The American expressionist movement wanted to fight against the commercial norms of melodrama and realism. It chose to ignore traditional conventions that continued to rule of Europe and the states. Expressionists worked with dark, honest, and aggressive reflections of real life. Rather than focusing on a linear plot, the stories were often segmented with time jumps and location changes throughout. Expressionism was unconcerned with the rules and previous methods. The playwrights wanted the focus to be on the characters and feelings associated with individual moments and experiences. Expressionist plays relied heavily on symbolism to achieve the goal of delving into the deep emotion of their stories. Elmer Rice's play, *The Adding Machine*, battles with the encroaching effects of technology on daily life.¹² *The Adding Machine*

¹² Weales, *American Drama since World War II*, 77-78.

follows the aptly named Mr. Zero, an average man working for a department store.¹³ He is surrounded by disingenuous “friends” who are also identified by numbers. Rice uses the symbolism of the numbers to demonstrate the lack of interpersonal connection associated with the characters. Mr. Zero is obviously dissatisfied with his life and circumstances. He is a low-level employee at a lifeless company, and after 25 years of service he is informed he is being replaced by a machine. Zero’s dissatisfaction and anger boils over, and he murders his boss. At Mr. Zero’s trial the jurors are his supposed friends. They convict and sentence him to death by hanging. Zero dies and wakes up in Elysian Fields, a heaven like place. However, rather than escaping the world he has left Elysian Fields is also mechanized and he is assigned as an adding machine operator. The adding machine being the same machine that replaced his job on earth and led to his rampage and execution. However, Mr. Zero’s plight does not end with his operation of the adding machine. Mr. Zero is informed that his soul is not useful at this job and that it will be recycled back to earth. Rice uses the character of Mr. Zero and his unfortunate life to illustrate the lack of compassion and humanity in a more industrial world.

The external factors of this period also drove the passion of new voices in American theatre. Playwrights explored more dynamic and representational storytelling. For the first time, women and people of color were writing mainstream works representative of their experience. During the time of the expressionist women received the right to vote with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Also, in this period the migration of black people from the south to the north instituted a new community. Artistically, black artists encouraged each other. One of the results was the Harlem Renaissance and the rise of black theater. The men and women of feminist and black theatre gave a fresh perspective to the theatrical world.

¹³ John Gassner, 1949. *Twenty-Five Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre*, (Crown Publishers, 1949).

In her book, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre 1925-1959*, Doris Abramson records the rise in black playwrights.¹⁴ There were a few black stories told before this time. One of the most notable shows featuring the black experience was the melodramatic adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe's novel and the subsequent theatrical adaptation attempted to tell the story of black people, namely slaves without consulting their muse. In the mid to late nineteenth century, these stories were more political than true to black experiences. Another large misstep was the horrendously demeaning minstrel shows. These shows served to reinforce terrible stereotypes of black people as buffoons and servants with depictions of characters by white actors in black face. With expressionism and the twenties, for the first time in American theatre, black characters were being played by black people. Influenced by the Harlem Renaissance black dramatist were encouraged to authentically display the black experience¹⁵. A declaration that black stories should be told by those with firsthand experience was a rallying call for leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois, black activist and co-founder of the NAACP¹⁶.

Willis Richardson was one of the first playwrights dedicated to telling stories from a black perspective.¹⁷ He is considered a pioneer of the black theatre genre. In his expressionist influence play, *The Idle Head*, Richardson tells the story of George Broadus, a man down on his luck. When George comes on stage, the audience is immediately prompted to make assumptions about him as a character. The opening scene takes place in the afternoon and George is just getting out of bed. His mother defends his lack of motivation, employment and depression, but it

¹⁴ Doris Abramson, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre 1925-1959*, (Columbia University Press), 22-43.

¹⁵ Bigsby, Critical Introduction. 237-256.

¹⁶ James Vernon Hatch and Ted Shine. *Black Theater, U.S.A.; Forty-Five Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974* (Free Press, 1974), Forward-x.

¹⁷ Hatch and Shine, *Black Theatre*, 233-240.

is difficult for the audience to assume anything but his laziness. With the first few scenes of the story we learn of George's temper. He cannot cope with the trials of his life and, therefore, lashes out. His mother, conversely, is resigned to her station. Regardless, Mrs. Broadus does fiercely protect her children and is extremely vocal about their vocational and social choices. Her status as an upstanding church member is the only aspect outside of her family which gives meaning to her difficult and mundane life. Mrs. Broadus' preacher arrives at their home and informs her that due to her finances that her status as an upstanding church member is in danger. Mrs. Broadus works as a washerwoman, and her children regularly help her with her duties. George aids his mother with the latest wash, he finds a gold pin and a diamond pin. Full of desperation and a need to help his mother, George takes the diamond pin to the pawn shop. When George leaves, the audience learns from his family that George is not, in fact, lazy but that he lost his previous job as a waiter because a patron was disrespectful and harassing toward him. George's response to the patron's jeers led to his dismissal and inability to get another job. When he returns home, George gives his mother the money she needs but is soon followed by a police officer and the chauffeur of Mrs. Broadus. The chauffeur openly dislikes George and accuses of stealing the diamond pin. A pawn ticket is found by Alice, George's younger sister, in his pocket. At the beginning of the play George warns Alice to stay out of his pocket. Her discovery leads to George's arrest. The play ends with Alice, Mrs. Broadus, and George broken.

The characterization Richardson exemplifies in *The Idle Head* are typical of the black experience of the time. He is careful not to stereotype but to give an honest portrayal. The Broaduses are victims of their circumstances. They work hard with little to no benefit. In line with the expressionists of the time, Richardson incorporates symbolism throughout the plot. The policeman, chauffeur, and the preacher all serve as examples of authority hindering average

people from rising up. The symbols of pockets and pins are most notable in the story.

Richardson uses pockets as a symbol for privacy and ambition. When Alice goes through George's pockets, she invades his privacy and stifles his dreams. George wants to provide for his family and puts the money and ticket in his pocket. The pockets of the Mrs. Broadus's employer's clothes hold the secret of the employer's distrust. The pockets are also representative of the privacy and privilege afforded by wealth. Storytelling in *The Idle Head* remains closer to realism than expressionism, however, it does contain the darkness and a semi-fragmented structure which nods to expressionism.

The emergence of feminist theatre was another result of the new voices in theatre during the expressionist movement. *Machinal* by Sophie Treadwell is not only a classic example of expressionism in the United States, but it is also quintessential feminist play. Similar in style to other expressionist works, the plot is fragmented and heavily symbolic. Treadwell based her story on a criminal case she followed as a journalist. She reported on the trial and eventual demise of Ruth Snyder, the first woman to be executed by electric chair. *Machinal's* plot rapidly jumps from scene to scene, changing time and characters along the way.¹⁸ Although the plot is fragmented, Treadwell beautifully infuses the symbolism of technology with the smothering relationships in the main character, Helen's, world. Treadwell's characterization of the supporting characters is extremely limited. They only serve to motivate or aggravate the character and perpetuate the plot. Treadwell does not spend much time on understanding and complexity in these characters.¹⁹

¹⁸ Gassner, *Modern American Theatre- Early Series*, 494-529.

¹⁹ Katherine Weiss, Katherine. 2006. "Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*: Electrifying the Female Body." (*South Atlantic Review* 71 (3), 2006), 4-14.

Another feminist playwright was Lillian Hellman whose approach to expressionism differed from her contemporaries in a few ways.²⁰ Her stories were more narrative, and characters were deeply defined. Hellman, however, does adhere to expressionism's fragmented structure. Her scenes jump in time and situation throughout the play but maintain a linear plotline. After the expressionist movement ended, Hellman became one of the few women in feminist theatre to have her work survive in popularity into the future. Most other works of feminist theatre were forgotten after the rise of modernism. One of Hellman's seminal works was *The Children's Hour*, first produced in 1934²¹. It is the story of two teachers running a small-town school for girls. One of the children accuses the teachers of having an inappropriate relationship. The accusation causes one of the teachers, Martha, to spiral into darkness. The characterization of *The Children's Hour* revolves around the teachers, Karen and Martha, as they traverse friendship, integrity, and being trusted as working women in society.

Until Modernism, the origins of American theatrical movements occurred in Europe. After World War II, America not only became a major world power but an artistic powerhouse as well.²² Artists took up the mantle of helping the country identify and cope with a new global perspective. Americans were now more than ever connected with the international community and with the new technology such as radio and movies they were more connected to each other as well. Men and women came back to the states or out of the factories into a country that was altogether different from what they had known. Fortunately, the previous American theatrical movements were preparing for the most prolific and arguably the most significant movement in

²⁰C.W.E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Vol. 1 1900-1945*. (New York, NY: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1982), 274-

²¹ John Gassner, *Twenty Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre*. (Crown Publishers, 1949), 561-598.

²² C.W.E. Bigsby, *Modern American Drama, 1945-1990*. (New York: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1992), 1-7.

the United States. Modernism, is thus, the ultimate culmination of all work done in melodrama, realism, and expressionism. Considered the golden age of American theatre, the post-World War II movement separated itself from other American forms of storytelling. It perfected the social justice of melodrama and the honest and semi-realism of expressionism. Modernism was concerned with plot, characters, and relationships. It did not conform to the stock characters of melodrama or the idea that the audience would walk away satisfied with the outcome of the plays. Modernism focused on individual perspective with a degree of realism rather than ornate spectacle or non-linear stories. As a convention melodrama dealt with conflicts in communities. It addressed concepts and ideas familiar to the audience and actors. Expressionism narrowed its focus further. With stories, ideas, and experiences increasingly personal to the audience. Modernism brought the conflict and the characters to an even more intimate level, which resonate directly with audience members. The playwrights of modernism were dedicated to one or two characters. Many of the themes featured a family or social dynamic coupled with the character's internal struggle. It took cues from expressionism in a more dedicated focus on the character development but deviated from the preceding movement in its attempts to incorporate emotionally and psychologically complex characters.

Modernism's themes often centered around one overarching message including: guilt, patriotism, and self-worth. The emphasis on theme became a signature of the movement.

C.W.E. Bigsby wrote *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Vol. 1, 1900-1945*²³, and *Modern American Drama, 1945-1990*²⁴, which analyze the external factors and complexities of modernism's evolution. Bigsby references many authors who drove the

²³ Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, 274-8

²⁴ Bigsby, *Modern American Drama*, 1-7.

beginning of this movement in his books. He gives credit to the playwrights of the time for creating complex and intriguing stories which challenged audiences and actors alike.

Eugene O’Neill is credited by Bigsby and many others with fathering the modernist movement in the states.²⁵ He was also one of the first American playwrights to gain international attention. O’Neill and many of the other members of his generation were either born into or came of age in an America that was never free of a significant trial. Their worldview colored their art and understanding of the human condition. O’Neill, himself, drew many of his characters from personal experience.²⁶ His father was an actor; therefore, he grew up very close to the theatre during the height of melodrama. O’Neill’s parents struggled with addiction, which instilled the isolation that would prevail throughout his work. He began as an expressionist, but not a terribly successful one. His most expressionist work, *The Hairy Ape*²⁷, involves Yank, a ship laborer, struggles to find the humanity in the industrially driven world around him. Yank’s world is full of poverty and a lack of empathy from the rich. O’Neill’s work is considered by some to be heavy handed. The stories are important and thought-provoking but also long and laborious. In what is considered one of his most significant works, *The Iceman Cometh*²⁸, a salesman comes into a seaside bar filled with men struggling to find hope in their seemingly meaningless lives.²⁹ Each of the characters has lost a piece of themselves in a pipe dream. The characters of this story lead uninteresting lives. O’Neill’s plays are long cyclical narratives. In the majority of O’Neill’s stories, the audience is engulfed by the dreary and lackluster lives of

²⁵ Bigsby, , *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*,14.

²⁶ Weales, 82.

²⁷ Gassner, *Twenty Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre* “The Hairy Ape”, 1-24.

²⁸ Gassner, *Twenty-five Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre* “The Hairy Ape”,1-24

²⁹ John Henry Raleigh. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Iceman Cometh; a Collection of Critical Essays*. Twentieth Century Interpretations. (Prentice-Hall, 1968.), 13-15.

the characters. O'Neill wrote twenty-five plays over three decades, setting the precedent for the modernist movement.

While O'Neill set the precedent and many other writers produced quality work during the modernist era, two playwrights defined the characterization and storytelling of the time. Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams were two of the most significant playwrights of the post-World War II period. Each of these men had a unique method of storytelling, to which audiences could relate and with which they could empathize. Arthur Miller's approach was narrative, linear, and a bit emotionally disruptive.³⁰ One contemporary described his work as "patrist"³¹. The conflict in Miller's stories stemmed from a paternal source with significant resulting emotional and psychological consequences. Miller referenced internal and external conflicts in his characters. Miller's characters frequently had to tackle some difficult or even impossible choices. Those choices became the catalyst for distress in the character. Within Miller's plays there is a direct and traceable cause to the main character's conflict. *Death of a Salesman*³² is an example of American modernism and the quintessential American tragedy. It is full of characterization. In a 1966 essay Brian Parker describes Miller's style in this script as a fusion of expressionism and realism³³. This reflects modernism's interconnected relationship with all the movements before it. In *Death of a Salesman*, the Loman family of Willy, Linda, Happy and Biff are a typical family. Willy is a hard-working father, Linda his dutiful wife, Happy their grown marginally successful younger son and Biff the deadbeat son. Miller's storytelling method is unusual in this

³⁰ Brian Parker. "Point of View in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*." *Twentieth Century Interpretations of *Death of a Salesman*: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (Prentice-Hall, 1983.), 41-55.

³¹ Alvin B. Kernan. *The Modern American Theatre*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), 34-51.

³² Miriam Gilbert, Carl H. Klaus, and Bradford S. Field. *Modern and Contemporary Drama*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994.), 338-384.

³³ Brian Parker. "Point of View in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.", 41-40.

story. It stays with modernism linear storytelling, but he adds flashbacks throughout. Willy also speaks to himself and speaks into the flashbacks. Willy's asides are a bit disturbing and manic. They are not the direct to audience soliloquies or aside of traditional theatre.³⁴ Rather Willy's outburst are evidence of him spilling from reality. Willy as a character is a tired and broken dreamer. The story is a journey of Willy's downward spiral and Biff's self-actualization. Willy is bombarded with failure in his family and professional life. Linda explains to the boys: "He drives seven hundred miles, and when he gets their no one knows him anymore, no one welcomes him. And what goes through a man's mind, driving seven hundred miles' home without having earned a cent? Why shouldn't he talk to himself?"

When he loses his job, and his sons abandon him, Willy's desperation spirals beyond his grasp.³⁵ He decides his life insurance policy is more valuable to his family than his life. Miller uses Willy to confront the realities and devastation of the post-war American family. Biff, on the other hand, is ruined by a choice of his father. Miller portrays Linda as the stable presence in the family. She sees all of the men falling apart around her and tries with all her might to hold them together. At the end of the play, the audience is given a glimpse into the devastation and hopelessness she has endured while watching Willy spiral. The victimization of the Loman men comes from external expectations or doubts about who they should be. Linda, however, is not a victim in the same way. Her suffering stems from the neglect, burden, and treatment she receives from her family. Miller uses both examples of victimization to reflect the systematic shattered reality of the American family.

³⁴ Bert Cardullo, "'Death of a Salesman,' Life of a Jew: Ethnicity, Business, and the Character of Willy Loman." (*Southwest Review* 92 (4), 2007), 583–596.

³⁵ Chaswal, Deepak. *Betrayal and Guilt in Arthur Miller's All My Sons*. (*IUP Journal of English Studies* 6 (3), 2011), 7–20.

In *All My Sons*³⁶, Chris is confronted with information on his family which challenges his identity and trust in his father.³⁷ This secret becomes the driving force of Chris' internal conflict. As he struggles through the newly acquired information about his father, Joe, the father, is also in conflict with himself. There is a grace and plurality in the conflict of this play. Miller's theme connects guilt to masculine identity and the complication of family obligation. Miller's characters in *All My Sons* address the brokenness of the American man of the forties and fifties³⁸.

Williams' method of storytelling was similar to Miller's, but he drastically differed in characterization.³⁹ While Miller was defined as a "patriot", focusing on conflicts and issues originating in a male or paternal figure, Williams would be described as more of a "matrist".⁴⁰ His characters were conflicted by a more feminine factor. Williams' characters faced victimization or misunderstanding by their community or world. His characters were also entangled in complex and, most often, toxic family relationships. The families themselves were relatable, frustrating and often destructive for the main character. Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*⁴¹ deals with the large themes of guilt and regret in the narrator and main character Tom; however, Williams simultaneously amplifies the exasperating nature of Tom's mother Amanda. *The Glass Menagerie* occurs in the memory of the narrator, but it is not as fragmented and separated as a similar story would be with expressionism.⁴² Tom reflects on the decisions

³⁶ Bigsby, *Modern American Drama*, 113.

³⁷ Weales, 6-8.

³⁸ Deepak. *Betrayal and Guilt in Arthur Miller's All My Sons*. (IUP Journal of English Studies 6 (3)), 7-20.

³⁹ Alvin B. Kernan, *The Modern American Theatre*, 34-51.

⁴⁰ Alvin B. Kernan. *The Modern American Theatre*. 34-40.

⁴¹ John Gassner, *Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre- Second Series 1939-1946*. (Crown Publishers., 1952), 1-38

⁴² Weales, 25-26.

that led him to abandon his family. He struggles through the unseen consequences of his abandonment as his travels through the memories that led him to leave. Characterization in this play is deceptively complex.⁴³ An audience member understands from Tom's description of his mother that she is overbearing, which pushes him away; however, his love for his sister Laura is also a major source of his internal conflict. Audience and Tom must find a way to cope with the relief of leaving Amanda and the guilt of abandoning Laura. Williams does not provide answers to the complicated questions and situations he presents but, instead, allows the audience to justify the conclusion themselves.

In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*⁴⁴, Williams uses a cyclical motif and precise characterization to convey the damage done to an individual by lying. There are many secondary characters which strengthen the plot and depth of the storytelling; but the story centers around three: Brick, Maggie and Big Daddy. Brick is an washed-up sports star turned announcer, who is an extremely self-aware alcoholic. His wife Maggie has well-defined social aspirations and does not feel wanted by her husband. To maintain her status in society and in Brick's family, Maggie desperately wants a child. The final main character is Big Daddy, Brick's father. Big Daddy Pollitt has worked his whole life to make his fortune and take care of his family. He is very sick, but the family and the doctors tell him he will be fine. The conflict of this piece is two-fold; Maggie and Brick's troubled marriage and the whole family lying about the status of Big Daddy's health. In act one, Maggie confronts Brick about her satisfaction in their marriage. She urges him to do something about their marriage lamenting that she "can't live on under these circumstances." Maggie's desperation and long for a simple relationship is something the

⁴³ Bigsby, *Modern American Drama*, 57-60.

⁴⁴ Miriam Gilbert, Klaus, and Field. *Modern and Contemporary Drama*. 381-425.

audience can connect with. Her hopelessness is further complicated by the fact that the relationship she seeks is supposed to be the most intimate relationship in her life.

A portion of act three is a conversation with Brick and Big Daddy. In this act Williams forcefully tackles the theme of truth. Rebecca Holder, in 2016, discussed this particular theme in her *Southern Quarterly* article “Making the Lie True”⁴⁵. Holder explains that modernism as a genre calls for an examination of truth in the stories themselves. Brick laments to his father that the cause of his drinking is the mendacity of the world in which he lives in. Big Daddy chides back at Brick with a sober self-reflection of the lies that govern his own life. Brick and Big Daddy’s conversation also serves as a mirror to the society of the times. Miller challenges the audience that living the lie, although it seems to benefit, will ultimately end in heartbreak. The play ends with Maggie’s conclusion to make the lie she told the family true. She says “I do love you, Brick, I do!” and Brick ends the show with the line: “Wouldn’t it be funny if that was true?” Williams summarizes the whole play with this line. He hammers into the audience that lies drive life. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is emotionally distressing for the audience and the characters. Williams, in this play, confronts the reality of one’s expectations for themselves and their own happiness with what everyone else wants from them. As the authors of *Modern and Contemporary Drama* write, “Because all of the characters in the play are so determinedly bent on their ways yet so undone by the way they have chosen for themselves...”⁴⁶ Modernism is full of the dichotomy of choices and circumstances. Williams uses his plays to balance the comparison between characterization and storytelling to create greater understanding of the human experience.

⁴⁵ Rebecca Holder “Making the Lie True: Tennessee Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and Truth as Performance.” (*Southern Quarterly* 53 (2), 2016), 77–93.

⁴⁶ Gilbert, Klaus, and Field. *Modern and Contemporary Drama*, 95.

Modernism shares a special relationship with two other theatrical movements: expressionism and melodrama. All three movements have sculpted the theatrical landscape for the future. Although they were not the only movements of their time, these three made significant impacts in American theatre. Over time, theatre artists learned to narrow their focus and dive into the hearts of their audiences. Melodrama taught artists and audiences to be more aware of the world around them. It also taught the country to embrace spectacle and new technology. With expressionism, the country learned to be even more socially aware and to listen and recognize new voices and to embrace the power in characterization. Modernism took the lessons of these two previous movements and added narrative and gentility. Modernism was focused on characterization and interpersonal relationships. In the last several years, contemporary mainstream theatres continue to perform modernist plays. These plays have resurged in the public consciousness. This research is an important reminder of the historic influence and significance of the past. American Modernism was the first uniquely native movement. It was not acquired by similar movements in Europe.⁴⁷ Modernism becomes one of the golden ages of American theatre in the course of history. It shares a special bond with the rise of radio, television, and movies in the nation. All three of these movements share a social awareness and exploratory intention in their work. They also respond directly to major social and economic conflicts and war. Melodrama and expressionism explore ideas and methods in their characterization and storytelling to which narrow the audience interaction and understanding of the material. The strides made in both movements directly influence the impact of the modernist plays. Storytelling goes from a grandioso display of technology and spectacle with a passing reference to characterization to tales built on complex characterization and minimal extravagant

⁴⁷ Weales, 25-26.

storytelling methods. American theatres evolution is mostly a coming of age story. American theatre matured and continues on the shoulders of these three movements. Storytelling and characterization continue to be the identifying factors in modern theatrical movements.

Reflecting on the methods and connection among early American and post-World War I and post-World War II in anticipation for the future of theatre is exciting.

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