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## **American Literature and Development of American Drama from 'Letter Home' to the Modern Age**

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The present research paper has been attempted to explore the formation of America, its literary growth, different writers who contribute its development and their outlook which is the hall mark of American literature. This paper will cover a long period from 'letter home' which was written between friends and relatives to the modern playwright Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller.

### **America: Formed or Discovered**

Literature is the mirror of any country. The growth of any country based on its inheritance. America: the superpower in the world; a developed country; was not discovered but formed and most surprisingly it was formed by the persons of those countries which are now developing countries. When Columbus wrote his famous letters to King Ferdinand of Spain, other explorers also wrote letters to their friends and relatives at home and these "letters home" mark the beginning of the written record of the American adventure. In these letters, the writers speak of their difficulties. These letters gave realistic features and people were busy to settle there. Such heroic souls came not from England alone, but from Europe also. Negroes were brought in as slaves and this becomes the foundation of unity in diversity which is a prominent feature of American culture.

The first successful English colony in North America was founded in Jamestown in 1607. Then there was a string of thirteen colonies all along the Atlantic sea-board. There was no communication between them. These early English colonists came and settled in America for various reasons. By the end of the colonial period, conditions were less strange and more comfortable.

The period from 1607-1765 is known as colonial period of American literature. During this period many colonies were flourishing but they have little contact with each other. In the middle of the 18th century, these people began to come close to each other and this is the birth of American nation. The writers had their cultural roots in Europe. Thus the earliest American writers were really European writers living in America. In these early days, reading was confined to the Bible and the Prayer book and the few books that were brought from England. Colonial American literature depicts the dangerous adventure, the hard work and difficult decisions that went into the process of building a nation.

### **Use of Pessimism and Symbolism in American Dramas:**

Drama is a form of short prose which is more to the point than longer works of fiction like novels. The basic difference between drama and any other fictional prose is most of the text is in form of direct speech. Play also has some words in the bracket that show the emotion, gesture, even the tendency of the speech. The readers have given more challenges to interpret the author's idea and it makes drama more interesting as an analysis object. The understanding of the story of drama is complex.

Thomas Godfrey (1736-1763) was the first American to write a play *The Prince of Parthia*. It is a tragedy full of pessimistic views and written in blank verse. It is a story of passion and violence.

Jonathan Edward (1673-1758) college essays laid the foundations of a rationalistic idealism in America and prepared the way for Emerson and the great literary and intellectual movement of the next century.

According to Spiller, as Jonathan Edward was the symbol of the religious fervor of Puritanism at its purest, so Franklin became the symbol of the Enlightenment in America, of the Age of Reason. American literature began in the seventeenth century in search for the ideal, a search lighted and directed by hope and expectation. This search has been a part of the entire history of the literature.

In 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was some development in drama and the plays of Royall Tyler and William Dunlop were staged and attained some measure of popularity. Tyler's *The Contrast*, first performed in New York in 1787, is a play which most successfully uses Native American characters and themes. Dunlop was sharply critical of the national attitude towards plays in general. Dunlop's plays included *The Father or American Shandyism* (1789), *Ander* (1798) and *The Italian Father* (1799).

One of the most gifted of the prose-writers of the day was Thomas Paine (1737-1809). His *Commonsense* and *The American Crises* still make interesting reading. In his the *Commonsense* he attacks the British government and makes a forceful plea for revolt against the imperialist rule. Theatrical companies sprang up in cities and professional plays toured over the country giving performances.

Henry David Thoreau and Emerson wrote *Journals* which provided raw material for their future works. Thoreau has made extensive use of symbols. Spring symbolizes perpetual youth. Winter symbolizes barrenness, yet it also symbolizes concentration and intensity of living. To Thoreau, the pond is a symbol of his real and essential self, and the shore that of his actual self. Stream in *Walden* symbolizes human efforts at self-understanding. The stream and fishing symbols are essential aspects of the thematic design of *Walden*.

Hawthorne believed that "every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact." In *The Scarlet Letter* he has made extensive use of symbols to convey complex moral, spiritual and psychological truths. Melville literary career was disappointing because one of his sons run away from home, another committed suicide. Rapid industrialization and urbanization bring with them their own problems and difficulties which colour the literature of the new century. The anxiety, sense of loneliness and neurosis caused by these developments find their own place in literature.

From the very beginning America was full of diversity. As E. S. Oliver rightly points out, we have had Southern writers, New England writers and Western and Mid-Western writers. We have had urban writers and writers of prairie or mountain life. The hybrid nature of our racial heritage has been a pronounced factor in our cultural life and in our literature. We have had a literature of the American Indian, the Negro and the Jew. Thus unity in diversity is a marked characteristic both of American literature and American social life.

Victorian age was the age of rapid change: change in almost every sphere of life; social, political, economical and English literature was also influenced by this. Disillusionment takes the place of idealism and frustration and pessimism

were wide-spread. That is why; terms like ‘waste land’ and ‘the lost generation’ were used for this era of disillusionment. The America, in the beginning, was suffered by domestic problems and with the passage of time, these problems change place of industrialization and urbanism.

Between the two Wars, American drama flourished. During this period, O’Neill was undoubtedly most able young playwright and his dominance of the American theatre is without questions.

The outbreak of World War II brought not so much technical change as a reorientation of ideas and concepts. The dramas written by Arthur Miller like *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1948) are full of pessimism. Living through young adulthood during the Great Depression, Miller was shaped by the poverty that surrounded him. The Depression demonstrated to the playwright the fragility and vulnerability of human existence in the modern era. *All My Sons*, a drama about a manufacturer of faulty war materials, *Death of a Salesman*, *All My Sons* and *The Man Who Had All the Luck* form a thematic trilogy of plays about love triangles involving fathers and sons. The drama of the family is at the core of all of Miller’s major plays, but nowhere is it more prominent than in the realism of *All My Sons* and the impressionism of *Death of a Salesman*. Miller won a Tony Award for *Death of a Salesman* as well as a Pulitzer Prize.

As a dramatist, Tennessee Williams uses expressionistic technique to depict ‘inner reality.’ The use of lighting, effects, music, telephone and symbols on the stage are a part of his expressionistic approach. Lighting is used to express the mood of nostalgia and illusion. Music too is employed to give emotional emphasis. Rose is a symbol of earthly love, a box of sleeping pills is a symbol of escape in *Summer and Smoke*. In *Orpheus Descending* the snake-skin jacket worn by Val represents his wild and independent nature. Williams’ dramas are psychological tragedies and they represent the problems like homosexuality, symbolic cannibalism, alcoholism and lurid behaviour and they do not have happy ending. John Osborne states:

Williams’ major plays are concerned with sex and failure. Failure is what makes human beings interesting. And let us remember sex is everybody’s problem. (Tilak 259)

His views of life are pessimistic and tragic. According to R. Watt:

The world of Tennessee Williams is certainly dark tormented and haunted by evil. But this is a description of his work, not a hostile criticism of it. There are indignant reviewers who insist that his plays are psychopathic in their subject matter and characters, that the characters belong to a psychiatrist’s couch, rather than to dramatic literature. (Tilak 259)

In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Eugene Gladstone O’Neill is the creator of serious American drama. In the plays of Eugene O’Neill, the picture of life is bleak and pessimistic. As Carl Van Doren puts it:

O’Neill’s view of life, it now seems clear, is of something which unaccountably frustrates the individual spirit. (Sharma 60)

There are only five out of thirty-seven O’Neill plays in which there are no murder, death and suicide or insanity. In the other we find a total of eight suicides and one unsuccessful attempt and twelve important murders. O’Neill was awarded Nobel Prize for literature in 1936.

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