

## Comparing Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee

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**Abstract:** Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, who emerged as playwrights in the post-war world, after the 1945, brought American Drama to prominence and dominated the American theatre for nearly a decade and a half. Both began their careers as political playwrights by responding to the economic and social realities of the age. After the 1950 another major figure appeared and provoked radical experimentation by combining aesthetic innovation with political revolt. His name was Edward Albee. All these figures played an enormous role in the process of transformation and innovation in the American theatre. The three of them with their talents, their aesthetic experimentation and political beliefs made the American theatre a 'fascinating phenomenon.' Although they are a product of the same nation, including political and cultural background, they are still very different in the way they present to the public the social drama, the transformation of the American dream, the character they choose to present their anxieties and the background they emphasize; thus their means of connecting fact and fiction, language and image, reality and drama are different. Therefore, this paper aims to present an overview of the differences and similarities of their styles, language, the nature of their characters, their theatrical performance, the innovation that each of them brought into the American theatre.

**Keywords:** comparing, drama, innovation, American theatre, Broadway

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### 1. Introduction

American Drama was slower in reaching maturity than either fiction or poetry. A number of critics and literary historians criticized drama for its lacked quality, national originality and integrity when compared with other types of American literature. The gulf between drama and serious literature was not bridged until the beginning of the modern American Drama in 1920, the year of O'Neill's *Beyond the Horizon*. The Thirties, Forties and Fifties was an era of absorption and perfection of the techniques of the '20. What drama offered during this era could be easily traced back in time, yet some of the post-1945 dramas, for example Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Williams *a Streetcar Named Desire* surpassed the ripeness and intricacy of the predecessors.

The American theatre and drama of the Thirties exhibits the conflict between capital and labour, between manual and mechanisation, between needs and societies limitations. It reflects the restrictions and limits the society had imposed upon the self. The post-war theatre was focused more on the psychological part of the human being; it also reflected a sense of bewilderment apparently derived from the war. The generation of playwrights that emerged after the '45 had undoubtedly been forged by the previous decade of writers, their language, images and the social problems conveyed by them.

The main playwrights that come into sight after the success and experimentation of the '30 are Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Both began their careers as political playwright and dominated the American theatre for more than fifteen years. Their plays dramatise the post-war period, the pieties of the war, the social and economical changes, but also the transformation of the human identity. Materialism as a system and as a value was (self)imposed from the community, that is why Willy Lowman brags about his car and refrigerator and Tennessee Williams uses it as a central metaphor in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. In his writing about the modern capitalist society Fromm (1950) asserts that the integrity of the individual had changed and was almost deformed; his values were only connected with his financial success. The same topic is easily seen in Edward Albee's early plays.

American drama between the two world wars deals, in a significant manner, with the enigma of the emerging American family, its uncertainties and institutions, and its eventual collapse. Miller injects into *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, and *The Price* the void that develops between father and son, between husband and wife, and between two brothers. Williams emphasizes the disintegration of the American South by depicting characters like Amanda Wingfield in

*The Glass Menagerie* and Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, women who attempt to arrange the particulars of harsh modern reality by retreating into a distant past of dead chivalry and non-existent "gentlemen callers." Each of these factors, the disintegration of family and the failure of the past, and lack of affection are materialized in Albee's play *The American Dream*. In the introduction of the play Albee asserts that it is a "picture of our time [. . .] an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and fatuity" (Albee 1963, 53-54). The play is also an account of the destructive power of the parents; the family is not presented as the cradle of love and respect but as the heart of venality and inhumanity. *The Zoo Story* is a model of American experience as he sees it, as flaccid and enervated, which has lost its vision and energy.

## 2. Comparing and contrasting

Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams represent the culmination of the process of the evolution in the American theatre which began in the era of Clyde Fitch and lasted for more than a century. Unlike Tennessee, Miller's work is basically realistic, his technique might be described as naturalism and his characters are ordinary people, whereas his style is straightforward. Miller's work more than original, seems a product of the long period of experimentation, where the diverse components that made the whole are not easily evident. Yet, his techniques are not as easy as the predecessors, they are more complex, they integrate "[. . .] most of the devices developed by the experimentalist of the Twenties: the free verse of Maxwell Anderson, the fluidity in space and time of the expressionist, the breaking down of the audience barrier of Brecht, Wilder, and others, and the inner psychological analysis of O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*." (Heiney 1958, 401)

Tennessee Williams, like Miller, utilizes many of the experimental devices of the expressionists and other avant-garde dramatists of the Twenties, but he is highly original in style, and in the ability to create vivid and striking characters. His main interest is in the human nature and the crises of personality. It is not easy to classify his work by conventional literary standards; anyway the naturalistic techniques are evident, he has depicted some of the most disgusting settings, whereas the realistic elements are always wrapped with an air of fantasy. He rejected the traditional realism in the theatre by reflecting his view in the preface to *The Glass Menagerie*: "Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art, that truth, life or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance." (Williams 1945, 4)

Albee's first works were staged at the moment when Miller's and Williams' careers seemed to be flattering. Edward Albee, the third the triumvirate that dominated the post-war American theatre, had written plays for a decade before his public debut. All these early work deal with "identifying the need for compassion, the necessity of relinquishing a destructive egotism and corrosive materialism for a redemption which can only lie in human relationships" (Biggsby 1984, 253). Individuals, like the society which they inhabit and which they constitute, are held together not by freely acknowledged emotional and moral bonds, but by money. Albee believes that human relation should be separated from economical interest; and realities of sexual need sometimes are a desperate sign for human contact. Miller and Albee's dramas convey to the public the idea that: "man can fulfil himself only if he remains in touch the fundamental facts of his existence, if he can experience the exaltation of love and solidarity, as well as the tragic facts of his alones and the fragmentary character of his existence" (Fromm 1957, 31) whereas Williams' characters are often destroyed because they offer love in a world that has no love to offer:

Man is torn away from the primary union with nature, which characterises animal existence. Having at the same time reason and imagination, he is aware of his aloneness and separateness; of his powerless and ignorance; of the accidentalness of his birth and of his death. He could not face this state of being for a second if he could not find new ties with his fellow man which replace the old ones, regulated by instincts. Even if all his physiological needs were satisfied, he would experience his state of alones and individuation as a prison from which he had to break out in order to retain his sanity [. . .] There is only one passion which satisfies man's need to unite himself with the world, and to acquire at the same time a sense of integrity and individuality, and this is love. (Fromm 1967, 35-7)

The dominant theme in Williams is the rejection of the American middle-class Protestant culture and its hypocritical standards. His favourite setting is the south, the decayed aristocrats of the Southern culture, the Creole and the Italians of Louisiana. For his immediate plot material Williams makes use of the sexual passions, especially in their exaggerated or frustrated form in almost all of his major dramas (*A Street Car Named Desire*, *The Rose Tattoo*) mixed with the perversions, neuroses, and the hysteria which arise from frustration of this basic need, his characters mainly follow their

“blood instinct.” However Williams is not influenced by Freud, nor is he a ‘psychological dramatist’ and has no interest in the sensational aspects of sex, he chooses his characters and his language carefully always in accordance with his poetic concepts of the play.

Arthur Miller, in his several modern plays that followed the Second World War, recognized that American drama needed to address specific issues: “Since the war began our most brilliant statesmen and writers have been trying...to frame a statement, a ‘name’ for this war. They have not found it, and they will not find it, because they are looking for something new” (*Echoes* 35). The attempt to demonstrate how the motivations of specific characters are derived from certain social events emerges consistently in the works of Miller, O’Neill, Williams and Albee.

The drama of Miller and Williams portrays action and dialogue that reflects recurrent post World War II “American” themes: the dissolution of the American family, the failure of the American Dream, and the collapse of capitalism in American economics. Similar connections between selections of modern drama by Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee emerge at first glance like the presence of the past which hunts the main characters of Miller, Williams and Albee. Willy Loman’s “past-ghost” pursue him in *Death of a Salesman*. The “lost” protagonist confronting apparitions from the past, the isolated individual seeking safety in wrong relationships, the suppressed feeling distort the natural course of the things whereas in Albee’s play the past is always present in the character’s personality and his present choices. However, closer scrutiny of selected works of the three playwrights offers evidence that as many associations between these modern dramatists exist as do divergences.

Miller’s favourite setting is the bourgeois family and many of his dramas are built upon the conflict between father and son. *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* are built chiefly around father-son relationship, *A View From the Bridge* around the tension between a father and a stepdaughter. Another important theme in Miller’s dramas which is closely connected with the theme of the family is the theme of the American Dream of material success, the need to rise in the world. Mixed with these two themes is found the third: the suppression of sex in puritanical society which results in distorted passions. This last element is seen in *A View From the Bridge* which is wrapped with latent homosexuality and incest. In Albee’s dramas critics find perceptible elements of homosexuality in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *Tiny Alice*, *The American Dream*, *Ye watchers and Ye lonely Ones* etc. and according to Bigsby:

“there is perhaps some justice in the suggestion that a part of Albee’s power as a playwright derives from experiences which are never allowed to surface clearly in language, from images of human contact charged with a subversive frisson, a cover conscious that some social interdict is being challenged. [. . .] like Williams, sexuality is an available and powerful symbol of the absolute need to escape the self and to evade an egotism which is the source alike of personal betrayal and social injustice.” (254)

The society is seen differently from the playwrights. Miller finds the fault not in the system but in the individual who sticks to the dreams discarded by history; this confuses his characters who did not understand that capitalism has destroyed its own principles Willy Lowman is discarded by a young employer, Joe Keller is attacked for being a bad industrialist. Whereas Albee’s model of society lies in the American past, in the principles of the revolutionary principles and the virtues of the lost individualism, and like Miller the reality he presents explains both personal and national failure. In Williams’ plays the character presented appears to be destroyed in spirit and in body whereas a careless society serves as a mere context to their sufferings, finally they are destroyed, but not from the political corruption but by “life’s own internal forces”.

### 3. Conclusion

As a conclusion we say that although they are product of the same nation, including political and cultural background, they are still very different in the way they present to the public the social drama, the transformation of the American dream, the character they choose to present their anxieties and the background they emphasize. However, all three have been concerned with the state of their society, with the transformation of the individual and the examination of the fate the American myth. For all three America had lost a lot of her innocence during the process of evolution, mostly they regret the state of decadence of the society and of the individual as a natural inhabitant of this setting. The destruction of their characters come as an inevitable result of their faulty personality, their cling to the dreams and myths discarded by history and not as a direct result of the corrupted society they live in.

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