

### (3) American Drama After the Second World War

#### Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams

#### American Drama until 1945

- Beginnings
- in the nineteenth century drama was acted by touring **theatre troupes**, who performed mostly for cowboys and gold-diggers, often Shakespeare's plays so as to avoid paying royalties to the dead author
  - until the twentieth century most plays produced were by European authors, the emphasis was on melodrama, spectacle and breath-taking performances on the part of the actors, who were celebrities of the pre-cinema era
  - in the early twentieth century rather low-quality plays were performed in order to satisfy the popular taste and earn money in the face of the growing strong competition of films<sup>1</sup> and musicals
- Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century
- the **Modernist Theatre** was dominated by **Eugene O'Neill**, who brought the stone theatre to the United States, set up two theatre groups and founded theatre guilds to ensure equal rights for everyone involved with theatre
  - the **Expressionist Theatre** was dominated by Elmer Rice, whose play *The Adding Machine* (1923) is an example of expressionist drama preferring emotions and feelings rather than a detailed portrayal of reality
  - the **Proletarian Theatre** was represented by Clifford Odets, whose best known play is *Waiting for Lefty* (1935)
  - the Little Theatre Movement started in 1912 to encourage experimental theatre groups outside Broadway and to react against the popular taste of large audience and commercial theatre by supporting high-quality plays

#### American Theatre from 1945 to 1960

- Rise of Broadway
- New York City was the theatrical capital of America, Broadway was synonymous with the American theatre
  - the fifteen years following the Second World War represented arguably the high point of the Broadway Theatre
  - Broadway then featured the late plays of Eugene O'Neill and introduced Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams
  - the **Method school** of acting was introduced and developed, consisting in the effort of actors to deliver lifelike performances by creating in themselves the thoughts and emotions of their characters rather than simulating them through external means, like vocal intonation or facial expression
- Play Features
- the plays were rooted in **domestic realism**, emphasizing the exploration of the subtext and the potential of the emotional drama lurking beneath the seemingly mundane situations and talk
  - the most favourite and successful plays were on the themes of the **American Dream** and the **American Loss**
  - the European theatre preferred individual characters, while the American theatre strived to create cultural types
  - **Jim Crow**, or, Uncle Tom: an old Negro, loyal to masters whom he seeks to educate rather than revolt against, introduced in the song and dance 'Jump Jim Crow' (1928) by the playwright Thomas Dartmouth 'Daddy' Rice
  - **Schlemiel** and **Schlimazel**: two Jewish loser types, the former inept and clumsy, the latter chronically unlucky, portrayed in Montague Glass's comedy called *Potash and Perlmutter* (1913) for common Jewish surnames
  - **Ah Sin**: a Chinese gambler who manages to cheat even white opponents, established as a type in the joint play by Bret Harte and Mark Twain called *Ah Sin* (1877)

#### Broadway Theatre

- Broadway Status
- refers to theatrical performances staged in one of the forty professional theatres located in the Theatre District in Manhattan, New York City, seating five hundred spectators or more and appealing to the mass audiences
  - represents an important aspect of the twentieth century American cultural history, featured besides playwrights the most influential classical music composers, including George Gershwin, Kurt Weill or Leonard Bernstein<sup>2</sup>
  - ranks as the highest professional form of theatre in the English-speaking world, along with London's West End
- Earlier Forms
- traces its origins to the nineteenth-century American dramatic forms of vaudeville and burlesque in interaction with the European grand opera, operetta and realistic drama
  - **vaudeville**: a multi-act theatre performance presenting in a single evening acts of music, comedy, opera, feats of aestheticism, magic, animal acts, Shakespeare, banjo, acrobatics, gymnastics, lectures by celebrities etc.
  - **burlesque**, also pastiche, parody, or mock-heroic: an imitative genre deriving its humour from an incongruous contrast between style and subject
- Alternatives
- **Off-Broadway**: seats between 100 and 499 spectators, offers generally less expensive, less publicized and less famous performances, often experimental, challenging and rather non-profit
  - **Off-Off-Broadway**: established as a reaction to Off-Broadway in the early 1960s, seats 100 or less spectators, offers non-professional and highly experimental performances

<sup>1</sup> The first feature-length sound film was *The Jazz Singer*, a musical film released in 1927.

<sup>2</sup> Gershwin is famous for his *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), Bernstein for his accompaniment for the musical *West Side Story* (1957).

## Arthur Miller (1915–2005)

- Writing
- uses realism to explore wider moral and political issues, focuses on ordinary man under extraordinary pressure
  - stretches out realism to incorporate borrowings from symbolism and expressionism, like Tennessee Williams
  - concentrates on the subject of the pursuit of success and public approbation enshrined in the American dream
  - focuses on the social and familial tension, conflict of competing moralities and passionate misconceptions that the characters have to endure and points at the economic and political system as a final cause of their problems
  - confronts his characters with the challenge to know and name themselves, a challenge that is both personal and rooted in a social landscape, and shows choices of his characters as determined by their history and their society
  - shifts from the social to the personal in his later plays (since 1960s), focuses on individual experience and guilt
- Competing Imperatives
- All My Sons*** (1947)
- explores the past and its impact on the present and the moral and social responsibility through a family conflict
  - the protagonist Joe Keller sells faulty airplane parts to the government during the war to support his family and does not realize his responsibility for the consequent death of several pilots until his son kills himself in shame
  - the fictional centre is the question of whether the surviving son should marry the fiancée of his dead brother
  - the blame is put on a system that forces a man to choose between competing imperatives of family and society
- Masterpiece
- Death of a Salesman*** (1949)
- uses expressionism and symbolism to transmute domestic realism and a story of a common man into a tragedy
  - employs realistic vernacular, the idiom of a society pursuing illusions and dreams rather than facts and reality
  - presents the destructive side of the American dream through a representative ordinary man called Willy Loman
  - the protagonist, a thirty-five-year old salesman, failed to achieve the rewards and recognition he had hoped for and is driven to despair by his apparent failure in a system that seems to him to guarantee success as a birthright
  - he withdraws into memories of the past and into imaginary conversations with his brother, a symbol of success
- American Loss
- Willy believes that in the land of opportunity failure can only be the fault on the individual, is ‘haunted by the hollowness of all he had placed his faith in’ but still stakes ‘his very life on the ultimate assertion’ of that faith
  - one of his sons, Happy, accepts the same ‘only dream you can have’ and plans to win it on behalf of his father
  - his other son, Biff, senses that he does not want what the world calls success, but cannot articulate his feelings
  - Willy learns the value of love through Biff but translates it into the values of a salesman, the only values that he knows, and kills himself so that his family can have the insurance money and Biff can get a new start in life
- McCarthyism
- The Crucible*** (1953)
- explores issues of personal conscience and social suppression in an analogy to the 1692 Salem witchcraft trials
  - touches on the consequences of McCarthyism whipped up by the House Un-American Activities Committee<sup>3</sup>
  - depicts the exploitation of cultural fears, conspiracy theories and social hysteria, the oppression of the innocent and manipulation of power, the complicity of ordinary citizens and public officials in a paranoid social process
- Preserving Personal Integrity
- features an exemplary citizen, John Proctor, whose illegitimate lover Abigail names his wife Elizabeth a witch
  - the husband attempts to expose the accuser and confesses to adultery, but both he and his wife are arrested
  - Proctor is drawn into examining his life, experiences an intense spiritual reevaluation of himself and realizes that honour requires his death because though innocent of witchcraft, he has other responsibilities to answer for
  - Proctor confesses to witchcraft for he believes that his dying with the truly innocent would be unearned, but recants out of a sense of responsibility to the innocents that he is to die with and to himself, and chooses death
  - Proctor is executed but manages to preserve his core of being, his sense of his worth, or his name, as he puts it
- Losing Personal Integrity
- A View from the Bridge*** (1955, revised 1956)
- follows a Sicilian American longshoreman, Eddie Carbone, who is consumed with a nearly incestuous love for his niece and is driven to report on a cousin smuggled into the country when the niece falls in love with the man
  - violates one of the taboos of his culture by reporting the illegal immigrant to the authorities but denies his guilt and equating the loss of honour with loss of name, he tries to recover his self-respect by seizing it by violence
- Marilyn Monroe
- After the Fall*** (1964)
- a semi-autobiographical play based on the author’s marriage to Marilyn Monroe, his second wife out of three
  - Quentin prepares for his third marriage with the fear that his past does not make him deserving of happiness
  - the central character realizes that the defects for which he blames himself are part of the human condition, as human beings we must accept and forgive our imperfections and build our future on the basis of that acceptance

<sup>3</sup> McCarthyism refers to the Second Red Scare in the 1950s, named for the Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy who fuelled the fears of widespread Communists subversion. House Un-American Activities Committee (1938–1975) was founded to detect Nazi propaganda but was later focused on persecuting those suspected from Communist sympathies. The suspects were often Jewish intellectuals, artists and disillusioned former communists, among them Arthur Miller, Richard Wright and Lillian Hellman.

Later  
Plays***Incident at Vichy*** (1964)

- a play dealing with the Nazi persecution of the Jews set during the Vichy government in France (1940–1944)

***The Price*** (1968)

- a play dealing with two brothers who meet after the death of their father to arrange the sale of his furniture

***The Creation of the World and Other Business*** (1972)

- a serio-comic rewriting of the story of Adam and Eve, in which Adam must struggle to find a capacity for goodness and moral responsibility in himself to guide Eve towards forgiveness and Cain towards repentance

**Tennessee Williams (1911–1983)**

Trivia

- born Thomas Lanier Williams, changed his name (1939) to Tennessee, referring to the state of his father's birth
- his granduncle was Sidney Lanier (1842–1881), a nature poet, considered the only true follower of E. A. Poe
- born in Mississippi, lived in several places mostly in the South, including for instance St Louis or New Orleans
- his problematic family was to inspire much of his writing, his mother was a borderline hysteric, his father a heavy drinker, his much beloved sister was diagnosed with schizophrenia and consequently institutionalized
- one of the first famous Southerners to reveal openly his homosexuality, second perhaps only to Truman Capote
- his later years were marked by alcoholism, drugs and depressive illness, especially after the death of his lover
- his later plays are weaker, he rewrote material, *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (1963) three times

Writing

- claimed that he wrote from his own tensions, as a form of therapy, which produced a series of intensely poetic examinations of the injured spirit, the private pains and passions of lonely individuals who hardly endure living
- preoccupied with fragile and deeply wounded characters concerned with nameless fears and insecurities and with desperate desires which make them grasp at anything to numb them and to offer distraction from their pain
- uses realism to explore emotional and psychological forces, focuses on extraordinary people trying to bear up against the ordinary pressures of life and on the common humanity that connects the outsider to the rest of us
- his best work is marked by an intensely heightened realism and a poetic impressionism of feeling and method, which make the ordinary seem extraordinary, the domestic mythic and the mundane a sensual mystery
- his favourite theme is waiting for meaning and for emotional rescue, as quoted in *Orpheus Descending* (1957)

***The Glass Menagerie*** (1945)Family  
Memories

- a memory play that stretches ordinary domestic realism to explore extremes of sensibility and experience and transforms the domestic setting of the play by filtering it through reminiscence of the narrator Tom Wingfield
- deploys evocative language, elusive symbolism and suggestive glimpses into ephemeral thought and emotion
- circulates around Tom's memories of his family living in genteel poverty in St Louis, Missouri, during the Depression, his former ache to leave home and his present guilt over his actual desertion of his mother and sister
- recalls Tom's mother Amanda, a faded Southern belle who clings to glamorous illusions about her past, and his sister Laura, a shy crippled young woman whose private world is centred on a collection of small glass animals

Emotional  
Truth

- the mother insisted on Tom's supplying a man to care for Laura in his absence, Tom brought a visitor, 'an emissary from a world that we were somehow set apart from', the visit turned a disaster, and Tom left the family
- the Wingfield family is presented as unable to function in reality, though this seems more of a virtue than a weakness, for the alternative space they inhabit appears as special and seductive as the world of Laura's animals
- the narrator is led to realize that though he tried to leave his family behind, he is more faithful to them than he intended, he is doomed to relive the past and to recognize that it is in the past that the emotional truth resides

***A Streetcar Named Desire*** (1947)Desire &  
Cemetery

- his finest play, set in New Orleans, Louisiana, was inspired by the author's stay in this city where there were 'two streetcars, one named Desire and the other named Cemetery' running near the place where the author lived
- the 'undiscourageable progress' of the two symbolically expresses the opposing fundamentals of experience
- Blanche Dubois, a fading Southern belle, visits her sister Stella to find her married to a crude 'animal', the intensely physical Stanley Kowalski, and struggles for control of Stella with Stanley and for a new life and love
- Blanche is torn between death and its opposite desire, the desperate longing to live and to love, perhaps, which drives her into a wrenching conflict, a mortal combat with Stanley for somewhere to be, for a place for herself
- Blanche fails, her romance with Stanley's friend Mitch is over, and after a violent and sexual confrontation with Stanley she is defeated and broken and is taken off to the asylum while Stella and Stanley remain together

Conflicting  
Opposites

- the play has the elemental force of a struggle for survival, beginning when Blanche invades the space occupied by Stanley and Stella, continuing in a fight for it between Blanche and Stanley, and ending in Blanche's defeat
- weaves a complex tapestry of oppositions in describing the conflicting and contesting personalities of Blanche and Stanley, presents the two antagonists as strangely fascinated with each other and with their antagonism

- Blanche is a Southern lady in a world that has no use for ladies, is associated with whiteness and the virgin of the zodiac, stands for idealism, culture, purity, love and romance, but also for falsehood, fantasy and weakness
- Stanley is associated with vivid colours, violent action, the goat of the zodiac and the strutting cockerel of folktale, represents prosaic reality rather than poetic idealism and the rawly physical rather than the spiritual
- the play may be seen as a fairytale of beauty and the beast, as a social history of a declining old world and an emergent new one or as a mythic contest between the material and the moral, the female principle and the male

***Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*** (1955)

- a powerful play with a dual narrative, focusing on a Mississippi landowner, Big Daddy Pollitt, and his family
- Pollitt has to decide who should inherit his estate, practical considerations favour his sensible and reliable son Gooper, while emotion and empathy draw him towards his childless and tortured son Brick and his wife Maggie
- Brick and Maggie, the cat of the title, have to find a way of living together and face the facts about themselves
- both narratives gravitate towards the discovery of emotional truth, the need to know as well as accept oneself
- Pollitt eventually decides in favour of Brick, his natural heir and spiritual mirror, while Brick and Maggie start to face the facts about their relationship, which are far from being pleasant but offer the chance of real survival

***Orpheus Descending*** (1957)

- the main character, Val Xavier, declares that we are all sentenced to solitary confinement inside our skins, that we are all waiting and living in the meantime, waiting for something to happen to make things make more sense

***Suddenly Last Summer*** (1958)

- a weaker play, deviates into a sensationalism unanchored in the emotional reality and the raw, intimate feeling

***The Night of the Iguana*** (1961)

- a play with a minimal plot, among the better of his later work, again weaving together very different characters

***The Rose Tattoo*** (1951), ***Period of Adjustment*** (1960)

- among his weaker plays, minor comedies, though the first mentioned won him a Tony Award for best play

***Camino Real***<sup>4</sup> (1953), ***Sweet Bird of Youth*** (1959), ***Summer and Smoke*** (1968)

- among the weaker of his plays, marred by an excess of symbolism, an overplus of heavily signposted meaning

***The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*** (1963)

- again a weaker play, though including an extraordinary speech in which the speaker compares human beings to 'kittens or puppies', 'secure in the house of their master' at daytime but not so much at night when they sleep

***In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*** (1969)

- a play apparently used as a confessional, featuring an artist who suffers a mental and aesthetic breakdown

***Clothes for a Summer Hotel*** (1980)

- another play as a confessional, using F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald as projections of his own sense of falling off

Dual  
Narrative

Later  
Plays

<sup>4</sup> The title is Spanish for the 'Royal Road', referring to the long trails that used to link the various colonies of Spain in the Americas.