

Cultural Milieu, Situation and Attitude Represented in Modern American Drama

Sunil N. Wathore

Asst. Prof. & HoD. English Arts & Science College, Pulgaon, Dist. Wardha (M.S.)

Affl. Rashtrasant Tukadoji Maharaj Nagpur University, Nagpur.

Cell: 9371957169.

Corresponding author: Sunil N. Wathore

Abstract: As a reflector of the American scene, *Death of a Salesman* is not a unique case. A close look at American drama after Eugene O'Neill reveals that the plots and the dramatis personae of representative plays show a similar relationship to the milieu. As Miller deals with the 'little man' in American society, so Tennessee Williams explores the mind of the Southerner caught between an idyllic past and an undesirable present. Thornton Wilder dramatizes the ideals of small-town American and Edward Albee satirizes the middle-class suburbanite in the affluent sixties. Both plot-situations and character-types are recognizable counterparts of problems and people on the American scene. There is a tendency in dramatic criticism to consider these cultural features of the drama as so much window-dressing, a technique for soothing the audience with familiarity while the real business of character portrayal goes on. This approach takes the territory for granted and focuses on an analysis of the hero as psychological specimen. It ignores the fact that drama deals with character-in-a-situation and that this situation is not static, but a developing action. Because the situation reflects the cultural milieu and the personae types in it, the play speaks from the culture to the culture. Thus the way in which the drama represents the milieu is essential to an understanding of the drama as a whole. The purpose of this research article is to examine cultural milieu, situation, and attitude represented in modern American drama.

Keywords: Cultural Milieu, Situation, Attitude, Heritage of Western Culture, Plot-pattern and Character-types and American Drama.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to his collected plays Arthur Miller records a remark overheard in the lobby after a performance of his *Death of a Salesman*: "I always said that New England territory was no damned good."⁽¹⁾ On the face of it, this comment represents a naïve, grass-roots reaction worthy of Willy Loman himself. For the anonymous theatre-goer who made this remark, the source of Willy's troubles was not his false ideals and lack of self-knowledge, but the sales-resistant New England territory. A more sophisticated observer would perhaps, emphasize the pathos of the anecdote only to miss the kernel of truth it contains. Here 'territory' refers to something more than geography; it refers also and primarily 'to a cultural climate and a state of mind'. Willy fails because he does not 'know the territory'; he neither recognizes nor understands the cultural forces that have shaped his ideals and his destiny. Willy's problem is the problem of the Salesman, the man who lives out there in the blue, on a smile and a shoeshine. And this is the problem of every American who has followed the dream of success to the end of the rainbow. As Willy failed to sell the hard-nosed New England merchandizers, he also failed to cope with his own milieu. So the kernel of truth contained in Miller's pathetic anecdote is that the play is as much about the milieu as it is about the character, as much about 'the territory' as about the tormented psyche of the salesman. It will be considered plot-structure, character-types and setting to discover how these elements of drama relate to the milieu. The various paths that this kind of study can follow are not uncharted; this relationship has been explored, with enlightening results, in the drama of other eras-for example, in Greek and Elizabethan drama. We understand the plays of the Athenians better for the studies of Greek ritual by Gilbert Murray and F. M. Cornford; we have a firmer grasp on Shakespeare's world-view because of the scholarship of E. M. W. Tillyard and Theodore Spencer. These scholars and others like them have painstakingly reconstructed the milieu of these periods from archaeological and literary remains. We have first-hand experience of our culture; its attitudes and ideals and strategies work deep in our own consciousness. For evidence we need not appeal to potsherds or black-letter pamphlets; we need only scan our book-shelves. It is true enough, as Frances Ferguson has pointed out, that the contemporary cultural picture is complex and

fragmented, without a neat cosmic focus, but even at this juncture it continues to supply attitudes and ideals that are grist for the dramatist's mill.⁽²⁾

This is not to say that the dramatic milieu includes only the immediate cultural situation, that it contains no traditional elements. It includes, along with the American milieu, the dramatic traditions that the playwright inherits from his predecessors, and the heritage of Western culture, especially as reflected in literature. These matrices are available to the dramatist not merely as conscious techniques of presentation or patterning like impressionism or surrealism, for example; rather they permeate the atmosphere in which he works in the same way attitudes and values permeate a culture-as a milieu, a largely unarticulated set of attitudes that structures societal institutions, creates behavioural patterns and, in general, presents the members of a given society with goals and with strategies for achieving those goals. The dramatic milieu is the atmosphere in which the playwright works. It comprises the immediate cultural situation, dramatic conventions and traditions, and the heritage of Western culture-in effect, all those attitudes, ideals and traditions that determine or affect values, supply strategies and pattern human activities.

The dramatic milieu functions primarily as a matrix for the playwright, it should be clear that the milieu of the playwright is also the milieu of the audience. It provides that common ground between stage and audience, the common stock of experience which makes communication possible. The play speaks from culture to culture precisely because the play and the audience occupy the same territory-at least for the duration of the play. What the playwright creates, what the play expresses and what the audience experiences relate, at least ideally, to the same milieu. The creative process of the playwright and the experience of the audience are both focused in the play, the medium which incorporates the milieu according to its own laws. The milieu appears, not as a sociological or psychological treatise or as a series of rhetorical flourishes, but dramatized in plot and personae. It contributes attitudes like the success ideology, strategies like personality development a la Dale Carnegie and dramatic patterns like the tragic triad of guilt-suffering-purgation. But these elements are woven into the action so that their meaning is experienced as well as stated. No matter what the playwright's intent, the drama creates its own effect and makes its own statement, through plot-structure and character delineation, about the culture to which it speaks. It is the critic's job to illuminate the experience and the statement as the drama affects them.

There are, as it has indicated above, three working areas into which the dramatic milieu can be divided for purposes of analysis: 1) the immediate cultural situation, 2) traditional dramatic forms, 3) the heritage of the past, especially as it is reflected in literature. Each of these areas deserves attention, though they overlap in some instances. The contribution made by traditional forms is, in theory, most obvious because these forms include ready-made patterns with conventional meanings. "Tragedy" and "Comedy" as traditional forms establish certain expectations in the mind of the audience, and, at a deeper level, they employ structures that make conventional statements. The non-dramatic heritage of Western culture provides traditional motifs and symbols for their conveyance. The struggle between good and evil, the significance of light and darkness can be dramatized in a good many ways while the basic images continue to hold a cosmic meaning for the audience. The treatment of the immediate cultural milieu deserves a whole section, and we will deal with it in due time.

Tragedy and comedy are traditional forms that include patterns of action with conventional meanings. Obviously, the meaning of these forms can be seen only in an historical perspective. When we look at tragedy from a distance, the pattern emerges; stripped to its essential framework, the tragic action is a movement from guilt through suffering to purgation and insight. The way in which this pattern is filled out differs considerably from age to age and culture to culture and even playwright to playwright, but its outlines persist in Western drama. Whether the play is Aeschylus's *Oresteia* or *Oedipus* or *Hamlet* or *Death of a Salesman*, the structure is a progress from guilt to purgation. In the *Eumenides*, the climactic third play of the *Oresteia* trilogy, Orestes is acquitted of the charge of blood-guilt; this acquittal is accomplished by a providential intervention that recapitulates a cultural transition from rule by tribal code to rule by democratic procedure. Oedipus determines to search out criminal who is polluting the city; he suffers through to a discovery of his own guilt and so learns that he is a fallible member of an error-prone race. Hamlet is forced to cope with a totally corrupt court and country, a world that has gone to seed. His problem is cosmic: how, in such a universe of disorder, one man can begin to set it right. It is the world that needs cleaning, and this is accomplished only at the cost of the Prince's life. In *Salesman* Willy Loman searches for the key to the success that has eluded him; he suffers very deeply because of his 'guilt'. If the search is unsuccessful and Willy goes to his death without the vision of the Theban king, it is because he is the Salesman caught in his milieu who cannot relinquish his ideals without destroying his identity. Each dramatization of the conventional tragic pattern finally makes a statement through the specific experience of the individual play about the relationship of the guilty individual to his society.⁽³⁾ The pattern reflects a basic human desire to be free from guilt-as the specific culture may define it-and to join or re-join a purified society. This is the conventional meaning of the traditional tragic structure; it is a progress by which the guilty individual is reconciled to society and in which society itself is renewed.

Comedy as a traditional term covers a wider spectrum of dramatic usage; from its Greek origins it reveals a two-fold potential for the satiric and for the sentimental. Aristophanes and Menander represent two

different thrusts with the same pattern, and these directions persist through Western drama so that Shakespeare can unite the satiric and the sentimental in individual plays and mock romantic love while he is ratifying it. Rosalind can poke fun at Orlando's idealism while she falls deeper in love with him. Edward Albee hurls his suburbanite couple at one another's throats for two-and-two-thirds acts and leaves them holding hands at the final curtain.⁽⁴⁾ Whether the satirical or the sentimental treatment is foremost in a given play, the final image projected by the last movement in a comedy is that of the harmonization of individuals in society with their own cosmos. The basic movement of the comic action often involves a progress to a 'wedding', the unification of a society on its own terms. This 'wedding' can represent a new social order rising from the ashes of the old, or the expulsion of undesirable elements-personae or character-traits-from society, or a celebration of harmony with the forces of nature, or any combination of these motifs. The happy reunion of separated lovers is the most conventional comic pattern, a mode that can be traced from the largest boy-meets-girl Broadway comedy through Shakespeare's forest comedies to the plays of Menander and the 'satyr-tragedy' of Euripides.

The 'boy-meets-girl' pattern of comic action has its own structure and its own meaning. The structure focuses on the reconciliation of lovers: a temporary liaison is followed by separation or alienation, and then the lovers are united in permanent union, at least for purpose of the play. Other images that surround the wedding serve to emphasize its meaning; a new society is born in harmony with the cosmos. So when Rosalind marries Orlando in *As You Like It*, not only are two congenial spirits happily paired, but the usurper Ferdinand is foiled, Orlando is restored both to his brother and to his rightful place in the body politic. At the wedding of Hippolyta and Theseus in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the fertile forces of nature in fairy-form bless the marriage-bed. The moon-drenched, flower-strewn bower that is the setting for romance surrounds the progress to the wedding with images of fertility. Even when this conventional pattern is adapted in a way that radically alters its meaning, as in Albee's *Virginia Woolf*, it makes a statement about man's aspirations to exist in a harmonious union both with his fellows and with a fruitful cosmic order. These traditional patterns with their conventional meanings never function in isolation; they are always assimilated to the whole. As the cultural situation changes, the significance of the pattern is modified. The tragic pattern in Aeschylus and the tragic pattern in O'Neill relate very differently to the total meaning of the play. The salient point is that the conventional significance provides a point of departure for the modern playwright. Because the form does make its own statement, the playwright may modify it to suit his own purpose.⁽⁵⁾

The other traditional aspect of the dramatic milieu, the heritage of Western culture, offers both conventional imagery and motifs to the drama. The Judaeo-Christian tradition is the most durable contributor in this area. Archibald MacLeish begins *J. B.*, his drama about the problem of evil, by invoking the Book of Job; T. S. Eliot uses a meld of Greek ritual and Christian philosophy in *The Cocktail Party*. O'Neill, Miller, Williams and Wilder deal with values that look back to the Puritan theology of election and the signs of election. Perennial imagery, with its attached values, becomes transmuted in the crucible of assimilation into the drama and thus makes a contribution to the meaning of the play. Whether the dramatist adapts traditional patterns and motifs or forges new structures from material at hand, he cannot avoid reference to his immediate cultural situation. He views the traditional in the light of his immediate environment; the conventional significance of the traditional elements in his milieu serves the present rather than embalms the past. For the American dramatist, specifically American ideals and attitudes contain material that the playwright can shape into plot and press for character-types. Ultimately the immediate cultural situation, woven into the texture of the drama, modifies the past and provides a key to the meaning of the action.

Dealing with such concepts as "cultural milieu", "cultural situation" and "cultural attitude" is like trying to hold quicksilver in the hand. Squeeze such concepts for precise definition and they vanish. Fortunately, illustration and example provide an alloy that makes slippery notions manageable. From the outset we have been dealing with the notion of "milieu"; it is the territory in which the dramatist works and whose qualities are absorbed in the play. As the territory is more a matter of attitude than of geographical location, so the immediate cultural situation is a milieu-the ideals, attitudes and institutions that distinguish the American group-mind. Like other cultures, the American culture is a product of adaptation and experience. Some of our attitudes are traditional, native adaptations of the cultures from which we sprang; others are unique, products of our attempts to cope with new situations. It is possible, for instance, to trace the unique American attitude towards 'successes to roots in our Puritan past, to see this ideology as a secularization of the Protestant ethic. It is likewise true that our fanatical faith in self-reliance was confirmed by the experience of the frontier.⁽⁶⁾ No scientific method can measure the relative influence of these two components on the American psyche, but it is clear that both have contributed to the shaping of uniquely American attitude. It is likewise clear that success and self-reliance provide an underpinning for our social, economic and political systems, though the meaning of these terms might be differently understood by different groups in American society. That minority groups have variant definitions explains, to some extent, why they are in the minority. We can identify such concepts because they exist not only as concepts and images but also as programs for action. "Success" implies the acquisition of wealth by industry and/or invention; inheritance of a fortune does not count. "Rags-to-riches" is a variant statement of a group attitude towards success that implies a program of action.

Images and programs for action that go to make up a cultural situation depend ultimately on what we may call, for want of a more precise term, "cultural attitude". Attitudes are the internal constituents of situation and milieu, psychological orientations from which images and patterns of action proceed. The most widely accepted cultural attitudes are expressed in social ideograms like "democracy", "law-and-order", "frontier", "success". The use of these ideograms implies the existence of a complex of inter-related images and emotions working in the psyche in a way that defies scientific analysis. "Democracy" strikes the ear of an American with a good deal more force than the dictionary definition can explain. To a long tradition of Anglo-Saxon parliamentary history, a revolutionary background and two-hundred years of republican experience add the images of 'the land of the free', 'equal opportunity', 'freedom of choice', 'free enterprise', 'rights of the individual', and so forth. No other nation or race can quite appreciate the complex of feelings and meanings signified for the American by 'democracy'. Here we have a folk-idea which cannot be formulated or defined precisely, yet which has a normative influence on the culture. It goes without saying that the force such cultural attitudes exert on society is directly proportionate to the credence which its members give them. Belief in the 'democratic way' will override confusions and even contradictions in theory and practice. So the cultural attitude represented by the ideogram provides the necessary consensus that supports social, economic and political institutions. Such a 'belief' does not, of course, represent itself as such; rather the believer simply accepts the attitude as the best, the most logical, often the only acceptable way of viewing reality.⁽⁷⁾

The plot-pattern and the character types considered in their cultural context, may not be altogether a product of the dramatist's conscious artistry, they do not often appear in simple combinations. Significant drama deals with the complexities of the cultural situation rather than the fantasy-ideal. The structure may be latent, carefully concealed by a wealth of realistic detail; occasionally it makes an ironic comment on the theme, or conflict, of the play; in every case, it has a meaningful function to perform. Appreciating this function involves digging out the pattern, identifying the type-characters and exposing to view the underlying cultural attitudes. It may be seen that this process demands the kind of reflection that cannot be achieved at a dramatic performance and that is true enough.

II. CONCLUSION

The story of modern American drama is the story of a courageous struggle against odds. By and large, however, significant contemporary plays are not social drama or thesis plays in the technical sense, rather, cultural attitudes and patterns operate in these plays in exactly the same way that they operate in the literary and sub-literary forms mentioned above-as structures that, by giving expression to the attitude or pattern and to the problem it generates, give shape and meaning to the action. Thus, if the culture fails to provide the dramatist with an adequate world-view, but only provides detached patterns that move in a vicious circle or spiral down into contradiction, a personal solution, arbitrarily supplied from outside the culture, cannot redeem the play. The frustration sometimes felt at the conclusion of an honest written, complex drama cannot be laid immediately at the door of the dramatist. If Miller cannot solve Willy Loman's problem, is it because the culture itself is helpless in the face of failure? The mirror that our drama holds up to nature reflects a familiar face; we need to take a long, hard critical look before judging the dramatist harshly. The face in the glass is our own; to understand it is to understand ourselves and our world.

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