

**AMERICAN SOCIETY AT THE BEGINNING OF THE XX CENTURY
AND ITS IMPACT TO THE NATIONAL LITERATURE**

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Annotation: XX century is known with two great wars and their tremendous effect to the social and cultural life of many countries. Indeed, America is also considered to be one of the countries with much harm in its economy, culture as well as its literature. The following article depicts socio-cultural life in XX century America and several prominent literary man during this period.

Key words: Theater Guild, Evgeny O'Neill, Provincetown Players, Green Pastures, Harriet Monroe, Provincetown Players

Important movements in dramaturgy, poetry, fiction, and criticism took shape in the years before, during, and after World War I. The eventful post-war era left its mark on all kinds of books. The literary forms of the period were very diverse, and leading authors in drama, poetry, and fiction were prone to radical technical experiments.

Americans traveling in Europe in the early years of the 20th century encountered a vibrant, thriving theater; after returning home, some of them became active in organizing the "Little Theater" movement throughout the country. Freed from commercial constraints, playwrights experimented with forms and methods of dramatic production, and over time trained producers, actors, and playwrights emerged in college classrooms and community theaters. Some Little Theater groups became commercial producers, such as the Washington Square Players, founded in 1915, which later became the Theater Guild (first production in 1919). [1,24] The resulting drama was characterized by a spirit of innovation and a new seriousness and maturity.

Evgeny O'Neill, the most prolific playwright of that time, was an artist born out of this movement. Before his plays were produced commercially, he worked with a theater troupe called the Provincetown Players. His dramas were written on various subjects. *Beyond the Horizon* (first performed in 1920), *Anna Christie* (1921), *A Dream Under Lead* (1924) and *The Frozen Comet* (1946) are naturalistic works, while *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and "The Hairy Monkey" (1922) used expressionistic techniques developed in German dramaturgy in 1914-24. He also used the stream-of-consciousness form of psychological monologue in *A Strange Interlude* (1928), and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) created a work that combined myth, family drama, and psychological analysis. [19,32]

No other playwright has received as much acclaim as O'Neill, but many other playwrights have written plays that represent the development of serious and colorful drama. Among them are Maxwell Anderson, whose poetic dramas were negatively rated, and Robert E. Sherwood, who created both comedy (*A Meeting in Vienna* (1931)) and tragedy (*There Will Be No Night* (1940)). Mark Connelly's African-American folkloric work *Green Pastures* (1930) uses an impressive fantasy technique to refer to biblical events. Like O'Neill, Elmer Rice made equally effective use of expressionist techniques (*The Adding Machine* (1923)) and naturalism (*Street Scene* (1929)). Lillian Helman portrayed strong, well-crafted melodramas in *The Children's Hour* (1934) and *The Little Foxes* (1939). Radical theatrical experiments included Mark Blitzstein's scathing musical *The Breaking Cradle* (1937) and work by Orson Welles and John Houseman for the government-sponsored Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Theater Project. The main radical theater of this decade was the Group Theater (1931–41) under Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg, which was famous for presenting works written by Clifford Odets. *Waiting for the Left* (1935) was a rousing rallying cry for unionism, in which Odets roused the audience with intense enthusiasm and perhaps the best play of the decade, *Awake In "on va kuyla"* (1935), he created an unparalleled family lyric. Odets' other famous productions for the Group Theater were "Lost Paradise" (1935), *Golden Boy* (1937) and *Rocket Launched to the Moon* (1938). [33,20]

Thornton Wilder made good use of unique settings and poetic dialogue in *"Our Town"* (1938), and fantasy in *"The Skin of Teeth"* (1942). William Saroyan, however, shifted his light, anarchic vision from fiction to drama in *My Heart Is as High as the Mountains* and *The Time of Your Life* (both 1939).[34,23]

Poetry was fundamentally different from the traditional types of poetry and experimental works typical of the 19th century. Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost, two New England poets neglected for their technical experimentation, gained both critical and popular acclaim during this period. Robinson, whose first book was published in 1896, was most prolific in the genres of sonnets, ballads, and white poetry. In the 1920s, he won three Pulitzer Prizes for three of his best-known works. These were *Collected Poems* (published in 1921), *Twice Dead Man* (1925) and *Tristram* (1927). Like Robinson, Frost's first book, *The Boy's Will* (1913), and volumes such as *North of Boston* (1914), *New Hampshire* (1923), *Useful Range* (1936), and *The Mask of Consequences* (1945) used traditional stanzas and free verse. Like Robinson, Frost, the most famous poet of his time, saw and commented on the tragic aspects of life in his poems "Design", "Directive", "Provide, Provide". Frost transformed ordinary colloquial language into a traditional poetic form with epigrammatic effect.[34,12]

Just as modern American drama began in small theaters, so modern American poetry took shape in small magazines. *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, founded by

Harriet Monroe in Chicago in 1912, was particularly important. The surrounding area soon became famous as the home of three poets: Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, and Edgar Lee Masters. Lindsay's mythic science and irregular forms of vernacular oratory became popular spoken word works, and live readings of his works such as *General William Booth Enters Heaven and Other Poems* (1913) and *The Congo and Other Poems* (1914) contributed to the success of the books. Masters' very famous *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) consists of free verse monologues by country men and women, many of them recounting their desperate lives.[33,42]

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