

Modern Drama (Lecture 6)

Modern theater, as we discussed in our last lecture, is versatile. The stage made itself host to a large number of experimental as well as conventional attitudes to the old art of drama. While realism remained a viable option, modernist experiments proliferated.

Two of the most famous realists were George Bernard Shaw in England and Arthur Miller in the United States. Shaw was a pacifist and Fabist. One of his most important plays was *Arms and the Man*. Another was *Pygmalion* in which Shaw attacks the idea of class distinctions.

Miller in the United States formulated his realistic vision in the mold of tragedy. As one of the oldest forms, tragedy proved to be malleable enough to be shaped in a form that accommodates the interests of the twentieth century. Miller disposed of the idea that the tragic hero has to be a man of high status and argued that the common man is no less suitable for tragic treatment than heroes of high status. His plays dealt with modern themes of American life: *The Crucible* was written in the Cold War era and focuses on the idea of witch hunt which stands for the practices of McCarthyism and the prosecution of American writers and intellectuals. *All my Sons* deals with the traditional importance of family for American life and introduces the idea of social responsibility as being of equal if not of higher importance. Realism proved to be flexible enough to live in the age of experimentation.

Experimentation was, nevertheless, the main feature of European drama. It remains the basic feature of continental drama until today. Modern experimentations have been carried out by August Strindberg in Sweden, Luigi Pirandello in Italy and by many dramatists in France. Experimentation is not a goal in itself. It is always a means of expressing a vision that differs from that of realism. This vision remains to be discussed later on.