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THEATRICALITY AND NARRATIVE PERFORMANCE IN MODERN AMERICAN FICTION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DRAMATIC SPACE, DIALOGUE, AND INNER CONFLICT

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Abstract This research paper extends the supplied synopsis and first paper by shifting the focus from the general presence of dramatic techniques in American novels to the more specific problem of theatricality as a mode of narrative performance. It examines how modern American fiction transforms dramatic resources such as dialogue, monologue, conflict, symbolic space, and scene construction into techniques of prose narrative. The argument is that American novelists do not merely borrow from drama in decorative ways; they reorganize the novel around theatrical principles of presence, confrontation, rhythm, and staged revelation. Using a comparative textual approach, the paper studies William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as primary examples, while also drawing on Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* as a dramatic reference point for understanding memory, illusion, and stage-like emotional design. The paper is grounded in Aristotelian ideas of conflict and catharsis, Bakhtinian dialogism, and modern criticism on the relationship between drama and narrative. It argues that Faulkner internalizes theatre through fragmented monologues, Steinbeck socializes theatre through group dialogue and public conflict, and Fitzgerald aestheticizes theatre through spectacle, performance, and symbolic setting. These differences show that dramatic technique in American fiction is not a single device but a flexible narrative system. The study concludes that theatricality deepens the modern American novel by converting private consciousness, social crisis, and symbolic environment into readable dramatic action. In doing so, the novel becomes a silent stage on which American anxieties about identity, class, memory, and moral failure are enacted for the reader.

1. INTRODUCTION

The American novel has often been discussed as a flexible form capable of absorbing other literary and artistic traditions. Among the most important of these absorbed traditions is drama. The relationship between drama and the novel is not limited to the adaptation of novels into plays or films; it is more deeply visible in the way novelists organize scenes, reveal character, build conflict, and produce emotional tension. Drama depends on action presented before an audience, but the novel can create a comparable effect through verbal arrangement. When a novelist frames a confrontation as a scene, allows voices to collide, or turns a setting into a symbolic stage, the prose narrative begins to perform. The reader becomes a silent spectator, not only receiving information but also watching psychological, social, and moral pressures unfold.

The supplied synopsis identifies the broad research area as the techniques of drama in American literary works and emphasizes the value of comparative study. The first paper already established that American novelists such as William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, and F. Scott Fitzgerald use dialogue, characterization, setting, conflict, and monologue to intensify their narratives. This second paper develops that discussion by asking how these techniques create theatricality within the novel itself. The word theatricality here does not mean artificiality in a negative sense. Rather, it refers to the capacity of the novel to arrange events as scenes, voices as performances, spaces as stages, and inner conflicts as dramatic revelations. Such theatricality helps prose fiction achieve immediacy, emotional concentration, and symbolic force.

The importance of this inquiry lies in the fact that modern American fiction is deeply concerned with fractured identity, social pressure, alienation, and public performance. These concerns are not easily expressed through linear narration alone. Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* turns grief and family duty into a sequence of competing monologues; Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* turns economic dispossession into a collective drama of migration; Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* turns the American dream into a glittering but unstable theatrical spectacle. In each case, the novel does more than tell a story. It arranges characters before the reader in a way that resembles dramatic presentation. The reader sees the Bundrens speak from enclosed interior worlds, watches the Joads struggle against social forces, and observes Gatsby performing an identity that collapses under moral pressure.

The study therefore argues that dramatic techniques in American novels should be understood as structural and interpretive tools. They shape how characters are known, how social tensions are represented, and how readers experience emotional release. Aristotle's understanding of plot, conflict, and catharsis remains useful because these novels move through crises that produce recognition and emotional response (Aristotle, 330 BCE). Bakhtin's theory of dialogism is equally useful because the modern novel is marked by competing voices, ideological tensions, and unresolved meanings (Bakhtin, 1981). Lukacs's account of the novel as a form shaped by modern dislocation also helps explain why novelists turn to dramatic methods when representing a fragmented world (Lukacs, 1971). Together these perspectives reveal that the novel's theatricality is not accidental. It answers a modern need for concentrated representation of conflict.

This paper is divided into major sections: a review of relevant critical ideas, a theoretical framework, methodology, comparative analysis, results and discussion, and conclusion. It preserves the inline author-date referencing style used in the first paper and uses the same core body of references. The overall purpose is to prepare a second independent research paper that remains connected to the synopsis and first paper while adding a more focused argument about narrative performance. This focus gives the paper a distinct scholarly direction.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Critical discussions of the relationship between drama and fiction generally begin with the recognition that literary forms are historically distinct but practically interconnected. Drama is built around visible action, dialogue, and performance, while the novel is built around narration, description, and interiority. Yet modern fiction frequently crosses this boundary. When a novel depends on sharp exchanges, interior monologues, symbolic staging, and scenes of confrontation, it borrows the energy of drama without becoming a play. This crossing of forms is especially visible in American literature, where writers repeatedly search for techniques capable of expressing psychological tension and social crisis.

Aristotle's Poetics remains foundational because it defines drama through action, plot, character, conflict, and emotional effect. Although Aristotle wrote about tragedy, his categories can be applied to novels because prose fiction also depends on structured action and emotional consequence. A novel such as *The Great Gatsby* contains a tragic arc, a central desire, reversal, and recognition, even though it is narrated retrospectively rather than enacted on a stage

(Fitzgerald, 2004). Similarly, *As I Lay Dying* develops through a journey whose outward purpose is burial but whose deeper function is the exposure of family fracture (Faulkner, 2014). The dramatic value of these novels lies in the way action reveals character and produces response, a principle already central to Aristotelian criticism (Aristotle, 330 BCE).

Bakhtin's theory of dialogism provides another essential critical foundation. For Bakhtin, the novel is a form that thrives on many voices, social languages, and ideological positions (Bakhtin, 1981). This idea is highly relevant to dramatic technique because drama is also a genre of voice and confrontation. In the modern American novel, dialogue is not merely a way to report speech; it becomes a field where worldviews compete. In Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, the speech of migrants, preachers, workers, officials, and landowners creates a dramatic arena of social conflict (Steinbeck, 2006). In Faulkner, the voices are less public but equally conflicting; the Bundren family members speak from isolated consciousnesses that fail to unite into one stable truth (Faulkner, 2014). Bakhtin's emphasis on plurality helps explain why the novel can function as a drama of voices.

Lukacs's theory of the novel also contributes to the discussion by emphasizing the novel's relation to modern dislocation. For Lukacs, the novel emerges from a world in which totality has become problematic and individuals search for meaning in fragmented conditions (Lukacs, 1971). This understanding corresponds closely to the use of theatricality in American fiction. The dramatic scene gives temporary shape to a broken world. It gathers conflict into a visible or readable arrangement, even when the resolution remains incomplete. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the road, camps, farms, and family gatherings become staged spaces where historical suffering can be seen. In *The Great Gatsby*, parties, rooms, cars, and the valley of ashes become settings where social illusion and moral emptiness are displayed. Dramatic technique therefore gives form to modern fragmentation.

Earlier American literary criticism has also stressed the closeness of fiction and drama. Brooks observes that the American novel often contains heroic and dramatic energies that exceed ordinary narration (Brooks, 1972). Fiedler's reading of American fiction highlights patterns of conflict, desire, death, and social myth, all of which lend themselves to dramatic organization (Fiedler, 1966). Heilman similarly treats the American novel as a field of comparative formal experimentation in which fiction borrows from adjacent genres (Heilman, 1975). These critics

support the view that the dramatic quality of American novels is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader tradition in which American writers use intense scenes and symbolic conflicts to explore national and personal crises.

Miller's discussion of the relationship between drama and the novel is especially useful for this paper because it directly addresses the interdependence of performed and written forms (Miller, 1984). The novel cannot reproduce the stage literally, but it can create an imagined stage through arrangement of scene, voice, and gesture. This imagined stage is often more flexible than actual theatre because it can move between public action and private consciousness. Faulkner's fiction illustrates this flexibility: the reader does not simply observe characters from outside but enters their broken mental performances. Steinbeck uses a different method. He creates group scenes in which dialogue, action, and moral decision build a collective drama. Fitzgerald creates yet another version by making social life itself theatrical: identity becomes costume, wealth becomes spectacle, and desire becomes performance.

The first supplied paper also emphasizes the importance of dialogue, characterization, setting, conflict, and monologue in the selected American novels. It argues that Faulkner's stream-of-consciousness resembles dramatic soliloquy, Steinbeck's naturalistic dialogue resembles stage exchange, and Fitzgerald's symbolic social scenes resemble tragic performance. This second paper accepts that foundation but moves further by treating these elements as parts of a unified theatrical system. Dialogue, monologue, setting, conflict, and spectacle are not separate devices; they cooperate to transform narrative into performance.

Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* is relevant as a dramatic reference point because it shows how memory, illusion, and symbolic staging can structure emotional experience (Williams, 1944). Although Williams is primarily a playwright, his use of memory as theatrical design helps clarify what similar techniques do in fiction. *The Glass Menagerie* demonstrates that a stage can represent both external space and inner life. Modern American novels often do something similar with prose. Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* mansion, Faulkner's rural Mississippi road, and Steinbeck's migrant camps are not neutral places. They are symbolic spaces that stage emotional and social meaning. The link between Williams and American fiction is thus not only influence but also shared artistic logic.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study combines three interrelated concepts: dramatic action, dialogic voice, and narrative performance. Dramatic action refers to the organization of events around conflict and consequence. Dialogic voice refers to the presence of multiple speaking positions that reveal social, psychological, and moral tensions. Narrative performance refers to the way prose fiction makes character and setting appear before the reader as if staged. Together, these concepts allow the study to examine dramatic techniques not as isolated ornaments but as a system through which the American novel produces meaning.

The first component, dramatic action, is rooted in Aristotle's theory that plot is central to tragedy and that character is revealed through action (Aristotle, 330 BCE). Modern novels do not always follow the strict unity or formal design of classical drama, but they often depend on dramatic movement. A desire is introduced, obstacles emerge, tensions rise, and a crisis leads to recognition or collapse. *The Great Gatsby* is a clear example. Gatsby desires to repeat the past and recover Daisy, but the social and moral world around him resists that desire. The conflict produces not only plot movement but also tragic recognition: Gatsby's dream is revealed as both beautiful and impossible (Fitzgerald, 2004). Dramatic action therefore helps the novel focus desire, failure, and consequence.

The second component, dialogic voice, comes from Bakhtin's understanding of the novel as a multi-voiced form (Bakhtin, 1981). Dialogue in fiction does not merely imitate spoken conversation. It creates a space where different values and perceptions meet. *The Grapes of Wrath* offers a powerful example because the novel's moral force emerges through many forms of speech: family talk, religious reflection, political anger, labor negotiation, and communal storytelling (Steinbeck, 2006). *As I Lay Dying* uses a more inward version of dialogism. Its chapters appear as separate voices, each presenting a partial truth. The dramatic effect comes from the fact that these voices do not fully reconcile. The reader must stage their conflict mentally and construct meaning from their dissonance.

The third component, narrative performance, builds on the idea that prose can create theatrical effect through arrangement. Narrative performance occurs when the novel turns description into staging, speech into acted presence, and identity into performance. Fitzgerald's novel is especially relevant because Gatsby's life is constructed as a performance of success. His parties, clothes, house, and gestures are all parts of a self-staged identity. Yet the performance cannot overcome

the social boundaries and emotional emptiness beneath it. In this sense, theatricality becomes a way to critique American culture. It reveals how public display can hide private insecurity.

These three concepts also correspond to modern criticism on form. Formalism encourages attention to how the elements of plot, language, structure, and symbol create meaning within the text. From a formalist perspective, the dramatic quality of a novel can be studied through its scene construction, pacing, and recurrent images. Structuralism encourages attention to larger patterns: family conflict, journey, fall, sacrifice, or social opposition. The dramatic techniques in Steinbeck and Fitzgerald often work through such structures. Postmodern or late modern perspectives emphasize fragmentation and instability, which are central to Faulkner's narrative design (Dollimore & Machann, 1997). The theoretical framework therefore remains broad enough to analyze several authors but focused enough to explain theatricality as a narrative method.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative comparative method. It does not rely on statistical measurement or field data; instead, it conducts close textual analysis of selected American novels and reads them through dramatic categories. The primary texts are William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* is used as a dramatic reference text rather than as a primary novel, because its techniques of memory, symbolism, and staged emotional conflict help illuminate similar methods in fiction.

The comparative method is appropriate because the selected authors use dramatic techniques in different ways. Faulkner emphasizes interior performance and fragmented voice. Steinbeck emphasizes social performance and collective dialogue. Fitzgerald emphasizes aesthetic performance, symbolic setting, and tragic spectacle. Comparing these modes makes it possible to identify both shared dramatic principles and individual artistic differences. The method also follows the research direction suggested by the synopsis, which calls for a comparative study of dramatic techniques across American literary works.

The analysis focuses on five categories. The first is dialogue, including both direct speech and the implied dialogue between different social positions. The second is monologue and interiority, especially when inner speech functions like soliloquy. The third is stage-like setting, where space

becomes symbolic and emotionally charged. The fourth is conflict, including internal, familial, social, and moral conflict. The fifth is performance of identity, meaning the way characters act out roles before others or before themselves. These categories allow the paper to study theatricality at the level of language, structure, character, and theme.

The study is limited to selected major texts and therefore does not claim to cover all American fiction. Its purpose is interpretive rather than exhaustive. The chosen novels are suitable because each has already been recognized as formally distinctive and because each uses dramatic technique to address major American concerns: death and family in Faulkner, migration and injustice in Steinbeck, and aspiration and illusion in Fitzgerald. The study uses inline references drawn from the same core critical and primary sources used in the first supplied paper.

5. THEATRICALITY IN FAULKNER: MONOLOGUE AS INNER STAGE

Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* is one of the strongest examples of theatricality internalized within the novel. The book is organized through multiple voices, and each voice appears like a monologue delivered from a private stage. The characters do not simply narrate events; they perform their consciousness. Their speech reveals desire, resentment, confusion, guilt, and isolation. The result is a novel that resembles a drama of minds rather than a conventional story told by one stable narrator.

The central dramatic situation is simple: the Bundren family must transport Addie Bundren's body to Jefferson for burial. Yet the simplicity of the action allows Faulkner to intensify psychological conflict. Like a stage plot, the journey provides a shared external frame, but the real drama takes place inside the characters. Each monologue exposes a different relation to Addie, to the family, and to the idea of duty. Because no single voice controls the meaning of the journey, the reader experiences the family as a fractured ensemble. This resembles dramatic performance in which separate characters present conflicting motives before an audience.

Faulkner's monologues also resemble soliloquies because they make private thought directly available. In drama, soliloquy allows a character to speak inwardly while being heard by the audience. In Faulkner's novel, interior monologue serves the same function. Darl's sections are especially theatrical because they combine observation with unstable perception. He sees more than others, but his seeing becomes a sign of separation and eventual breakdown. His voice is both

revealing and unreliable, creating dramatic tension between insight and madness. This technique supports Bakhtin's view that the novel can contain multiple consciousnesses without reducing them to one authoritative meaning (Bakhtin, 1981).

Addie's monologue is also crucial. Although she is dead for most of the novel, her voice enters the narrative and reorganizes the reader's understanding of the family. The effect is dramatically powerful because the supposedly absent character suddenly occupies the center of the stage. Her reflections on language, motherhood, and resentment expose the emotional emptiness beneath the family's ritual of burial. This moment demonstrates that Faulkner's theatricality is not dependent on visible action. A voice alone can become dramatic when it reveals hidden conflict.

The setting of *As I Lay Dying* functions as an austere stage. Roads, rivers, bridges, barns, and rooms appear less as richly detailed realistic environments than as charged spaces of trial. The family's movement across the rural landscape resembles a sequence of scenes in which obstacles expose character. The river crossing, for instance, operates like a dramatic crisis: physical danger, family obligation, material loss, and emotional tension converge in one staged event. Such scenes show how Faulkner combines narrative movement with theatrical concentration.

The novel's dramatic technique also depends on silence and failed communication. Although the book is full of voices, the characters rarely understand one another. This paradox creates a tragic dramatic effect. Each person speaks, but speech does not heal the family. Language becomes performance without communion. Lukacs's idea of modern fragmentation is useful here because the novel presents a world in which shared meaning has broken down (Lukacs, 1971). Faulkner's theatricality therefore expresses modern alienation. The characters appear together in one family drama but remain trapped in separate interior spaces.

From an Aristotelian perspective, the novel produces catharsis not through a clear tragic resolution but through exposure. The reader witnesses the painful contradiction between duty and selfishness, grief and resentment, speech and silence. The burial journey ends, but the emotional disorder remains. This incomplete resolution is typical of modern fiction, where dramatic action leads not to moral balance but to recognition of disorder. Faulkner transforms the stage into a fragmented inner theatre, and the reader becomes the audience of consciousness under pressure (Faulkner, 2014).

6. THEATRICALITY IN STEINBECK: SOCIAL DIALOGUE AND COLLECTIVE DRAMA

If Faulkner turns the novel inward, Steinbeck turns it outward toward social performance. The *Grapes of Wrath* is dramatic not because it is experimental in the same way as *As I Lay Dying*, but because it arranges social conflict through dialogue, group scenes, and symbolic settings. The Joad family's migration from Oklahoma to California becomes a large-scale social drama in which private suffering is inseparable from historical injustice.

Steinbeck's dialogue is naturalistic, direct, and communal. Characters speak in rhythms that reflect class, region, labor, and moral experience. This speech creates immediacy because the reader hears social reality as lived language. Unlike Faulkner's monologues, Steinbeck's conversations are often practical and collective. Family members discuss food, travel, work, danger, and survival. Yet beneath this practicality lies dramatic tension. Every exchange takes place under pressure: poverty, displacement, hunger, police hostility, and uncertainty about the future. Dialogue becomes the dramatic instrument through which social crisis enters the family circle.

Tom Joad and Jim Casy are central to the novel's dramatic development. Their conversations gradually shift the story from personal survival to social awareness. Tom begins as an individual returning from prison, but through dialogue and experience he becomes part of a broader moral struggle. Casy's reflections help transform suffering into ethical consciousness. This development resembles dramatic characterization because change occurs through conflict, encounter, and decision. The reader does not merely receive an abstract argument about injustice; the argument is dramatized through people speaking and acting in crisis (Steinbeck, 2006).

Steinbeck's intercalary chapters also contribute to theatricality. These chapters widen the stage beyond the Joad family and present the collective experience of migrants, landowners, machines, roads, and camps. They function almost like chorus passages in drama, connecting individual action with communal meaning. The effect is similar to Greek tragic structure, where private suffering is placed within a larger moral and social order. Aristotle's idea that drama organizes action to produce emotional and ethical response helps explain the power of these sections (Aristotle, 330 BCE). Steinbeck creates a theatre of social history.

Setting is one of Steinbeck's most dramatic tools. The Dust Bowl, the highway, the migrant camp, and the California fields are not passive backgrounds. They are stages of dispossession. Each space creates a new scene of conflict between hope and exploitation. The road appears as a stage of transition; the camp as a stage of temporary community; the farm as a stage of labor conflict; and the final flood as a stage of human vulnerability. Brooks's claim that the American novel often carries dramatic and heroic energies is relevant here because Steinbeck's narrative turns ordinary migrants into figures in a broad moral drama (Brooks, 1972).

The conflict in *The Grapes of Wrath* is both external and internal, but its dominant form is social. The Joads confront banks, land systems, police power, low wages, hunger, and homelessness. However, Steinbeck avoids reducing this conflict to melodrama by grounding it in human detail. The dramatic force comes from the way social systems enter family life. A lack of work becomes a family crisis; a wage cut becomes a moral confrontation; a police threat becomes a test of solidarity. Drama therefore emerges from the pressure of history on ordinary bodies.

Steinbeck's theatricality also creates collective identity. While Faulkner's characters often remain isolated, Steinbeck's characters move toward communal recognition. Ma Joad, Tom, Casy, and other migrants gradually understand survival as a shared condition. This movement from individualism to solidarity is one of the novel's central dramatic arcs. It also distinguishes Steinbeck from Fitzgerald, whose characters perform identities that separate them from others. Steinbeck's dramatic method is public and ethical. It stages the possibility that suffering can produce community rather than only despair.

The ending of the novel does not offer conventional resolution, but it does produce catharsis through an image of human compassion. The dramatic effect lies in the shift from social disaster to moral gesture. The reader is not given legal justice or economic repair, but a symbolic act of care interrupts despair. This is modern dramatic resolution: partial, symbolic, emotionally intense, and ethically suggestive. Steinbeck therefore uses dramatic technique to make social realism emotionally immediate and morally urgent (Steinbeck, 2006).

7. THEATRICALITY IN FITZGERALD: SPECTACLE, PERFORMANCE, AND TRAGIC ILLUSION

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* presents a different kind of theatricality. Where Faulkner emphasizes interior monologue and Steinbeck emphasizes social dialogue, Fitzgerald emphasizes performance, spectacle, and symbolic staging. Gatsby is not merely a character with a dream; he is a performer of identity. His mansion, parties, clothing, gestures, and carefully created biography all form a theatrical construction. The novel's tragedy arises from the gap between performance and reality.

The most obvious theatrical spaces in the novel are Gatsby's parties. These scenes are crowded, bright, noisy, and visually arranged like performances. Guests appear, move, gossip, drink, dance, and disappear. Gatsby himself is both host and hidden center, present as rumor before he becomes fully visible. This delayed entrance is a dramatic technique. The reader, like the party guests, first encounters Gatsby as an effect before knowing him as a person. Fitzgerald uses spectacle to create desire and mystery, making Gatsby's identity a staged event (Fitzgerald, 2004).

Nick Carraway's narration is essential to the novel's theatrical quality. He is both participant and spectator. His position resembles that of an audience member who has partial access to backstage reality. He observes Gatsby's performance, Daisy's charm, Tom's brutality, and the social choreography of wealth. Yet Nick is not neutral. His memory shapes the scenes he presents, and his moral judgments influence the reader's response. This creates a layered theatricality: Gatsby performs for Daisy and society, while Nick stages Gatsby's story for the reader.

Dialogue in *The Great Gatsby* often carries more meaning through tension than through explicit statement. Conversations in drawing rooms, hotels, cars, and gardens are charged with unspoken rivalry and desire. The Plaza Hotel confrontation functions almost like a climactic stage scene. Characters are gathered in an enclosed space; hidden tensions become spoken; Gatsby's dream is tested; Daisy's weakness is exposed; Tom reasserts social power. The scene has the concentrated pressure of drama because personal desire, class privilege, gendered expectation, and moral failure converge in dialogue.

Fitzgerald's setting is also highly theatrical. East Egg and West Egg operate as symbolic stage zones representing inherited wealth and newly acquired wealth. The valley of ashes functions as a dark counter-stage where the waste of glamour becomes visible. New York offers a space of transgression and performance. Gatsby's mansion is a stage set of aspiration, while Daisy's house is a stage of elegance and exclusion. These spaces organize moral meaning visually. A formalist

reading would note how setting, symbol, and scene construction work together to create the novel's tragic design.

The novel's conflict is driven by illusion. Gatsby believes that performance can recover the past. He assumes that wealth, style, and devotion can make Daisy return to an earlier emotional moment. His tragic flaw is not simply romantic obsession but theatrical faith in the power of self-created image. He acts as if life can be restaged and corrected. Aristotle's idea of tragic reversal applies here because Gatsby's performance seems successful until it encounters the resistant facts of class, time, and moral cowardice (Aristotle, 330 BCE). The dream collapses when the staged identity can no longer command reality.

The Great Gatsby also demonstrates the social theatricality of American culture. Fitzgerald suggests that class itself is performed through manners, houses, accents, leisure, and display. Gatsby can imitate wealth but cannot fully enter the world Daisy represents. His performance is impressive but incomplete. This is why the novel's spectacle is tragic rather than celebratory. The glittering surfaces are beautiful, but they conceal exclusion, carelessness, and violence. Fiedler's attention to desire and death in American fiction helps explain the novel's movement from romance to destruction (Fiedler, 1966). The dream of self-invention ends in death because it is built on illusion.

In comparison with Faulkner and Steinbeck, Fitzgerald's dramatic technique is more visual and symbolic. He does not use multiple interior monologues like Faulkner or broad social dialogue like Steinbeck. Instead, he stages surfaces so that they reveal hidden emptiness. His theatricality is the theatricality of modern spectacle. Characters appear before one another as images, and the tragedy lies in the failure of image to become truth. The reader watches Gatsby's performance with fascination and pity, experiencing the catharsis of a dream exposed as impossible (Fitzgerald, 2004).

8. WILLIAMS AS DRAMATIC REFERENCE: MEMORY, ILLUSION, AND STAGE DESIGN

Although this paper focuses on novels, Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* provides an important dramatic reference for understanding theatricality in American literary form. Williams's play is explicitly built around memory, illusion, symbolic objects, and emotional confinement.

These features help clarify similar techniques in fiction because they show how a literary work can stage inner life through external design (Williams, 1944).

In *The Glass Menagerie*, the stage does not simply represent a realistic apartment. It becomes a space of memory and emotional pressure. The lighting, music, objects, and gestures create an atmosphere in which past and present overlap. This is relevant to Fitzgerald because *Gatsby* also lives inside a theatre of memory. His mansion and parties are attempts to stage a desired past. It is relevant to Faulkner because *As I Lay Dying* also turns family memory into dramatic presence. Addie's voice returns after death like a memory that refuses to remain silent. It is relevant to Steinbeck because the Joads carry memory of home into the public drama of migration.

Williams also helps explain the role of illusion. In his play, characters survive through fragile fantasies that are both necessary and destructive. American novels often use similar patterns. *Gatsby*'s illusion gives his life direction but also blinds him. The Bundrens maintain rituals of family duty while failing to confront emotional truth. The Joads hold hope for California, only to discover exploitation. Dramatic technique makes these illusions visible. It places dreams before the reader and then tests them through conflict.

The Glass Menagerie also demonstrates how character can be revealed through confined space. The apartment limits movement and intensifies emotional pressure. Many American novels create comparable confinement through symbolic settings. Faulkner confines characters within family and consciousness; Fitzgerald confines them within classed spaces; Steinbeck confines migrants within economic systems even as they move geographically. This paradox of movement and confinement is central to modern American theatricality. Characters may travel, speak, and perform, yet they remain trapped by deeper structures.

Williams's use of memory also supports the idea that theatricality is not limited to external action. A memory play stages the mind, and modern fiction frequently does the same. This connects Williams to Faulkner's inner monologues, Fitzgerald's retrospective narration, and Steinbeck's historical memory of collective suffering. The dramatic reference therefore enriches the comparative reading of novels by showing that stage methods and narrative methods share a common goal: to make invisible emotional life perceptible.

9. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

The three novelists studied in this paper demonstrate three major modes of theatricality in modern American fiction. Faulkner's mode is psychological, Steinbeck's is social, and Fitzgerald's is spectacular. Each mode adapts dramatic techniques to a different narrative purpose. Faulkner uses monologue and fragmented structure to stage inner conflict. Steinbeck uses dialogue and group scenes to stage social injustice. Fitzgerald uses spectacle and symbolic space to stage the performance of desire and class.

These differences also reflect different understandings of character. In Faulkner, character is not stable; it appears through broken voices and partial perceptions. The reader must assemble character from competing monologues. In Steinbeck, character develops through action within a community. The reader sees moral growth through dialogue, suffering, and solidarity. In Fitzgerald, character appears as image and performance. Gatsby is known through rumor, appearance, gesture, and Nick's memory before he is understood as a tragic figure. Dramatic technique thus shapes not only style but also the ontology of character: what a character is and how a reader can know that character.

The role of setting also differs sharply. Faulkner's setting is austere and ordeal-like, reducing the world to scenes of trial. Steinbeck's setting is historical and social, showing how environment is shaped by economic power. Fitzgerald's setting is symbolic and spectacular, turning houses, roads, cities, and landscapes into visual signs of moral condition. Yet in all three authors, setting functions like stage design. It frames action, creates atmosphere, and reveals conflict without needing direct explanation.

Dialogue and silence provide another point of comparison. Faulkner's characters speak inwardly but fail outwardly. Steinbeck's characters speak collectively and gradually discover moral purpose. Fitzgerald's characters speak socially, often using conversation to conceal as much as reveal. These patterns show that dramatic dialogue in fiction is not simply speech. It is a technique for organizing knowledge. What is said, unsaid, overheard, misunderstood, or remembered becomes part of the novel's dramatic structure.

The treatment of conflict also reveals important differences. Faulkner's conflict is rooted in family, death, and fractured consciousness. Steinbeck's conflict is rooted in economic injustice and

collective survival. Fitzgerald's conflict is rooted in desire, class, illusion, and time. However, all three conflicts produce catharsis in a modern sense. The reader is not necessarily comforted by resolution; instead, the reader undergoes recognition. In Faulkner, recognition concerns the loneliness beneath family duty. In Steinbeck, it concerns the moral urgency of solidarity. In Fitzgerald, it concerns the tragic emptiness beneath spectacle. Catharsis becomes interpretive awakening.

The comparative analysis also confirms Bakhtin's claim that the novel is a multi-voiced form (Bakhtin, 1981). Even Fitzgerald's apparently controlled narration contains competing social voices, including Nick's moral voice, Gatsby's romantic voice, Daisy's evasive voice, and Tom's authoritarian voice. Steinbeck explicitly multiplies voices across families, workers, officials, and communities. Faulkner radicalizes plurality by making each section a separate consciousness. Dramatic technique is therefore inseparable from dialogic form.

Finally, these authors show that theatricality allows the American novel to represent national myths critically. Faulkner questions the myth of family coherence and Southern stability. Steinbeck questions the myth of economic opportunity and American mobility. Fitzgerald questions the myth of self-invention and wealth as fulfillment. Each critique is made dramatic by placing myth under pressure in scenes of conflict. The novel becomes a stage where American ideals are performed, tested, and exposed.

10. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The first major result of this study is that dramatic techniques in modern American fiction operate at several levels at once. They are linguistic because they shape dialogue and monologue. They are structural because they organize scenes, confrontations, and climaxes. They are spatial because they turn settings into symbolic stages. They are psychological because they reveal hidden inner conflict. They are social because they represent public struggle and collective pressure. This multi-level function shows that dramatic technique is not a secondary influence but a central narrative resource.

The second result is that theatricality helps bridge the gap between private consciousness and public action. Faulkner, Steinbeck, and Fitzgerald all face the challenge of representing experiences that are difficult to narrate directly: grief, poverty, class desire, alienation, moral

failure, and historical suffering. Dramatic technique allows these experiences to become visible. A monologue can stage a mind; a conversation can stage social conflict; a party can stage cultural illusion; a journey can stage moral testing. The novel becomes more immediate because the reader encounters meaning as enacted pressure rather than abstract statement.

The third result is that the American novel's use of theatricality reflects the instability of modern identity. Characters in these works often perform roles they cannot fully inhabit. Gatsby performs the role of the successful gentleman. Members of the Bundren family perform duty while concealing selfishness or resentment. Migrants in Steinbeck must renegotiate identity under conditions of dispossession. This performative view of identity is deeply modern. It suggests that selfhood is shaped by social expectation, memory, economic force, and language. Dramatic technique is especially suited to such a view because theatre has always been concerned with role, mask, gesture, and audience.

The fourth result concerns the reader's position. In these novels, the reader is not a passive receiver of narration. The reader becomes a spectator and interpreter. Faulkner requires the reader to assemble meaning from fragments. Steinbeck asks the reader to witness injustice and respond morally. Fitzgerald positions the reader beside Nick as a spectator of glamour and collapse. This active readerly role resembles the experience of theatre, where the audience must interpret gesture, speech, silence, and staging. The supplied synopsis's emphasis on reading drama is therefore highly relevant to fiction: the reader performs an imaginative staging of the text.

The fifth result is that dramatic techniques allow fiction to achieve emotional compression. A single scene can carry multiple layers of meaning. The river crossing in Faulkner is physical danger, family test, symbolic passage, and psychological exposure. The camp scenes in Steinbeck are practical shelters, social experiments, and moral stages. The Plaza Hotel scene in Fitzgerald is romantic confrontation, class struggle, and tragic reversal. This compression is one reason drama has been so influential for novelists. It enables narrative economy and emotional force.

The discussion also reveals that these techniques do not erase the difference between drama and the novel. Instead, they show the creative advantage of hybridity. The novel can borrow the immediacy of drama while retaining access to memory, description, and interiority. It can stage a scene and then move inside the mind. It can present dialogue and then interpret its social meaning.

This flexibility is why American fiction has repeatedly turned toward dramatic form without abandoning narrative prose.

The broader literary significance is substantial. The evolution of American fiction in the twentieth century cannot be fully understood without recognizing its theatrical dimension. Modern American writers faced new historical realities: urbanization, economic crisis, migration, war, racial conflict, class mobility, and psychological fragmentation. Dramatic techniques provided formal means to represent these pressures. They allowed fiction to become more immediate, more dialogic, and more symbolically concentrated. Heilman's view of comparative formal development in the American novel supports this conclusion (Heilman, 1975).

11. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined theatricality and narrative performance in modern American fiction through a comparative study of Faulkner, Steinbeck, and Fitzgerald, with Williams serving as a dramatic reference point. The study has shown that dramatic techniques are not marginal features of these novels. They are central to the way the novels construct character, conflict, setting, and emotional meaning.

Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* transforms the novel into an inner theatre of monologues. Its dramatic power comes from fragmented voices, failed communication, and the exposure of hidden family conflict. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* transforms the novel into a social theatre of migration, labor, and collective suffering. Its dramatic power comes from naturalistic dialogue, group scenes, and moral confrontation. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* transforms the novel into a theatre of spectacle and illusion. Its dramatic power comes from staged identity, symbolic spaces, and the tragic collapse of performance.

Together these works show that the American novel uses drama to represent the pressure of modern life. Theatricality allows fiction to make consciousness visible, turn social systems into scenes of conflict, and reveal the performative nature of identity. The novel becomes not a silent alternative to drama but a different kind of stage: one built from words, memory, voice, and symbolic space.

The study also supports the value of comparative literary analysis. By reading several authors together, it becomes clear that dramatic technique is flexible and varied. It can be psychological,

social, or spectacular. It can appear as monologue, dialogue, setting, conflict, or symbolic action. It can lead to catharsis, recognition, critique, or unresolved tension. Future research may extend this inquiry to other American novelists, to African American fiction, to postmodern narrative, or to contemporary novels shaped by cinema and digital performance. Such work would further demonstrate that the relationship between drama and fiction remains one of the most productive areas in American literary studies.

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