

The Dramatic Art and Vision of Eugene O'Neill

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to analyse the dramatic art and vision of Eugene O'Neill who is dramatist and a playwright with a great imaginative zeal and a broad experience of life. This article deeply analyses the projection of recurrent themes and autobiographical elements as focused upon in his plays and also shows how the personality of Eugene O'Neill is designed and moulded by his lived experience as a American Playwright.

Eugene O'Neill

Eugene O'Neill, one of the greatest of modern American play wrights, is ranked among Bernard Shaw, Ibsen and Strindberg. Having given a new intensity and depth to American drama, he is said to have seen human nature in its stark nakedness and depicted it most truthfully. He believed that the real work of an artist to depict life as he sees it and this must be performed by him without fear. This is what he did rather strongly in his plays. Being the severe and serious critic of modern civilization and especially of the American way of life, O'Neill strongly believed that by concentrating too much on the production of wealth and the pleasures of luxuries and other material things of life, the American people had lost their original integrity and purity.

O'Neill also believes that man has a dual personality. The personality which he shows to others is often a cover under which he deliberately hides his real self. O'Neill's effort as a dramatist was to uncover that hidden personality by removing the mask that a man normally wears. That is why in many of his plays he makes use of masks under which the characters manage to hide their real selves. This innovation which O'Neill introduced in the American theatre rather successfully. No doubt, he had his hand in contributing new drama. His is purely an objective kind of drama showing the working of man's mind and conscience. He belongs to the expressionistic school of drama and is often called the dramatist of protest. He has really protested against the prevailing surface realism or naturalism. His drama is "pre-occupied with spiritual values, inner conflicts, anguish, failure and pride. His use of mask, asides

and expressionistic techniques in his plays reveals his profound interest in experiment and innovation”. (Mehta, 1)

Such a great dramatist was to James O’Neill and Ella Quinlan on 16th October 1888 in an up-town family hotel named Barrett House in New York. His parents were ardent Catholics. Having spent his early educational period in Catholic schools, O’Neill studied for four years at the Betts Academy at Stamford from 1898 to 1902. From there, he moved to Princeton where he joined the University for studying law. But law did not suit him. He was soon attracted by drama. In the autumn of 1914, O’Neill entered G.P. Baker’s Academy at Harvard to take lessons in playwriting. It is where he learnt a good deal of playwriting. He has to his credit publication of such plays as 1. **Beyond the Horizon**, 2. **Anna Christie** 3. **Desire under the Elms**, 4. **The Great God Brown**, 5. **Lazarus Laughed**, 6. **The Iceman Cometh**, 7. **A Moon for the Misbegotten** 8. **Long Day’s Journey into Night**. As the leading American dramatist, he had such literary triumphs as award of Pulitzer prize and Noble Prize for Literature which he received for his plays like **Beyond the Horizon**, **Anna Christie** and **Long Day’s Journey into Night**.

Euripides in Greek drama and O’Neill in modern drama stand out prominently as the great representatives of the two great moments in human history. They have much in common. They rebelled against the diction and the conventions of the theatre, brought forth a natural sense of melody and revealed profound sense of the dramatic. They tested theories, found shelter in none. Their spiritual yearnings found a new expression in an intensely traditional form. They created a new taste for ideas. Their problems are those of human beings; i.e., problems of religion, war and women peculiar to man. They tapped mercilessly but judiciously the customs and ideas of man to discover and unravel their hollowness. In the words of Robert F. Whitman, “Throughout his life, O’Neill sought a dramatic medium with which to explore the human soul. He tried many methods, some of them as radical as anything attempted in the American theatre.

O’Neill was primarily the writer of tragedies and he had tragic conception of life. He believed that a really worthwhile life is always tragic. In his words, nobility of life can be found only in tragedy. O’Neill was torn between two opposed impulses, one-a desire to separate himself from the world, a passion for privacy and the other being a need to explain and justify himself to the world. O’Neill reveals as well as conceals himself to the world in his writings. But finally he put everything in **Long Day’s Journey into Night** which he wished to be withheld from the public till decades after his death. He always wrote from his own life rather boldly. From the time Eugene O’Neill discovered his own latent as a dramatist, what obsessed him was one common theme i.e., the story of his unfortunate family. When he started writing the plays **Long Day’s Journey into Night** and **Iceman Cometh** in 1940, it was nothing but a great agony from the beginning. Carlotta’ makes note of O’Neill’s suffering as:

“How would come out of his study at the end of a day, gaunt and sometimes weeping. His eyes would be all red and he looked ten years older than when he went in the morning”. (p.170)

No other dramatist drew so fully on his own life for material for his drama as O’Neill did. In **Long Day’s Journey into Night**, O’Neill has changed the name of his family. Tyrone – the name which he has chosen reflects his pride in his Irish ancestry. This name is derived from the country in Ireland, where the O’Neill’s had ruled as warrior kings. He has retained the Christian names in **Long Day’s Journey into Night** except in his own case. His father thus becomes James Tyrone, O’Neill’s mother was generally known as Ella O’Neill, but in **Long Day’s Journey into Night** her Christian name Mary is used with good reason. The name evokes the Virgin Mary and is appropriate for one who was more fit for the convent than for the home where the role of the wife and mother was too hard for her immature nature. Jamie, the brother, is given the same name, but O’Neill has chosen to call himself Edmund, the name of a brother who died in infancy. This dead child is mentioned in the play and more interestingly he is given the name Eugene.

Long Day’s Journey into Night like many other plays of O’Neill, is a long one, by the closing of which Mary Tyrone enters the living room where the family has been waiting. She looked as if lost in a morphine induced fog. Carrying her wedding gown, she looked as though she had at last cleansed herself of adult experience and her face is unbelievably innocent. As among her sacrifices as an actor’s wife, she has long listed her rootless, homeless life. Over the years because of her marriage, she had to accept isolation unwillingly. Now she avenges by distancing herself from her family:

“Aware of them merely as she is aware of other objects in the room... familiar things she accepts automatically as naturally belonging there but which she is too preoccupied to notice”. (p.713)

Edmund’s summer cold has been confirmed as tuberculosis just as Mary’s isolated behaviour is now being confirmed as a symptom of her addiction. Mary is trying to become a nun. There are obviously two images prevalent – negative and positive elements are now super imposed and inseparable. In the positive image, the mother has left the world and is elevated into saintliness. In the negative image, the mother has abandoned her family, leaving them to their need. As a remarkable expression, it is grief transcending itself into an acceptance of the myth of virginal innocence, within which the mother hides. **Long Day’s Journey into Night** has great clarity as well as content. It is possible to locate here the single stand of its composite mother-figure, particularly as the “mother” and “son” play out roles in relation to each of other. The first of these is the innocent son and the worshipped, distant mother. Here, mother is portrayed as Madonna figure and source of forgiveness. The next is the isolated rejecting mother, and the abandoned son.

The positive image of the mother described as “good” idealized mother, resembles the Virgin Mary whom she worships. Mary Tyrone is described as possessing “the simple, unaffected charm of a shy convent-girl youthfulness she has never lost – an innate other worldly innocence” (p.13). In this regard, she is the suffering mother worried by circumstances of a life for which she was unprepared too soon taken from this “convent”, she has indeed never left, a ghost within her past – “only the past when you were happy is real” (p.104). In this way, her family too identifies their past as well. Just like the mother, all are attached to a past, is remembered as a golden age and a past to which they were in possession of their more “real” selves.

Often Mary is found displaying toward Edward a “detached motherly solitude” (p.91), a “detached impersonal tone” (p.61) and she as well has the effect of weakening and infantilizing him, keeping him attached to her as a perpetual child, as she assumes her nun-like personality. The mother’s attitude vacillates between genuine concern which can only remind her of Edmund’s in causing her own illness. She not only blames his birth, but she also blames her present relapse, upon his current illness. So that the present time is the repetition of the past. It is reminder of her younger son’s original sin. “Putting her arm around Edmund’s shoulder – with a fond solitude which is at the same time remote”. (p.67)

The figure of Evelyn in **Ice Man Cometh** in many ways resembles Mary Tyrone. Both are “nice” innocent girls married to men who travel, consequently leaving them alone for much of the time. Both have remained throughout their marriage virginal. Hickey complains that he cannot be “himself” and like James Tyrone, he prefers the company to men in bars to girls. The roles of “mother” and “son” were even more clearly played by Hickey and Evelyn, paralleling to those of Mary and Edmund in **Long Day’s Journey into Night**. The mother as innocent Madonna, withdrawing herself from worldly affairs, and the mother as destructive, guilt-provoking and abandoning her family, **Long Day’s Journey** presents, as its final image, Mary’s simultaneous “good” and “evil” as a paradox to be accepted without judgement.

O’Neill, for a portion of his career experimented with reviving the use of classical masks. In **Strange Interlude**, instead of actual masks, O’Neill used a mask-like technique of the double voice so that each character is heard speaking in both a stream-of-consciousness soliloquy and in more formal voice. In **Long Day’s Journey into Night**, one of Mary Tyrone’s guilt provoking weapons is just this double voice. Here one can note that instead of there being two voices, her doubleness of speech resembles again a super imposition of two selves which conveys simultaneously a Madonna like forgiveness and understanding always undercut by anger.

“Don’t’ think I’m finding fault, dear.

You must do as you please. I won't mind" (p.83)
"..... I know you didn't mean to humiliate me.
I know that was the way you had to do everything". (p.85)

Evelyn's sweet stooping is, like Mary's, a purposeful means of "humiliating" Hickey, generating in him the crippling guilt. Although he is able to acknowledge only tentatively her passive anger, the other mother-figures in **Iceman Cometh**, Rosa Parritt and also Hope's long deceased wife, are revealed as overtly hostile and entrapping. In this way, reinforcing the sense of female evil is permeating the play.

In O'Neill's plays there is another variant recurring theme. It is that of the wronged mother-figure saved by her son. This mother is often shown to be literally sick, with an illness caused by the male. **The Straw All God's Chillan** and **Days Without End** contain examples of this pattern. In **Mourning Becomes Electra** and **Desire Under the Elms**, the son seeks to save the mother by avenging the father who wrongs her. In both **Long Day's Journey** and **Moon for the Misbegotten**, death is more characteristically viewed as a return to lost innocence. It is describes as a condition of womb-like protection and associated with the mother. Indeed, O'Neill's journey as a dramatist, his consistently autobiographical, family drama, can be seen as analogous to Mary's Wistful search, for something she has lost. Edmund's position thus reflects Mary's characteristic bifurcation.

O'Neill had a great imaginative zeal and a broad experience of life. The audience were overwhelmed by the sheer power of his plays. Although O'Neill is capable of writing eloquent prose, there is very little poetry of language in his plays. No other 20th century poet had experimented with art so broadly as O'Neill who throughout his life searched fruitlessly for a kind of relationship between himself and life which is a condition and feeling of belonging to a home in this universe.

"In such a world-death, darkness and doubt-illusion is the only protection and hence O'Neill's plays at their deepest level, are concerned, torment edly and complexly with the endless ambiguities of the relationship between illusion and reality" (Raleigh, 99)

To conclude, one can easily find through evaluation and analysis of O'Neill's plays the domination of the mother-image and the autobiographical elements. Through a study of the development of his autobiographical themes within their various permutations, one can understand that everyone of Eugene O'Neill's plays owes something or other to an incident in his life.

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