

**O'Neill's Dramatic Skill in Depicting the Most Pressing
Psychological Complexity of Modern Men with a Focus on
Treatment of Adultery and Love in His Plays:
An Appraisal**

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.



Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953)

Courtesy: <http://www.notablebiographies.com/Ni-Pe/O-Neill-Eugene.html>

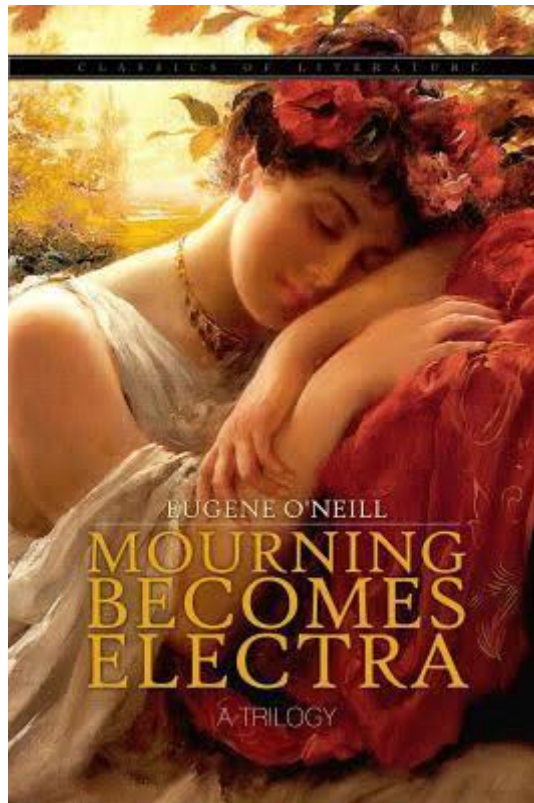
Abstract

This paper throws light upon the achievement of the great realist in the field of drama. Eugene O'Neill, who had contributed a lot to modern drama by focusing attention on the psychological complexities of the contemporary generation, It also focuses on his dramatic skill in depicting the most desperate need for reform and dynamism by which Eugene O'Neill proved himself to be the chief insurgent against dramatic conventions and the romantic banal and established himself as the symbol of the renaissance that paralleled on the stage. It neatly projects the depth of human nature manifested in an idealized and exalted position.

Keywords: Eugene O'Neill, psychological complexity, modern man, adultery, love.

Eugene O'Neill

There is no denying the fact that Eugene O'Neill is a great realist in the field of drama and all along his life, has been committed to the dramatization of the living, pulsating human drama. He is one of the greatest dramatists of America, the creator of serious American drama, almost as one, to whom goes to the credit of securing international honor and recognition for American drama. As a prominent dramatist of modern age, he is said to have contributed a lot to modern drama and his dramatic world is nothing but an objective kind of drama showing the working of men's mind and conscience. The bulk of his output is fairly large, sufficiently large to place him securely in the forefront of twentieth century dramatists. As he belongs to the expressionistic school of drama, he is usually called the prevailing surface realism or naturalism.



Eugene Goldstone O'Neill was born on 6th October 1888, in a Broadway hotel room, New York as the son of James O'Neill and Ella Quinton. As his family was an ardent Catholic family, he had to spend his early years for education in Catholic schools and studied for four years at the Betts Academy at Stratford. From there, he went to Princeton University to study law. But law course did not suit him at all He was soon attracted by drama. The death of his parents and his elder brother and also his suspension from Princeton University

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:7 July 2017

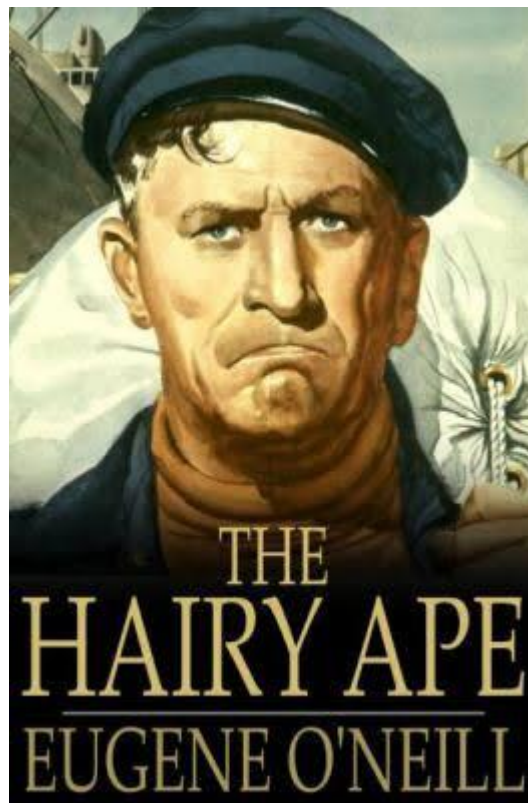
Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.

O'Neill's Dramatic Skill in Depicting the Most Pressing Psychological Complexity of Modern Men with a Focus on Treatment of Adultery and Love in His Plays: An Appraisal

made him suffer from depression and alcoholism and the result was that he turned to writing a form of escape from such depressing and tragic aspects of life. Joseph wood Krutch writes.

“The playwright of today must dig at the roots of sickness of today as he feels it-the death of the old god and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfactory new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in and to comport its fears of death with. It seems to me that anyone trying to do big work nowadays must have this big subject being all the little subjects of his plays or novels or he is scribbling around the surface of things” (pp. 92-93)

Dramatic Realism



These revealing words of Eugene O' Neill provide a key to our understanding of the playwright. No other dramatist as O'Neill introduced American drama to the dramatic realism and naturalism as pioneered by Russian playwright like Anton Cheker, Norwegians playwright like Henrik Ibsen and Swedish playwright like August Strindberg. In his own life time, O'Neill had established himself as the leading American dramatist. He had his triumphs: he was awarded Pulitzer prizes for beyond the Horizon, Anna Christie, strange Interlude and long day's journey into night. He won the highest international recognition by

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:7 July 2017

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.

O'Neill's Dramatic Skill in Depicting the Most Pressing Psychological Complexity of Modern Men with a Focus on Treatment of Adultery and Love in His Plays: An Appraisal

winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. A considerable number of books and articles have been devoted to his works since 1920's and in recent years, sign of interest growing remarkably pronounced for his plays have become quite popular in the English speaking world.

It is said that O'Neill was the genius behind the change that came over American theater and made the 1920's and 1930's the greatest period in its history. He wrote things of contemporary interest by giving American drama its requisite genius and authority, dynamism and force. American theatre was found to be in a desperate need for reform and dynamism. There was notable playwright before O'Neill but the drama had enmeshed in a stereotyped pattern and worn out condition. Eugene O'Neill proved himself to be the chief insurgent against worn out dramatic conventions and the romantic banal and established himself as the symbol of a renaissance that paralleled on the stage that so called renaissance in poetry.

Five Unquestioned Master Pieces

Eugene O'Neill has left behind him five unquestioned master pieces such as 1. *Desire under the Elms*, 2. *Strange Interlude*, 3. *Mourning Becomes Electra*, 4. *The Iceman Cometh*, and 5. *Strong Day's Journey into Night*. In addition to these, there are many more which would stand high in any long list of plays of our time: *The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape*, *All Good Chillum Got Wings* and *A Touch of the Poet*. As H. E. Woodbridge puts it,

“His plays have been popular and influential at home, both on the stage and in book form; they stand the test of reading as good plays must. He is easily the foremost of American dramatists and he is the first and still the only one of them to become widely known outside of America. His plays are translated, acted, and read in the most European countries, some of them have been produced in Japan,” (p. 58)

A Tireless Experimenter

O'Neill was a tireless experimenter who experimented with a variety of dramatic forms and modes. Even when he succeeded in one form at style, he would move on to another one and this experimentation continued from the beginning up to the very end. His plays involve characters who inhabit the fringes of society, engaged in depraved behavior

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:7 July 2017

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.

O'Neill's Dramatic Skill in Depicting the Most Pressing Psychological Complexity of Modern Men with a Focus on Treatment of Adultery and Love in His Plays: An Appraisal

when they struggle to maintain their hopes and desires but ultimately slide into disillusionment and hopelessness. “Characters face the life and death or give up fighting. Defiant courage is the key note of them all. A never failing spirit of defiance is the chief quality of O’Neill’s tragic heroes. They are unable to dominate forces which they do not understand or master” (Sharma 8).

O’Neill was also part of the modern movement to receive the classical heroic mask from ancient Greek theater and Japanese non theater in some of his plays. He was very much interested in the Faust theme especially in 1920’s. he is also known for the very poetic names of many of his plays. In the words of Gaff B. Wilson, “O Neill was not concerned with political or economic history but with the spiritual and psychological development of the family, which he hoped to make symbolic of the possessiveness and materialism which have characterized and corrupted American history” (p. 454). There is no shadow of doubt that O’Neill combined great theatrical talent with enormous knowledge of the human soul and with his works have an intensity of passion. His courage and endless experiment with various methods in his plays-naturalistic, realistic, expressionistic and symbolic-proves him to be a great American dramatist. “O’Neil remains for us the restless seeker, the man of many creeds and many forms. His great dramatic power appears in the skill with which he develops out of themes that are hardly promising in themselves ... some of his plays remain interesting case studies”.

Psychology of the Subconscious

Revealing the confused mass of complexes and psychoses of the characters, O’Neill had better resources of psychology of the subconscious at his disposal. O’Neill himself said, “I wanted to borrow the theme pattern of Aeschylus (and the old legends) and to interpret it in modern psychological terms” (Wilson 428).

Strange Interlude

Strange Interlude, a nine-act play explored through its female character, the way in which hidden psychological process affects outward action also. It is a story which represents the intimate reactions of Nina Leeds, daughter of a college professor, several men who affected her life. She is a woman of frustration not satisfied at all in her profoundest needs and instincts. She is neurotic. In the play, O’Neill uses Freudian perspective the *Oedipus*

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:7 July 2017

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.

O’Neill’s Dramatic Skill in Depicting the Most Pressing Psychological Complexity of Modern Men with a Focus on Treatment of Adultery and Love in His Plays: An Appraisal

complex and the father-daughter fixations, i.e., the *Electra complex*. “But Doris Alexander, an O’Neill scholar, has written that *Interlude* is based squarely on the philosophy of Schopenhauer, who believed that all love, however ethereally it may bear itself, is rooted in the sexual impulse alone” (Brown 168).

An Accurate Study of Neurosis

Strange Interlude is nothing but an accurate study of Neurosis. The central theme may be stated as Nina’s search for the self, her pursuit of happiness and her attempt at the avoidance of pain. Being one of the most ambitious plays, the play carries four characters through searing emotional crisis in their lives over a period of twenty eight years. Nina Leeda is the heroine of the play. She has been engaged to an aviator. Her stern and puritanical father did not permit her to marry her fiancé and prevented her from making love. The lover Gordon is killed in the World War-I. Nina is left with severe mental pain. Being a scholar, she is withdrawn, isolated and severe in self-discipline. After the death of her lover, she leaves the home and becomes a nurse. She attempts to calm her guilt by sacrificing her body to wounded ex-serviceman. She dedicates her life to the struggle against her fate. Gordon is a symbol of love of the escape from the proud mask of the father.

In *Strange Interlude*, O’Neill explores the concept of psychology. From the beginning, Nina Leeds is dominated by her romantic dream of Gordon Shaw. Her father, Marsden and Darrel all fight against the reality of life whereas Gordon and Sam Evans are the only men in Nina’s life who approach reality. Almost all the characters in the play have their existence fixed but the action is conceived as psychic duration. Here in the play, the psychological complexes are represented by four main characters. Both the male and female characters express their inner feelings psychically. The characters like Nina, Edmund Darrell, Marsden and Sam Evan are possessed with deep psychology. By making Nina the protagonist, O’Neill treats the male characters as ‘inferior’. Nina is considered the strongest character in the sense that she initiates the action of the play. She acts and the men react out of their need for her. She is the source of life and identity in the woman herself. She is the centre of focus for the four men, three of them are sexual partners. For these men, she is the source of life and well-being.

Nina as a Symbol of Sexuality

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:7 July 2017

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.

O’Neill’s Dramatic Skill in Depicting the Most Pressing Psychological Complexity of Modern Men with a Focus on Treatment of Adultery and Love in His Plays: An Appraisal

The concentration of Nina's sexual life projects her as a supreme adulthood. Just as Christine in *Mourning Becomes Electra* appears as a Nymphomaniac, who possesses excessive sexual desire, Nina is projected here as a symbol of sexuality in *Strange Interlude*. She is said to have inherited not the souls of her men but their false selves. Her marriage to Sam, her pregnancy, her abortion and her love-affair with Darrel hold the action particularly for sexual concerns. She becomes weary of the struggle for happiness and wants only peace. With a sudden scornful violent change of feelings she says:

“These men make me sick! ... I hate all three of them! ... they disgust me! ... the wife and mistress in me has been killed by them! ... thank God! I am only a mother now! ... Gordon is my little man, my only man”
(*Strange Interlude* 149)

Nina reveals a cruel and unpredictable willfulness, a power to hurt not only the men but also herself. As Chaman Ahuja says,

“Becoming at once a creator and a destroyer, a tempter and a redeemer, a liberator and a possessor she devours her lover, kills the soul of her husband and ruins her children” (P 98)

O'Neill has created in Nina Leads a female counterpart who needs a spiritual union and so she makes a quest for happiness in sex and a moral existence lying across all values and gives herself to men without love. She is neurotic, tense, frustrated and vindictive. Through this sort of behavior, she is said to have possessed abnormal psychology. Thus, Nina is created in this play as a powerful heroine whose character has manifested with a deep psychological study of womanhood. Through portrayal of the character Nina, O'Neill has consciously sought to create a heroine who would personify a cross section of all womanhood. What he actually created is nothing but an embodiment of his ambivalent feeling towards the sex, a female who is both victim and victimised.

Freudian Outlook - *Gold and Welded*

No doubt, O'Neill's psychological explorations have something in common with Freud. Like Freud, O'Neill's chief concern has been in the dramatization of the subconscious

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:7 July 2017

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.

O'Neill's Dramatic Skill in Depicting the Most Pressing Psychological Complexity of

Modern Men with a Focus on Treatment of Adultery and Love in His Plays: An Appraisal

mind. O'Neill's conception of character has been shaped by Freud. His deep probing into the motivation of dynamic character, his power in evoking psychic conflicts has a direct bearing on Freud's exploration of human character. O'Neill has made an extensive use of the Freudian revelation of the irrational self. In *Gold and Welded*, an attempt has been made to probe into the secret places of the mind. In *Gold and Welded*, O'Neill has shown how two naked souls are at war with each other. The *Strange Interlude* dramatizes the subconscious and makes it accessible to us. It reveals the inward, unconfessed and unspoken thoughts.

Autobiographical Dramas

O'Neill's dramas are not only realistic and psychological but also autobiographical. O'Neill does consider art and autobiography as one. He is known as the most autobiographical among modern playwrights. His own life has furnished the raw material for his final plays. It is only towards the end of his life that he resorted to direct autobiographical statement. His later plays are based on his own personal experiences or reminiscences. Intensely autobiographical, O'Neill has poured out all his longings and despairs his agonies and ecstasies into his plays O'Neill once informed Barret H. Clark:

“All the most dramatic episodes of my life I have so far kept out of my plays and most of the things I have seen happen to other people. I have hardly begun to work up all this material and I am saving up a lot of it for one thing in particular, a cycle of plays I hope to be acted or nine successive nights; together they form a sort of dramatic autobiography in the sort of **Peace or Jean Christophe** (52).”

Many of his characters are near projections of his own self. In the words of John Gassner, “It is impossible to forget that O'Neill is speaking through them”. From the beginning to the end of his career, O'Neill has attempted to transmute his autobiographical experiences into art. Most of his characters do reveal his own thoughts and experiences and give expression to his views and ideas. The poet in *Fog*, Robert Mayo in *Beyond the Horizon*, Stephen Murray in *The Straw*, Michel Cape in *Welded*, Dion Anthony in *The Great God Brown*, Richard Miller in *Ah! Wilderness*, John in *Days without End*, Edmund in *Long Day's Journey into Night* all represent the winter as a hero. O'Neill has made an extensive use of his life and delves directly into his mental and spiritual past in his autobiographical plays. He plays the role of the tormented in the tragic drama of his own life. He wrote of his family all his life. His dramas are full of strange echoes of his own past familial experiences.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:7 July 2017

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.

O'Neill's Dramatic Skill in Depicting the Most Pressing Psychological Complexity of Modern Men with a Focus on Treatment of Adultery and Love in His Plays: An Appraisal

In *Desire under the Elms*, Ephraim Cabot is Eugene's image of his father. They have many things in common. Like, Ephraim Cabot, Eugene's father, James O'Neill is also a god like patriarch. Both the fathers are very harsh, intolerant and critical of their sons. In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, James Tyrone's nature is like that of O'Neill's father. Both the fathers are highly self-centered and have very little time for their families and there is emptiness in their lives. Both are irrationally anxious father, James Tyrone is also a popular actor of melodrama.

Full Representation of His Mother

O'Neill has also given full representation of his mother in his plays. She was a dreamy, self-dispossessed, convent-bred angel. She was a victim of her proud, romantic temperament and fixations. Love and peace are associated with mother's love. She is commonly presented as Earth-Mother. *The Great God Brown*, *Strange Interlude*, and *Mourning Becomes Electra* show how her death-hungry 'sons' seek a lost innocence and sheltering womb. *The Straw, Welded* and *Different* emphasize the images of mutual salvation, and recreation of mother-child relationships. O'Neill is said to have achieved objectivity towards his autobiographical self. The autobiographical elements in O'Neill's dramas did contribute a deeper knowledge and understanding of both private and social reality conveyed through particulars aspiring after the universal meaning.

Leading on to Salvation

The depths of human nature are beautifully depicted with psychological insights rather effectively. This progress leads to salvation. In the play *Strange Interlude*, Nina is depicted as a powerful heroine. Her character has been manifested with a deep psychological study of womanhood. She is obsessed with a purest and blackest woman's soul. She is the precursor of a long line of neurotic heroines. Nina is the victim of her neurosis or of the Schopenhauer will to live. While there is ethical justice in her final defeat in the sense that her egotism has destroyed her, Nina never achieves the self-understanding and consequent acknowledgement of guilt which would give the play or her character tragic proportion. And yet at the end, she wants peace, but she meets anything but tragic for essentially carnal passions and psychological troubles. Nina Leeds is one of the author's most fascinating and least credible women. It appears that O'Neill consciously sought to create a heroine who would personify a cross section of all womanhood. What the novelist actually created was an

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:7 July 2017

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.

O'Neill's Dramatic Skill in Depicting the Most Pressing Psychological Complexity of Modern Men with a Focus on Treatment of Adultery and Love in His Plays: An Appraisal

embodiment of his ambivalent feeling towards the sex, a female fate which is both victim and victimizer. Doris Folk comments:

“The characters of *Strange Interlude* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* are neurotic, doomed to move within the limits of the pride system, still they move with dignity and sanity, submitting only after a heroic struggle”
(P 129)

O’Neill’s probing into the gloomy depths of character into the strained and divided psyche deserves appreciation. It is generally felt that O’Neill has enriched the drama with his psychological insights and tragic vision. Thus, *Strange Interlude*, all the male and female characters are obsessed with deep psychology.

Desire under the Elms

Desire under the Elms is a play about the sons longing to possess the patrimony of their father and their hatred of him is largely caused by his authority over them due to his possession of the farm. But O’Neill represents Freudian psychology which with its emphasis on the attachment between mother and son and hostility between son and father which strengthens the inner meaning of the Greek tragedies with their attraction for incest is clearly evident in the play. This play is set on a farm in New England and here the characters are presented as overpowered with emotions and unconscious influence in expressed in terms roughly equivalent to the Oedipus complex. O’Neill supports and strengthens *Desire under the Elms* by integrating into a single complex of Freudianism. Each character has a lust for material possession particularly for the farm and each has a sexual lust that leads to his or her final downfall. The characters move hurriedly with life and initially. Both the male and female characters are possessed with psychological complexes. Specifically, the story surrounds on the three characters Eden, Abby and Ephraim. Eden possesses a complex psychological i.e. mother complex whereas Abbie burns with desire to have a sexual intercourse with Eden exhibits her abnormal psychology. Ephraim plays a minor role. He is also presented with psychological complexes.

The male character who is a good example for complex psychology is Eden. He is a creature caught in the trap of materialistic greed and possessiveness. With the death of his

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:7 July 2017

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.

O’Neill’s Dramatic Skill in Depicting the Most Pressing Psychological Complexity of Modern Men with a Focus on Treatment of Adultery and Love in His Plays: An Appraisal

mother, or too early a stage that object, meditates between the unconscious and the ego. At his mother's death and in the following years his anima, his need for love has never been able to establish a psychic equality with his need to possess the form. As Rod W. Horton says,

“opposing the persona, there is presumed to exist in the unconscious a contrary force, the anima which tends to check every outward manifestation of human behavior. Thus, a kind of dialectical opposition is set up within the individual which is not properly resolved results in frustration and neurosis” (p. 357).

Sons

Psychically for all the sons, the patriarchal values of greed cannot be modified, complemented or disciplined by the anima energies of love. That is why Eben is emotionally bound to his mother and love. Eben suffers from psychic spirit of wanting love because of mother fixation. The theme of his mother's curse that Eben introduces runs throughout the action. It is linked with some of the developments like the growth of Eben's personality through incest. Eben brings home news that his father had got married again. It makes all 3 of them with anger and frustration. Simon and Peter decide to leave for California at once. Eben wants to make a deal with them. He knows whether his father has hidden gold for three hundred dollars to each Simon and Peter will write off their share of the farm to Eben. In a language full of lust, hatred and animal imagery, Eben describes his adventure with Minnie. Eben's obsession with Minnie exhibits his complex psychology. The desire of the mother is essentially manifested in an idealized and exalted mother. The dependence of Eben's desire on his mother is the permanent dimension of Eben's drama. Eben is plunged into severe mental pain at the thought of his mother being replaced in his father's affection by someone else, i.e., Abbie.

Mother Archetype

O'Neill makes use of the mother archetype to probe into Eben's personality. Eben's internal conflict is the psychological core of O'Neill's play. The exploration of Eben's personality based on his relationship with his mother is the main source of Eben's tragedy. The female character who possesses abnormal psychology is Abbie. Like Eben, she wants the farm. Her immediate response to the farm is one of the greed and possessiveness. Abbie's burning desire for Eben displays her abnormal psychology. Abbie is a compelling character

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:7 July 2017

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.

O'Neill's Dramatic Skill in Depicting the Most Pressing Psychological Complexity of Modern Men with a Focus on Treatment of Adultery and Love in His Plays: An Appraisal

who figures as a sexually abnormal being appearing herself to be a wanton, sexual offender who has managed to maintain her amateur standing. Abbie proves herself that to be a character of abnormal psychology similar to that of Nina in *Strange Interlude*. Edger F. Racey remarks:

“Eden and Abbie become simply the victims of their lust and fail to assume stature of agents of tragic retribution, are of course locally, psychologically, dramatically motivated” (Gassner 60)

In the play *Desire under the Elms*, O’Neill presents the readers with psychological issues and an opportunity to examine the motivation for incest and the actions of the characters are set in the contexts of psychological life.

To Conclude

Thus, O’Neill has created immortal characters in his plays. They are affected neither by fate nor by the supernatural beings but by their own distinct and desires. They are all depicted as suffering from alienation, frustration and miseries and they are found to be the victims of their neurotic pride. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* O’Neill portrays the theme of love and adultery in *Strange Interlude*, the theme of adultery gets exemplified whereas in *Desire under the Elms*, the theme of mother complex and adultery is respected. A profound touch of psycho analysis is rejected in the dramatic world of O’Neill compiled with treatment of love, incest and adultery. In brief, it may be said that O’Neill’s greatness lies in his dramatic skill to focus attention on the most pressing psychological complexities of contemporary generation

Works Cited

1. Ahuja, Cheman. **Tragedy Modern Temper and O’Neill**
New Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd, 1984
2. Bowen, Groswell. **The Curse of the Misbegotten**
London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1960
3. Falk, Doris. **Eugene O’Neill and the Tragic Tension**
New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:7 July 2017

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.

O’Neill’s Dramatic Skill in Depicting the Most Pressing Psychological Complexity of Modern Men with a Focus on Treatment of Adultery and Love in His Plays: An Appraisal

4. Krutch, Joseph Wood. **The American Drama Since 1918**
New York: Random House Inc, 1939.
 5. Sharma, N.K. **O'Neill's Dramatic Vision**
New Delhi: Educational Publishers, 1985
 6. Wilson, Garff.B. **Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre**
New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1973.
-



Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.
Professor, Head & Chairperson
School of English & Foreign Languages &
School of Indian Languages
Department of English & Comparative Literature
Madurai Kamaraj University
Madurai - 625 021
Tamilnadu
India
aschelliah@yahoo.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:7 July 2017

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.

O'Neill's Dramatic Skill in Depicting the Most Pressing Psychological Complexity of
Modern Men with a Focus on Treatment of Adultery and Love in His Plays: An Appraisal