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Language and literature: Eugene O'Neill's language, his characters and contribution in modern American drama

ABSTRACT

No writer of American drama was more conscious of language than Eugene O'Neill. In his plays, characters make speeches rather than engage in dialogue, and language is layered, slabs of soliloquy are placed upon one another. He presents a critique of language, a profound suspicion of utterance. He offers not only a dramatization of the inadequacy of words to feelings but enacts evidence of the betrayal of truth by words. Downer believes "in spite of the lack of poetic language in his dialogue O'Neill could achieve an effect similar to the effect of poetic language." O'Neill's characters are sailors, farmers, housewives, soldiers, actors and postmen. Lairs, deceivers and fantasisers all come alive in his plays. These are the characters that push language forward as though it could offer them some protection or amusement. In his early plays, we see that O'Neill was very much interested in sailors. This fascination was because of their inarticulateness in which he identified their "silence." O'Neill's characters mostly in his last plays are all self-conscious performers. They play roles, which will turn away the pain of the real life. They seek oblivion through alcohol, through memory or through narrative, repeating the story of their lives as though thereby to create those lives. It was

O'Neill's style rather than the content of his plays that was of first importance, style indeed was sufficient content: the language of *Anna Christie*, the crude color, the drumbeats and the phantasmagoria of the *Emperor Jones*, the engine rhythms, the masks, the ballet movements of *The Hairy Ape*, all constituted a denial of the neat proprieties, all spoke of a life more colorful and terrible than the American theater had ever thought of representing. This article which is based on a research work is composed of three parts. The first part called "introduction," will present O'Neill as the father of modern American drama. The second part of the article called "Discussion," includes: a)O'Neill as a tireless experimenter: his naturalism, b)Fusion of naturalism, symbolism, and expressionism, c)O'Neill's language and style, d) the great poetic dramatist, e) Sense of form and pattern, f)The great tragic artist, g) Human sufferings; its causes, his characters and themes. The last part called "Conclusion," will present the findings of the study and some points for further researches.

Keywords: Eugene O'Neill, Language, literature, American drama.

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Introduction:

Modern American drama as a serious form of art is a product of twentieth century. American dramatists of the twentieth century, particularly since the years of World War I, have been concerned with interpreting reality both freshly and imaginatively in terms of story, dialogue and character. They have had something topical to say comparable to what has been expressed in other literary forms. American dramatists of the twentieth century have been more realistic than their predecessors, not merely in actual observation and report but in psychology and motivation.

A new conception of the importance of drama and a desire for self-expression led to the establishment of amateur groups interested in acting, direction, design, the organization of audience, financing, and building of theatres. This development of dramatic taste reflected a gradual aesthetic, social and economic change. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Chicago was a leader in this transition, with its Donald Robertson Players, Hull House Players, New Theatre, and the Drama League.

By 1915 knowledge of European productions by the Moscow Art Theatre, and by Max Reinhardt, and of the scene designs of Adolph Appia and Gordon Craig began to affect such American artistes as: Robert Edmond Jones, Sam Hume, Norman Bel Geddes and Lee Simon Son. Partly under their influence, partly stimulated by an extended literary appreciation, partly by a new artistic awakening and enthusiasm, and partly because it was fun, various new production groups were formed. Of these perhaps the most important for the American dramatists were the Provincetown Players and the Washington Square Players.

Provincetown Players were a group of young intellectual Bohemians, producing first at Provincetown and then in Greenwich Village. They worked for an institution called “The Little Theater Movement” that came into being in 1915. The Provincetown Players, for all their amateurism were interested in providing a break to the American

writers who wished to test the potential of the stage, and who were thereby instrumental in causing the explosion of the experimental theatre.

Washington Square Players was a small theatre group, founded in 1915. Out of this group came Philip Moeller and Zoe Akins. This movement was a rapid success as it helped the establishment of more than fifty little theatres in America. The Washington Square Player was disbanded in 1918 because of World Ward I, but some of its members reassembled the next year to establish the Theater Guild, which later produced works by Elmer Rice, Sidney Howard, S.N. Behrman, and Maxwell Anderson as well as the later plays of Eugene O'Neill.

The Provincetown group played a significant role in the establishment of Eugene O'Neill as the most experimental of American playwrights in the 1920s, and a pioneer of the new American drama. The importance of this movement from amateur to professional lay not in the establishment of influences of "schools" of playwriting but in the opportunity it gave to the American dramatists to develop their abilities and outlook.

O'Neill as the father of modern American drama:

Eugene O'Neill is the father of modern American drama, one of the greatest dramatists of America, the creator of serious American drama, one to whom goes the credit of securing international honor and recognition for American drama. The bulk of his output is fairly large, sufficiently large to place him securely in the fore front of twentieth century American dramatists.

Eugene O'Neill has left behind him five unquestioned masterpieces; *Desire Under the Elms*, *Strange Interlude*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into night*. Still, there are many more plays which would stand high in any long list of plays of our time: *Anna Christie*, *The Emperor Jones*, *Te Hairy Ape*, *All God's Chillun Got Wings* and *A Touch of the Poet*.

H. E. Woodbridge writes:

(O'Neill's) 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 have been translated, acted and read in most European countries; some of them have been produced even in Japan (Maufort, 126).

In this connection, J.W. Krutch, another great critic says:

Eugene O'Neill is acknowledged to be the most distinguished of the group of dramatists who created the serious American drama. He was one of the first to emerge, and the very bulk of his successful work would make him stand out, even if the best of that work was not the best of our contemporary dramatic literature. He is the first name to be mentioned in any discussion of American theater today, and he is the only one of our playwrights who has a wide international fame (Chenetier, 122).

Before 1930, Eugene O'Neill, the most eminent American playwright, was concerned with the nature of man and the forces that move him. Some of his early plays are; *Bound East for Cardiff* (1915), *Different* (1920), *Emperor Jones* (1920), *Anna Christie* (1921), *The Hairy Ape* (1922) and *Desire Under the Elms* (1924). Eugene O'Neill and Maxwell Anderson, who turned from violently outspoken war play, *What Price Glory* (1924) to the domestic comedy of *Saturdays* (1927), are considered as the major exponents of modern American drama.

After 1930, the American drama did not have quite the same spontaneous freshness and vigour. O'Neill for example, after his masterpiece, *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), and the nostalgic comedy, *Ah, Wilderness* (1933) had no successful play in New York until *The Iceman Cometh* (1946).

Transformation of American Drama:

Sinclair Lewis is right when he says: "Eugene O'Neill has transformed American drama utterly in ten or twelve years from a false world of neat and competent trickery into a world of splendor and greatness" (Bock and Wertheim, 45). He had seen

life as something not to be neatly arranged in a study, but as terrifying, magnificent and often quite horrible, a thing akin to a tornado, an earthquake or a devastating fire and has rendered that life is his plays.

Commenting on this remark of Sinclair Lewis, George Jean Nathan has observed:

for the truth of the matter is just what Sinclair Lewis announced it to the Swedes, that O'Neill alone and single-handed waded through the dismal swamplands of American drama, black squashy and oozing, sticky goo, and alone and single-handed bore out of them the water lily that no American had found there before him (Bock and Wertheim, 138).

1920s and early 1930s were the so-called glorious days for the American drama. During this period O'Neill reached for greatness with the Pulitzer Prize winning *Strange Interlude* (1928), a nine act play, explored through its leading female character the way in which hidden psychological processes affect outward actions; and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), a trilogy, which was a powerful adaptation of three ancient Greek tragedies. All these helped him to become the first American playwright to win Nobel Prize for literature in 1936.

Discussion

A tireless experimenter: His naturalism:

O'Neill was a tireless experimenter who experimented with a variety of dramatic forms and modes. Even when he succeeded in one form or style, he would move on to another one, and this experimentation continued from the beginning of his career up to the very end. He started his career with writing plays in the natural language of everyday use. John Gassner writes:

He did not abandon colloquial dialogue until in the nineteen-twenties and then only for good reasons and he returned to it in 1939 with the writing

of the *Iceman Cometh*. He depicted environment scrupulously. And he was virtually the first serious American dramatist of any standing to bring characters from all walks of life on to the stage. Noting their origins of race and background with sympathy and understanding. It would not be difficult to sustain the point that he gave us social pictures and socially conditioned, if not altogether socially determined, actions with greater credibility and vitality than most social dramatists of the nineteen-thirties and since then. He is, indeed, historically important as the first American to make naturalist art prevail on our stage Mordden (qtd. in Mordden, 19)

Fusion of naturalism, symbolism and expressionism:

In her *Theater in America*, Mary Henderson writes: “Nevertheless, (O’Neill) was not a ‘naturalist,’ and he struck out, in fact, against the belief that mere transcriptions of life were the province of art. He fused naturalistic detail with symbolist mood and suggestiveness”(109). And taking his cue from his admired Strindberg, he restored to the “expressionist” dramatic style of distortion of action, speech and scene, as in the weird cavalry of his *Emperor Jones* through the jungle and in *The Hairy Ape*. John Gassner writes:

Tireless in his search for theatrical means of projecting the inner life and the metaphysical idea, he used interior monologue- speech on different level of consciousness- in *Strange Interlude* and he experimented with masks as a method of dramatization – with partial success in *The Great God Brown* and with virtually none in *Lazarus Laughed*. He even employed monologue in one highly effective scene of so realistic a comedy as *Ah, Wilderness!* And he split the protagonist of *Days Without End* into two characters who had to be played by two actors. This constant, if not indeed always satisfactory, experimentation, is actually another important feature of O’Neill work. It was his role to open out all the stops of theater-art in America and we have reasons to be grateful to him (qtd. in Mordden, 24).

The note of melodrama:

Eugene O'Neill began his career by writing his materialistic plays mixed with symbolism and melodrama. Melodrama in his plays is of two kinds, one resulting from the improbability of character and situation, and the other resulting from some overpowering obsession which destroys surface reality as well as truth of character. Woodbridge writes:

These early pieces show that O'Neill began as a writer of naturalistic melodrama, that he soon developed a talent for characterization and the evocation of atmosphere, and in two or three plays shook himself free of the shackles of melodrama; that in *Ile*, the most characteristic of his early plays, his fondness for obsession led him to a kind of symbolism, and coalesced with his love of striking stage-effects to create a new variety of melodrama. In his later work the element of naturalism tends to diminish, though it never quite disappears (except perhaps in *Lazarus Laughed*): the element of symbolism tends to increase, though very irregularly; and the element of melodrama remains approximately constant, though it appears in various forms. On the whole, though the symbolism greatly heathens the imaginative appeal of some of the plays, it is more often a curse than blessing, and it is disastrous when it gets out of control. In most of the stronger and finer plays *The Emperor Jones*, *Anna Christie*, *Strange Interlude*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*- it is subordinate and used chiefly to create overtone; in some of the weakest or most questionable- *The Fountain*, *The Great God Brown*, *Dynamo*, *Lazarus Laughed*- it becomes dominant, and sometimes in alliance with melodrama, wrecks the play. It is powerfully used in *The Hairy Ape* through most of the piece; but when near the end it takes control, reality and emotional appeal fade away (Maufort, 129).

O'Neill's language, characters and style:

For nearly thirty years, O'Neill's plays created a powerful modern dramatic literature in America. O'Neill's characters are sailors, farmers, housewives, soldiers,

actors and postmen. Lairs, deceivers and fantasisers all come alive in his plays. These are the characters that push language forward as though it could offer them some protection or amusement. He was always concerned to get behind language. In his early plays, we see that O'Neill was very much interested in sailors. This fascination was because of their inarticulateness in which he identified their “silence.” His similar sense of sympathy for the people, who existed at the bottom of the social order, lay in the fact that their experiences were nonetheless sharp for all their failure to make their way fully into language.

No writer of American drama was more conscious of language than Eugene O'Neill. In his plays, characters make speeches rather than engage in dialogue, and language is layered, slabs of soliloquy are placed upon one another. He presents a critique of language, a profound suspicion of utterance. He offers not only a dramatization of the inadequacy of words to feelings but enacts evidence of the betrayal of truth by words.

In O'Neill's early naturalistic plays, such as *Bound East for Cardiff* (1915), which is poetic and romantic in tone, we can see the notion of character as an individual. In these early plays his characters are well defined and the feature of their faces and even the intonation of their expression can be heard and distinguished. But in his later plays mostly expressionistic plays it comes under a heavy assault and begins to disintegrate.

Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922) was one of the first plays to introduce expressionism in America. This movement, which was a reaction against realism, emphasizes subjective feelings and emotions, rather than a detailed or objective depiction of reality. In this way, *The Hairy Ape* depicts a character that is searching for the inner life and we are confronting a rejected character, who feels he belongs nowhere until he confronts an ape in the zoo. He sets the animal free only to be destroyed by it.

O'Neill's characters mostly in his last plays, such as *The Iceman Cometh* (1946) are all self-conscious performers. They play roles, which will turn away the pain of the real life. They seek oblivion through alcohol, through memory or through narrative,

repeating the story of their lives as though thereby to create those lives. These characters hold the real at bay. O'Neill's last play, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), which premiered after his death in 1953, is a painful autobiographical play. It chronicles a day in the life of the Tyrone family, during which family members inexorably confront one another's flaws and failures.

The great poetic dramatist:

O'Neill's one ambition was that he should be considered as a poetic dramatist. This was an artistic necessity for him, if we take into consideration his matter as well as his point of view. But so long as he wrote about common life -of sailors and farmers and social outcasts- he managed his language securely, often with strong effect, sometimes with poetic overtones appropriate to his subject. When he set out to be deliberately poetic, he failed, sometimes embarrassingly. When he turned to middle class or upper class society, he missed fire in those parts of his plays in which he tried to generalize a feeling or an idea. Yet it may be conceded that even then he could achieve a poetic effect of low degree, through the full rhythm of his sentences, if not through cadences and imagery. Poetry is sufficiently present , for example in *Ah, Wilderness!* and there is considerable measure of it in *Desire Under the Elms*, one of his best plays. he got his poetry as other modern playwrights have done, not from verbal beauty but from the breath and reach of his imagination, mood or feeling and especially from his theatrical sense. John Gassner writes:

If he was felicitous in creating verbal poetry, he often created a poetry of the theater –this in effect of which a few examples are the tom-toms in *Emperor Jones*, the firemen forecastle and the Fifth Avenue nightmare of *The Hairy Ape*, the masks and transformation-effects of *The Great God Brown*, the evocation of the farmhouse and land in *Desire Under the Elms*, and the Greek colonnade, the chantey refrain, and Electra Lavinia's tragic closing of the doors upon herself in *Mourning Becomes Electra* (qtd. in Mordden, 26).

Sense of form and pattern:

O'Neill displays a strong sense of form both in his realistic and non-realistic plays. His plays are strictly patterned. The structure of the play, the pattern of the action, even the shaping of the dialogue, always follow a strict design usually one devised for that particular play. Downer believes:

The alternating setting of *Beyond the Horizon*, shifting from the open road to the farmhouse interior, parallel the choices which confront the two brothers in the action. The fixed non-realistic nature of the setting in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* creates a dramatic symbol of the forces opposed to the self-realization of the hero and the heroine in *Mourning Becomes Electra* the completely realistic setting is also completely symbolic (Chenetier, 47).

In characterization, too, O'Neill prefers to follow a pattern. His characters are not necessarily stereotypes, but he is at some pains from the very beginning of his career to make it apparent that each is but an instrument in the revelation of his theme. At first, he frequently describes the humor or manner of a character by the figurative situation of a mask: "Mrs. Mayo's face has ... become a weak mask wearing a helpless, doubtful expression of being constantly on the verge of comfortable tears."

Later in the *Great God Brown*, each character is equipped with an actual mask which he dons or doffs to indicate his inner nature, his attitude and his emotion. Aware that this restoration of a classical stage property called attention to itself and away from the play as a whole, O'Neill made a further modification.

In *Mourning Becomes Electra* where the Greek myth suggested the employment of actual masks, the realism of the setting forced a compromise. The Mannons, in repose, all have mask-like faces, resembling the mask-like portraits on the walls of their library. Since the Mannons are seldom in repose, the effect is more potential than actual, but it underlies the action as a symbol of the chain of evil that binds them together. Downer writes:

“The use of the material of theater, setting and make up and action, on several levels, achieves an effect similar to the effect of poetic language in the older drama, and accounts for the impact of much of O’Neills work, in spite of the lack of poetic language in his dialogue” (Chenetier, 49).

A great tragic artist:

O’Neill’s vision of life was essentially tragic; the human predicament is the theme of his plays, which are all, with one exception, tragedies. He is a great tragic artist, but with a difference. He writes tragedies of modern life which do not follow the traditional, Aristotelian form. There are no tragic heroes, exceptional individuals with *hamartia*, in the Aristotelian sense.

His tragic protagonists are all drawn from the humblest ranks of society, such as are gathered in Harry Hopes’s bar in *The Iceman Cometh*. Each of them has his own pipe-dream, his own romantic illusion which sends him to his doom. As Blumenthal believes :“(O’Neill’s) tragedies are studies in the destructive possibilities of romantic ideals” (16). They demonstrate that any kind of escape from the reality of life is self-destroying; they assert at every step, the beauty and joy of life which must be accepted with all its joys as well as with all its limitations. Tragedy results when in the pursuit of some cherished illusion man forgets the reality of life.

Human suffering: its causes- his themes;

Basically and essentially, O’Neill’s tragedies are the embodiments of a comic anguish. As he himself said: “he has studied man not in relation to man, but man in relation to God. Man has lost faith in the God of old relations and has yet found no new faith. Living in an impersonal, mechanical, urbanized and industrialized social environment, man is constantly on the track. He suffers from inner emptiness, isolation and a feeling of insecurity” (qtd.in Herman 79).

John Gassner rightly says: (O'Neill's major theme was man's disorientation, man's bedevilment from within and from without" (qtd. in Mordden, 27). O'Neill made himself the dramatist of ironic fate and of the psychological tensions Freud's interpreters and misinterpreters were then communicating to us in books and lectures. He then continues: "he took for his masters the Greek tragedians of fate, to whom he ultimately paid the tribute of imitation in *Mourning becomes Electra*, and Strindberg, the Scandinavian dramatists of man's division and search for reunification, to whom he has paid the tribute of imitation in *Welded* and *Strange Interlude*" (qtd. in Mordden, 27). This makes O'Neill a great tragic artist whose tragedies soothe, console and strengthen. They never depress and dishearten. They are as much apotheosis of the human spirit as, say, the tragedies of Shakespeare or of the ancient Greeks.

Conclusion

Some limitations and O'Neill's real greatness

In the end, some limitations of O'Neill as a dramatist may be noted: First, as Woodbridge rightly points out, "his most obvious limitation is the inadequacy and intermittent appearance of his sense of humor" (Maufort, 132). He has, indeed, a rather grim Irony: *Marco Millions* shows satiric power and *Ah Wilderness* a broad recognition of the value of humor. But a richer sense of humor would have preserved him from many melodramatic extravagances and from such defects as the crude treatment in *Indifferent* of the ills of sex suppression; also from the intolerably mechanical laughter of *Lazarus Laughed*.

Secondly, his grasp on character is uncertain. How few people in his plays do we remember as individuals-Emperor Jones, Old Christe, Marco, perhaps Lavinia in *Electra*, Nat Miller in *Ah Wilderness*, not many more, Woodbridge writes "O'Neill portraits are none in wood block; not in fine lines, but striking masses of black and white" (Maufort, 133).

Thirdly, he lacks the power of happy memorable phrase; he seldom or never gives final form to an idea in words. There are few lines in his plays that are likely to become familiar quotations.

Fourthly, he lacks control, and does not distinguish between force and violence. He has the ex-invalid's love of strong words and violent deeds. Thus he often spoils his effect by laying on his colors too thick.

Fifthly, sometimes his symbolism gets out of control and is overdone as at the end of *The Hairy Ape*.

Sixthly, his control over emotion is also uncertain.

But despite such drawbacks, O'Neill remains a great dramatist, one of the greatest figures in the Twentieth Century Theater. His great and central merit is that he is a serious and generally sincere artist in drama. He has never compromised with box-office demands, but has won his success without tampering with his artistic conscience. O'Neill wrote in 1922, "I intend to use whatever I can make my own – and I shall never be influenced by any consideration but one: is it the truth as I know it, or better still, feel it? If so, shoot and let the splinters fly where they will. If not, not" qtd. in Wilkinson, 85). Woodbridge writes:

O'Neill has always, I think, been faithful to his vision, such as it is and this is the root of all good writing. In the second place, O'Neill has at its best a fine sense of dramatic values which fuses the discordant elements of which his work is composed and makes us forget all his defects. Finally he has always shown a splendid artistic courage. He has dared to try new things and to do old things in new ways. He has greatly widened the range of our theater (Maufort, 136).

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