



EUGENE O'NEILL AS AMERICA'S OUTSTANDING PLAYWRIGHT RICHLY USING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENT IN HIS DRAMATIC WORLD: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This present article lays focus on the rich use of autobiographical element as depicted in the dramatic world of Eugene O'Neill. He is one of the most prominent writers in America with spiritual values, inner conflicts, anguish and failure. He believed that the real work of an artist is to depict life as he sees it. Through a deep study of this paper, one can understand importance of autobiographical elements which owe something to an incident in man's life, especially in his life.

Key Words: *Expressionistic, Agony, Hostility, Self-Absorption, Sexual Quit Birth-Guilt, Torment, and Doubt-Illusion.*

It is generally held that drama in the United States of America was incapable of keeping pace with the progress in other branches of literature. Though by the nineteenth century, there was widespread puritan prejudice against theatre, a great many plays had been produced. Though the majority of the plays seldom transcended mediocrity, the need for drama was very much satisfied often by the imported stuff. For example, the play namely **Our American Cousin** during the performance of which Abraham Lincoln was shot at in 1865 was written by an Englishman. Despite the fact that the period preceding the end of the nineteenth century was a period of dearth in the history of English drama, by the end of the nineteenth century English drama had felt the invigorating influence of Strindberg and Ibsen. A sudden rival in drama took place with George Bernard Shaw contributing to this revival. By the next decade, the playwrights became increasingly aware of the richness of the American sense. Themes of wide interest and contemporary significance found their way into the theatre by this time, that too, through production of **The Great Divide** by William Vaughan Moody **The Faith Healer** by Moody and **The Nigger** by Edward Sheldon. All these dramatists were somewhat handicapped by a tendency towards sentimentality and a readiness to follow theatrical convention. The much needed break with conventions took place only with O'Neill.

Eugene O'Neill is one of the greatest American dramatists. As a prominent dramatist of modern age, he is said to have contributed a lot to new drama. His is purely an objective kind of drama showing the working of man's mind and conscience. Belonging to the expressionistic school of drama, he has already, as the dramatist of protest, protested against the prevailing surface realism or naturalism. He was theatre and the 1920's and 1940's constituted the greatest period in its history. He wrote things of contemporary interest giving American drama its requested genius and authority, dynamism and force. He proved himself to be the chief insurgent against worn out dramatic conventions and the romantically banal and established himself as the symbol of renaissance that paralleled on the stage of the so-called renaissance in poetry. He was, no doubt, a verbal and an anti-conventional dramatist O'Neill seemed to be capable of so many new ideas for the theater. For he incorporated both realism and expression. Expressionist effects were first made noticeably as a part of his drama in **The Emperor Jones** (1920) and in **The Hairy Ape** (1922), expressionist devices and settings combined with strictly naturalistic details so that the "real" achieved a symbolic quality through formal repetitions and exaggerations, and in **The Great God Brown** (1926), he tried the addition of masks as an experiment in dramatic effects. Quite truly speaking, O'Neill's drama is pre-occupied with spiritual values, inner conflicts, anguish, failure and pride. His use of mask, asides, expressionistic technique in his plays reveals his profound interest in experiment and innovation.

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill, the son of James O'Neill and Quinine, was born on October 16, 1888 in an up-town family hotel named Barrett House, New York. His parents were ardent Catholics. His father was one of the best known of American actors and his mother, exceptionally beautiful, was fond of music and practiced a curled



handwriting. Having spent his early years in Catholic schools, O'Neill studied for four years at the Bells Academy at Stanford from 1896 to 1902. From there, he went to Princeton for his graduation studied and studied Law to take his B.Litt. degree. As 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 was in the Academy that he learnt a great deal of playwriting. He wrote many plays which made me quite popular as a dramatist in the American Theatre. In his life-time, had established himself to be leading American dramatist. He had his triumphs; he was awarded Pulitzer Prizes for **Beyond the Horizon**, **Anna Christie** **Interlude** and **Long Day's Journey into Night** and he received the highest international recognition by winning the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature; a considerable number of books and articles has been devoted to his works since the 1920's and in recent years, the sign of interest has grown markedly pronounced and his plays are popular in the English speaking world. He has to his credit composition of such notable plays as 1.**Beyond the Horizon** (1918), 2.**Anna Christie** (1920), 3.**The Emperor Jones** (1920), 4.**The Hairy Ape** (1921), 5.**Desire Under the Elms** (1924), 6.**The Great God Brown** (1925), 7.**Lazarus Laughed** (1926), 8.**The Strange Interlude** (1927), 9.**Mourning Becomes Electra** (1931), 10.**Ah, Wilderness** (1932), 11.**The Iceman Cometh** (1939), 12.**Long Day's Journey into Night** (1941), 13.**Long Day's Journey into Night** and 14.**A Moon for the Misbegotten** (1943).

Universally recognized as the greatest of modern American dramatists, Eugene O'Neill is ranked among Shaw, Ibsen and Strindberg, for he gave a new intensity and depth to American drama. As he saw human nature in its stark nakedness, he was bold enough to depict it most truthfully in his dramatic world. O'Neill believed that the real work of an artist is to depict life as he sees it and this must be performed by him without any fear at all and he also believed 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 and so his 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 and this innovation was introduced rather successfully by O'Neill in the American Theatre. Generally speaking, O'Neill is mainly the writer of tragedies, and he had tragic conception of life, for he believed that a really worthwhile life is always tragic because a man of high ideals rarely attains those ideals, and so his life is tragic. According to O'Neill, nobility of life can be found only in tragedy. Actually he was born between two opposed impulses one, a desire to separate himself from the world, a passion for privacy and the other a need to explain and justify himself to the world. O'Neill reveals, as well as conceals himself 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. In the words of Robert F. Whitman,

"An expression of the human tragedy ... the eternal conflict between man's aspirations and some intransigent, ineluctable quality in life which circumscribes and limits him..." (P 143).

The philosophical view appears more stressed in this following quotation:

"...the struggle between life and death ... metamorphosed into a compulsive preoccupation: the maintenance of an equilibrium between life sickness and death-fear" (Engel 267).

All the above facts reveal that O'Neill is found to be less concerned with "the human tragedy," and he was more concerned with his own particular "tragedy" occurred in his life. Each play of his is a product of his life-long autobiographical preoccupation. The plays do reflect topical concerns as marriage, religion, along with the mother-son themes. In a word, it may be said that the essential unity of O'Neill's works is established through a profound study of the development of his autobiographical themes within their various interchanges. Few artists have been as overwhelmingly and relentlessly autobiographical as was Eugene O'Neill. Again and again, he dramatized the intense love-hate relationships among his father, mother, brother and himself. Most explicitly portrayed in the post-humus **Long Day's Journey into Night** one of his major works, these relationships are mirrored in all his plays. Almost every husband or father is James O'Neill, every wife or mother, Ella, the hopelessly alcoholic brother, Jamie is featured in **A Moon for the Misbegotten** and of course, O'Neill, himself is in most plays sensitive and suffering protagonist.



O'Neill is not the only dramatist of the modern times who laid bare his experiences in his plays. No doubt, drama is an objective art, but some of the modern dramatists projected their self and their reminiscences in drama. Marcel Proust and O'Neill belong to the group of subjective dramatists. In the words of John Henry Raleigh, "Although Proust and O'Neill are the clearest cases of great modern writers for whom art and autobiography are one, they are not the only ones". In **Long Day's Journey, into Night**, the dramatist has telescoped events from his life, suppressed some facts, distorted others, invented some more and transferred some others (the Lady of Lourdes incident). He seemed to have both simplified and heightened characters. Jamie has been selected as one side of himself and one side of his father. **The Iceman Cometh** is an autobiographical play. O'Neill exhibits in this play a group of down-and-outers that frequent Harry Hope's West Side Saloon in 1912. The place is described sardonically by one of the characters as the No chance Saloon, Bedrock Bar, the End of the Line Café, and the Bottom of the Sea Rathseller. Harry hope, Larry Slade, Jimmy Tomorrow are the characters developed by the dramatist from the known persons in his life.

From the time Eugene O'Neill discussed his own talent as a dramatist, there was one theme that obsessed him. It was the story of his unfortunate family. From the time when he began the writing of the plays **Long Day's Journey into Night** and **Iceman Cometh**, it was great agony from the beginning. Carlotta gives an account of O'Neill's suffering thus:

"He 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" (LDJIN 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 and with good reason. The name evokes the Virgin Mary and is appropriate for one who was 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. Perhaps this title deviation from truth gave the necessary objectivity in a work of this manner. Furthermore, it reflects, as some critics have pointed out, Eugene O'Neill's persistent death wish.

Long Day's Journey into Night has great clarity as well as content. It is possible to locate in **Long Day's Journey into Night** the single stands of its composite mother-figure, particularly as the "mother" and "son" play out roles in relation to each other. The first of these is the innocent son and the worshipped, distant mother. Here, the mother is portrayed as Madonna-figure and source of forgiveness. The next is the isolated rejecting mother, and the abandoned son. These are perfectly related and such relationship is the point in **Long Day's Journey into Night** as well as in **The Iceman Cometh**: the distance that is connected with the other's otherworldliness is at the same time also a product of her hostility toward her son. Linked to both poles is a third pattern which can be often found in Eugene O'Neill's works. It is a sick, isolated woman and the invalid son. In this aspect, both the mother and the son are mutually identified as each causing the other's condition. That is, the long suffered sickness by Mary after the birth of her youngest son is just the same birth sickness, from which, he too has never recovered. Along with these patterns that describes the relationship between mothers and sons, in addition, there is also found a major pattern common to both **Long Day's Journey into Night** and **The Iceman Cometh**. It is the search for lost innocence. 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 otherworldly innocence" (P13). In this regard, she is the suffering mother worried by circumstances of a life, for which she was unprepared, two soon taken from this "convent" she has indeed never left, a ghost hidden within her past. In this way, her family too identifies their past as well. Just like the mother, all are attached to a past, which is remembered as a golden age and a past to which they were in



possession of their more “real” selves. The figure of Evelyn in **The Iceman Cometh** in many ways resembles Mary Tyrone. Both are “nice” innocent girls who were married to men who travel, consequently leaving them alone for much of the time. Both these girls have remained throughout their marriages virginal. Hickey complains that he cannot be “himself” (that is, sexual, with his wife) and like James Tyrone, he prefers the company of men in bars to hers. 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 into Night** presents, as its final image, Mary’s simultaneous “good” and “evil” as a paradox to be accepted without judgment. Analogues to this image are found in many earlier works of O’Neill. “The web”, **Beyond the Horizon, Desire under the Elms, the Straw Mourning Becomes Electra**-all contains scenes in which the mother-figure is shown leaving the world, wrapped up in a similarly “religious” self-absorption. Mary of O’Neill’s “good” earth-mother figures are, like Josie in **Moon for the Misbegotten**, as taboo as sexual objects. This is suggestive that there was for O’Neill a connection between sexual guilt and birth-guilt.

In O’Neill’s plays there is another variant theme that recurs. 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 web”, **The Straw, All God’s Chillun and Days without End** contain examples of this pattern. This is in a way suggesting that O’Neill had in mind, himself and his mother, as prototype of a mutually identified illness. In **Mourning Becomes Electra** and **Desire under the Elms**, the son seeks to save the mother by avenging the father who wrongs her. In “where the cross is made”, father and son are shown waiting for the return of a lost ship, which has been named for the dead mother, “Mary Allen” a name strongly suggestive of O’Neill’s own mother, Mary Ellen Quintian O’Neill. In **Long Day’s Journey**, Mary’s three men are shown pleading with her to return to them, to let them save her. And in **Iceman Cometh**, Hickey’s claim is that in murdering Evelyn, he is acting to save her from the destruction of her endless faith.

O’Neill frequently used names reminiscent of Ella’ that began with “E”. Eileen in **the Straw**, Emma in **Different**, Elsa in **Days with End**, Evelyn in **the Iceman Cometh**. Ella O’Neill was, in her convent days, a pianist and it is to a crazed echo of this that Mary Tyrone reverts at the close of **Long Day’s Journey**. Although O’Neill’s biographers claim that he ran away to sea to escape his first wife, Kathleen Jenkins. The Gelb biography of O’Neill considers the history of his relationship to Kathleen Jenkins. Arthur and Barbara Belb observe:

“James (O’Neill) cast about for a way of removing Eugene (from Kathleen) and came up with a plan to send him on a mining expedition... Eugene was to set sail for Handuras from San Francisco and Kathleen saw him off at his train. Eugene considered it rather a good joke on his father that the girl from whom James was separating him was already his wife” (P 113).

O’Neill 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 a such a world-death, darkness and doubt-illusion is the only protection and hence O’Neill’s plays at their deepest level, are concerned, tormented and completely with the endless ambiguities of the relationship between illusion and reality” (Raleigh 99).

Truly speaking, O’Neill had always taken material from his personal life and artistically transmuted it into his plays. In the first phase, if he had depicted realistically the life of sailors, peasants and labourers, in the psychologically realistic plays he had dealt with the complicated and mysterious motivations of man. In the last plays, he had reinterpreted his own past and through his own personality tried to present graphically the tragic picture of man moving about in search of a home and sympathy which he had mostly missed in his life. To conclude, O’Neill is the dramatist of the twentieth century who has introduced autobiographical elements in his plays. Since many characters of O’Neill’s plays are near projections of his own self, they are not allowed to become great powerful figures. However, it is impossible to forget that O’Neill himself is speaking through them and it is his largeness of tragic feeling that constitutes their magnitude.



Through a study of the development of his autobiographical themes within their various permutations, one can understand that every one of Eugene O'Neill's plays owes something or other to an incident in his life. Despite some critical effort to debunk him, Eugene O'Neill remains America's outstanding playwright, the only one to win international fame and recognition.

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