

PREFACE

WHY O'NEILL

*For a second you see — and seeing the secret, are the secret.
... Then the hand lets the veil fall and you are alone*

Edmund Tyrone in Long Day's Journey Into Night

Preface

I knew Eugene Gladstone O'Neill when I was doing my post graduate studies in English and opted for American literature as my special paper.

O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra (1931), which we had to study, fascinated me so much that I decided to read more plays of O'Neill after my postgraduation. My personal liking for O'Neill further deepened when I started reading his works afterwards. Since O'Neill's career as a dramatist began from his one - act plays like A Wife for a Life (written in 1913) and Bound East for Cardiff (1914), I considered it worthwhile to read the one - acters before reading his full - fledged dramas. O'Neill himself believed that his one-acters contained the germ of the spirit and life-attitude of his important future works.

O'Neill's plays fall into chronological groupings through which the changes and development of his art may be traced. According to their dates of composition three groups emerge : those plays written from 1913 to 1925, 1926 - 1933 and 1939 - 1943. To the first group, it is needless to mention, belong his early one - act plays. Hence, my decision to read the one - acters. In course of my reading those plays, which specially drew my attention was O'Neill's obsession with death. In O'Neill death was a kind of grand gesture, a ritual celebration of freedom, escape or home coming.

It is rather interesting that "out of thirty-seven of O'Neill's plays it has been observed that there are only five free from murder, death, suicide or insanity. In the others the score is eight suicides and one unsuccessful attempt, twelve important murders (not counting incidental episodes); twenty six deaths, nearly all due to violence, and eight cases of insanity."¹ This was O'Neill.

O'Neill was "... in love with death²." The vision of death which loomed large in O'Neill, gave me a new insight into his works. And I began to think whether I could embark upon my Ph.D dissertation on the theme of death with reference to his one-acters. The critical literature about O'Neill though prolific, had not paid adequate attention to this subject which hovered over the creative world of Eugene Gladstone O'Neill.

I discussed my idea with my supervisor Dr. B.K. Banerjee. Encouragement received from him went a long way in shaping this present dissertation. I owe a lot to him.

Psychiatrist Hervert Hendin in The Age of Sensation used the expression, "drawn to death as a way of life". Another psychiatrist, Mary Gibbin observes that the only love affair in a suicidal child's life may be his love affair with death. Poets Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, both of whom killed themselves, appeared to have a romance with death. Sexton, who committed suicide in 1974 wrote "Wanting to Die". (a poem posthumously published in 1976) in which she described her desire to die as "the almost unnameable lust".

O'Neill's deeply rooted scepticism expressed throughout his writings, may be viewed as a manifestation of his death wish. To him America was not the most successful country in the world, but "the greatest failure". His second wife Agnes Boulton wrote, he was "firmly convinced that he could not alter that heavy hand of fate"³. Belonging and peace are invariably the attributes of death in O'Neill's plays; life is characterised by alienation and pain. Death was always "the right of release" (Robert Mayo-a self portrait in **Beyond the Horizon**). There was medical testimony to this. Dr. G.V. Hamilton treated O'Neill in 1926 and noted the death wish. Also the doctor who attended his death bed in 1953 confirmed it.

Still there was something deeper in this death wish that truly haunted me. Somewhere in the work this American Playwright made me feel disturbed and moved. It was akinness of O'Neill to Oriental thought.

The mystic vision of Eugene O'Neill about death almost echoed the concept of Nirvana as the final attainment of life. Eugene himself was aware of this as evident in the theme of **Lazarus Laughed** and exclamation of Edmund Tyron in **Long Day's Journey Into Night**. Frederick I Carpenter in his "Eugene O'Neill the Orient and American Transcendentalism"⁴ first put a voice to it which was carried on further by Robinson James A. in **Eugene O'Neill and Oriental Thought: A Divided vision**.⁵ The ultimate achievement of O'Neill was not limited to American life or "American reality". As F.I.Carpenter puts it in **The Pattern of O'Neill's Tragedies**. ". . . O'Neill no longer celebrated the romantic dreams of his characters, nor condemned

their selfish materialism, nor even participated emotionally in their human tragedies. Rather, he transcended both the actions and the passions which he described, so that his characters seemed to live out their tragedies without help or hindrance of author. The final dramas ceased to be romantic and became 'transcendental'"⁶. O'Neill neither sympathized with nor criticized his characters for their 'pipedreams' but dealt them with a distant objectivity something like "beyond good and evil". It is difficult to resist the temptation of quoting F.I. Carpenter again, "The 'trancendental' tragedy of the later O'Neill achieves a goal much like that of the oriental religion and philosophy which lured O'Neill throughout his life, and which found final expression in **Tao House**. In the final tragedies, the veil of Maya seems to be torn aside and all the illusions of human life laid bare. . . . when the veil of Maya is torn aside, he may achieve an approximation of Nirvana. This modern philosophy of tragedy which sees man's life as necessarily doomed to defeat may constitute a kind of victory, arrives at much the same goal as the most important religions of the Orient. . . ."⁷

This gave me a new insight. Reading O'Neill turned out to be a bimodal journey for me. I became convinced about the role of death drive in O'Neill's creations. I also realized that the drive may have many expressions. The concept of Nirvana, that is escaping from cycles of life altogether is also a death wish – the ultimate call of the inorganic.

Hence, the choice of my subject. The whole project has been presented in five chapters. **The first chapter** is a survey of O'Neill criticism. This

would justify the relevance of this dissertation. In **The Second Chapter** I have studied the man, his family and his upbringing to search the roots of this death wish. My **Third Chapter** is an overall study of the major works of O'Neill vis - a - vis his one - acters. The **Fourth Chapter** examines exclusively the one - acters of O'Neill highlighting the death wish in the respective plays. In the concluding chapter, I have attempted a summing up of my observation about the whole thesis.

And in the Appendix, we have provided O'Neill's own diagram showing "the early forces that had shaped him." and a graph of **Long days journey into night** from **The Defense of Psychoanalysis in literature : Long days journey into night and A view from the bridge** by Albert Rothenberg and Eugene D. Shapiro, and a photocopy of Agnes Boulton's observations on **Part of a Long Story**.

Since no thesis is complete without a bibliography, I have prepared the same following the instructions as laid down in the M.L.A. Handbook. I will be failing in my duty if I do not acknowledge my special debts to Professor Amitabha Roy, Shakespeare Professor of English, Rabindra Bharati University of Calcutta, Professor Sisir Das, Retd. Professor of English, University of Calcutt and Professor Viswanath Chatterjee, former Professor of English Jadavpur University. I sought their valued advice while writing this dissertation. But for their co-operation this thesis would never see the light of day.

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