

CHAPTER IV

DRAMATIST IN THE MAKING

THE EARLY ONE-ACTERS OF EUGENE O'NEILL

The one-act play, . . . is a fine vehicle for something poetical, for something spiritual in feeling that cannot be carried through a long play.

Eugene O'Neill in New York Herald Tribune.

Before Breakfast apparently is the story of a nagging wife, Mrs. Rowland. She " . . . enters from the bedroom yawning. . . . Her drowsy eyes stare about the room with the irritated look of one to whom a long sleep has not been a long rest. . . . Pours out a large drink and gulps it down. . . ."¹ and does the next thing — search out a letter from her husband's pocket. Her monologue reveals the full tragedy of the fallen angel from riches to a loveless marriage with a dead baby. There is a new love in his life, but it will not succeed. In the end the husband commits suicide by cutting his throat with the razor. On discovering this, the wife " . . . runs shrieking madly into the outer hallway."²

Before Breakfast was first staged at The Playwright's Theatre on December 1, 1916. Probably it was written just before in July 1916, after O'Neill's arrival in Provincetown. It was published in *The Provincetown Plays* (Third series) in December, 1916.

Virginia Floyd opines, "No single source inspired the play's subject matter. . . ."³; while Travis Bogard felt, "In **Before Breakfast**, he drew even closer to his model, and again around a self-portrait wrote a deliberate imitation of **The Stronger**."⁴ This model was Strindberg.

The imitation is obvious. But one can recognise what is essentially O'Neillian in **Before Breakfast**. First is his innermost desire to draw a self-portrait. Alfred Rowland, unheard and unseen, however, shows " . . . a sensitive hand with slender fingers"⁵ with alcoholic tremor — resembling

what O'Neill thought of himself. The story of marriage of the Rowlands revealed by the wife is almost as much a distorted picture as could be that of O'Neill's brief involvement with his first wife Kathleen Jenkins. Mrs. Rowland is drawn in total black conforming to O'Neill's idea of a nagging wife. She is of "medium height . . . shapeless stoutness . . . form-less blue dress. . . . characterless . . . spiteful mouth." and to crown it all " . . . looks much older".⁶ The playwright makes no pretention to reveal which side he favours. Alfred Rowland is gentleman " . . . the millionaire Rowland's only son, the Harvard graduate, the poet, the catch of the town. . . ." ⁷ turned to loafing " . . . around barrooms with that good-for-nothing lot of artists from the square." ⁸ " . . . writing silly poetry and stories that no one will buy. . . . " but still " . . . too proud to beg".⁹

The message is very clear. The harsh reality is killing the dreamer. The wife should have considered herself lucky enough to be married to this "honourable" prodigy; and should have borne smiling all the pretty earthly family responsibilities. As we have noted before, this was exactly O'Neill's idea of an ideal wife. O'Neill had the other weakness too. Whoever he disliked, was always drawn in pure black in his plays. Kathleen would be again the sloven maid-servant in Long Day's Journey Into Night. Even O'Neill could be held guilty of distorting the truth. Her "father's only a grocer" " . . . lucky the poor thing was born dead, after all." "with a sort of savage joy"¹⁰ — this lady could never be the real Kathleen Jenkins. In life, Kathleen never accused Eugene of the affair and even did not demand any compensation for the

divorce, while she was left helpless with a baby. Far later, with all his seriousness to depict the O'Neill family in Long Day's Journey Into Night, the self-portrait Edmund evaded this marital affair.

Before settling to writing dramas, Eugene tried his hand at poetry and short story. Before Breakfast can be viewed as a short story. From the beginning, tension rises up to reach the climax at the end. The hero is, of course, Alfred Roland. His ultimate exit is the central event. Mrs. Rowland is just a side character and the narrator as well. She gives us the details about the fallen angel. And the dramatist achieves to represent the external trauma of the hero through her. If the hero is down, then she is the cause. And there is a third girl too. "This Helen must be a fine one. . . . does she write poetry, too? Her letter sounds that way."¹¹ She is the understanding lover; but sad are the ways of life, they cannot meet in this world.

Alfred escapes; as Robert Mayo will do in Beyond the Horizon. "Sensitive", Soul cannot live in this crude world. Eugene glamourises the event. This is a deviation from Strindberg's unsentimental treatment of the conflict. This romanticisation is essentially O'Neillian affair. It is worth noticeable that in a Provincetown production, the sensitive hand was played by the playwright himself. This is the death wish. Eugene O'Neill himself felt that dreams could not be fulfilled here. Goal is, if any — beyond the horizon.

Here we can have a look at the use of monologue in Before Breakfast. Apart from its value as a technical experiment and that it imitated the monologue

of The Stronger, it also foreshadowed a long series of monologues as in The Emperor Jones, The Hairy Ape, Strange Interlude, Hughie and The Iceman Cometh. This was very much in O'Neill's blood to express his own alienation. Monologue can be viewed as an O'Neilleian effort by which the characters tried to face their inner-self. Probably Eugene perceived dialogue as a poor medium at times for effective communication. There was no other theatrical way to express himself or his characters but through monologue. A spiral course of probing into one's self followed to reveal the deepest anguish. Eugene dreaded his death wish, but still tried to face it. Monologue was his vehicle in this journey. What started in Before Breakfast, ended in self-discovery of Hickey or Parritt in The Iceman Cometh.

Eugene O'Neill had seen his father having long successful seasons with Broadway productions on the Biblical themes — the early Joseph and His Brethren when Eugene was convalescing in a sanatorium; and later The Wanderer at the end of acting days of James O'Neill (who was seventy that time). Eugene throughout his creations showed the tendency to base his material on other works. But though he collected the germinal idea from them, ultimately such themes assumed a new meaning and significance due to his own approach and interpretation of that subject. The above plays inspired him in utilising the Biblical stories. And he took recourse to the versions of the parables in The Rope, where the Cross is Made, and The Dreamy Kid and of course, in some later works too.

Louise Seaffer writes, James O'Neill at the age of seventy, "appeared to shed years as he began rehearsing for The Wanderer based on the parable of the Prodigal Son. To the old actor, who had long been worried about a rebellious son who wandered off to sea and hung around the most unsavory places, the role of the Jewish Patriarch Jesse must have seemed like type casting. . . . Eugene of course took a dim view of the opus at the opera house; yet it probably was The Wanderer as well as the earlier Joseph and His Brethren that planted the idea in him of using the scriptures in several of his works."¹²

Return of the prodigal son is a central theme in these three one-actres. This is most apparent in The Rope, where Luke Bentley — "Abe's son by a second marriage"¹³ comes "back after five years of bummin" round the rotten old earth. . . . "¹⁴ In Where The Cross is Made, Nat Bartlett returns to the insane dream of his father Captain Isaiah Bartlett to find out the hidden treasure. " 'The treasure is buried where the cross is made' ".¹⁵ The Dreamy kid returns to his grand mother and his childhood innocence being followed by police for killing a white man — " . . . when I heerd it was ole Mammy croakin' and axin' ter see me, I says ter myse'f : 'Dreamy, you gotter make good wid old Mammy no matter what come. . . . ' " ¹⁶

These plays show something more in common. O'Neill's concept of destiny expresses itself in the common goal of unfulfilment for all. In The Rope Abraham Bentley starts with " 'woe unto us! for the day goeth away, for the shadows of the evening are stretched out' ".¹⁷ The haunting shadow

extends its evil spell over everything. Luke Bentley returns without repentance intending to rob his father: Mary, the overgrown girl of ten has already been drawn as "stupidly expressionless" and her mother Annie with "dulled irritation." Now Luke appears who "lacks in intelligence" with "half foolish grin" inspite of his "devil may care recklessness". All these meant to make certain that Abraham's real purpose of hanging the rope with hidden bag of gold coins is never understood.

Luke stole one hundred dollars from his father when he was sixteen and ran away from home. Abraham cursed him, hung a rope in the barn, and told him to "hang himself on it when he ever came home agen."¹⁸ The rope becomes the central point of conflict. "From the edge of the loft, half way from the door, a rope about five feet long with an open running noose at the end, is hanging."¹⁹

The basic unhappy atmosphere of a family tormented with suspicion and greed is depicted from the beginning. Abraham enters the barn, discovers his grand daughter, and drives her out, muttering "out O'my sight, you Papist brat! Spawn O'Satan! Spyin' on me!"²⁰ Annie comes, quarrels and exposes how her father Abraham Bentley destroyed his first wife by meanness and how the second wife did the reverse before deserting him and the son whom she claimed was his five year old Luke. She urges him to go to the house to take his medicine but the old man " . . . hits her viciously over the arm with his stick."²¹ The rope is an obsession with him and he guards " . . . to make sure the rope was still there."²²

Pat Sweeney, Annie's husband also wants the hidden dollars but is a more balanced person and wants to make a deal with Luke as he returns. Before father meets the son, the episode of Marry's learning to throw dollars into the ocean from uncle Luke, happens. A little amateurish one may see, rather too much contrived. But at that stage of maturity and probably with some hurry to produce play for the Provincetown players, Eugene had no other short cut to reach the climax.

Abraham becomes extraordinarily excited on discovering Luke back and chants "Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him."²³ He indicates that he wants the boy to hang himself in the noose. Luke first mockingly agrees and then turns violently on his father. Both Luke and Pat plot to torture the old man to force him declare the hidden gold and leave the barn.

Mary swings on the noose and the bag of gold coins falls on the floor. As learnt from uncle Luke — rather to prove the mockery of destiny, she throws the coins one after another into the ocean.

Travis Bogard declares this " . . . an almost complete failure of imagination".²⁴ But still O'Neill tries to keep the bag of gold hidden from the audience till the end. While Luke and Sweeney go out to search for the hidden money, the last part unfolds in complete silence with only the audience as the sole witness. The audience learns belatedly the purpose of the hanging rope; and now the deeper reflection too. The rope becomes the true instrument of death. The money is gone. Luke's return becomes meaningless. And Abraham

will be murdered. Louis Sheaffer rightly remarks, "The Rope is entirely O'Neill's; raw, bitter, an unvarnished account of some vengeful humans."²⁵

Nat Bartlett knows about his father Captain Isaiah Bartlett that "The things he wants to see can't be made out in daylight. . . ." ²⁶ His ship named after his wife – "The Mary Allen" – went to the sea for a treasure-hunt but was lost in a hurricane.

Captain still waits for the ship and her crew to come back with the hidden treasure. The flash back, i.e., the events of the past are presented through conversation between Nat and a psychiatrist Doctor Higgins. Nat wants to send his father to an asylum. Years back captain had a shipwreck and discovered treasure chests in a tiny island in Indian Ocean. All the men were going mad with hunger and thirst; as a last effort to save the treasure they buried it and drew a map marking the site "Where the cross is made".²⁷ Only three returned alive with captain Bartlett who then mortgaged his house to outfit schooner, the Mary Allen. Captain could not accompany others in their mission as his wife was dying. His madness became apparent as he got the news of Mary Allen "Lost in a hurricane off the celebés with all on board. . . .

— a thing which " . . . he won't believe." ²⁹ The map is still with Nat. But Nat has arranged with Doctor Higgins to send his father to an asylum — quite justifiable as they have to vacate the house to foreclose the mortgage.

Where the Cross is Made like The Rope is a saga of greed and insanity. There are other similarities between the two plays. Captain Isaiah

Bartlett is obsessed, like Abraham Bentley, with the idea that he knows the location of the hidden treasure and that Mary Allen will come back with it. Bartlett also has a son Nat and a daughter Sue who is a widow. Nat, like Luke, tries to betray his father. He holds two grudges against his father. While the first one in relation to "the damned sea he forced me on as a boy — the sea that robbed me of my arm. . . ." ³⁰, the second one originates from ". . . his mad game with me — whispering dreams in my ear. . . . taught me to wait and hope with him . . . made me doubt my brain. . . ." ³¹

Where the Cross is Made is ultimately the destiny of Nat. He is a weak personality compared to his father whose ". . . face is more stern and formidable. . . ." ³² He is torn between common sense and greed — reality and wishful thinking. He expresses that — "I believe — it would be better for him — away — where he couldn't see the sea. He'll forget his mad idea of waiting for a lost ship and a treasure that never was. . . . I believe this!" ³³

The dialogue is interesting. The repetition of "I believe" signifies that he doesn't believe truly what he says. Only after a while he confesses, "when I knew it was all a dream — I couldn't kill it! . . . God forgive me, I still believe!" ³⁴ As a final effort to free himself from the spell, he sets the map on fire.

When Captain Bartlett comes, he shows striking resemblance to his son. This is a favourite trick of O'Neill to prove the genesis. As in Mourning Becomes Electra and numerous other situations, O'Neill used appearance

of his characters both as an expression of the inner self; and also a vehicle to stress home the fact of genetic transmission — of built, and of the inner guilt.

Captain Bartlett declares both Nat's belief in his dream and also inability to sustain the belief — ". . . mockin' at himself, too, for bein' a fool to believe in dreams as he calls 'em".³⁵ No doubt, Nat is a weak personality made weaker by his sudden greed. He quickly becomes hypnotised by his father's insane obsession. What follows is incredible flow of events. Both father and son are convinced of the return of Mary Allen with its crew and gold chests. Eugene O'Neill commented later about this episode " . . . an amusing experiment in treating the audience as insane. . . . " ³⁶ The ghosts of the drowned sailors enter the room with the treasure chests. Still a clever bit of dramaturgy saves the situation. The sister Sue is sane and gives a rational explanation of the illusions of son and father.

BARTLETT. Up they come! Up bullies! . . .

NAT. You here them now?

SUE. Only the rats running about. It's nothing, Nat.³⁷

Success of Eugene O'Neill rests on getting the audience on his side. The story-line was always his fortress. Those who witness the event, see it from both sides. One is with captain Bartlett and his son — because it satisfies a dream and relieves, at least temporarily, of reality and reason. The other part of mind remains rational and neutral, it enjoys the childishness of the

other mind, and with Sue provides a neutral observer of the events for the playwright. When the father dies of a heart attack and Nat solemnly decides to find " 'The treasure is buried where the cross is made,' "38 the cycle is completed. The nothingness is the final message.

A more mature Eugene later resorted to this trick again in Day's Without End. There he relies entirely on the imagination of the audience who see Loving throughout the play but also know that he is invisible to other characters and actually non-existent (as here the ghosts are to Sue and Doctor Higgins).

The possession of one's self by another is also an idea very characteristically O'Neillian. This was actually a hidden conviction of the dramatist himself. It is interesting to note that Where The Cross Is Made was written in "1918 fall": Virginia Floyd quotes from O'Neill's notebook in 1918 an idea of a "long play — Jim and self-showing influence of elder on younger brother".39 Floyd informs, "The alter ego of the hero is described in all the notes for the drama as being Mephistophelian and as having considerable influence over the weaker self."40 So repeated versions of this exorcism — father on son (where The Cross is Made), self on self (Days Without End), brother on brother (Long Day's Journey Into Night) will haunt O'Neill till the end.

The idea of pipe dream sustaining life also took their first flight from here. Here was the germination of the central theme of The Iceman Cometh :

NAT. There is no doubt for him or anyone else to cling to. She was sighted bottom up, a complete wreck

HIGGINS. And hasn't your father ever heard —

NAT. He was the first to hear, naturally. . . .

He knows, Doctor, he knows — but he won't believe. He can't — and keep living.⁴¹

Abraham Bentley keeps living in the hope that one day his prodigal son Luke will return. Isaiah Bentley lives for Mary Allen to come back. And in a dimly lit bedroom in New York city Mammy Saunders refuses to die till she meets her grandson Abe — The Dreamy Kid.

Mammy had given the name to her grandson Abe as a baby when the two sat under a willow tree and his big eyes chased "de sun flitterin' froo de grass — an' out on de water —" ⁴² No theme can be more akin to O'Neill than to examine how this dreamy kid becomes an adult gangster. However, the one-acter shows only the end where the self wins — but only at the price of death. Abe has killed a white man and is being chased by the police. Ceely Ann, his mother has called him because Mammy is dying. He comes, inspite of the risk of being followed. Irene, Abe's girl-friend comes and warns him that police has already crossed the front of the house — an escape through the back-door is still possible. But Mammy is not ready to part with her grandson and threatens him with a curse if he does so. Abe now attends the dimension of an epic hero. He sends off Irene by force. —

"(Dreamy gets on one knee beside the bed. There is a sound from the hallway as if someone had made a misstep on the stairs — then silence. Dreamy starts and half aims his gun in the direction of the door. . . .) Dey don't git de Dreamy! Not while he's 'live! Lawd Jesus, no suh!"⁴³

The Dreamy Kid is one of the best one-acters of Eugene O'Neill. The characters are alive, the setting credible and all the actions have been built up by few suggestions. There is no supernatural event taxing on viewer's imagination. There are two killings. None happens on the stage. One such has happened before — leading to the flow of events. And the other is going to happen — police gunning down Dreamy — but the actor ends just before. The viewers see both without seeing anyone.

O'Neill's sympathy with the downtrodden is evident. Dreamy remains dreamy at the end. And the gangster element implies what the society has done to him. Subtly the dramatist hints at racial injustice too. The Negro grandmother and her Abe represent one culture and the police avenging the death of a whiteman, the other. O'Neill understands both the weakness and the greatness of the blacks. Their superstitions — Dreamy truly fears as his grandmother's curse : —

"Dreamy, De game's up, I tole you (With gloomy fatalism) I s'pect it hatter be. Yes, suh. Dey'd git me in de long anyway — and wid her curse de luck'd be again me."⁴⁴ — and their inner strength. The unhappy childhood of an Irishman among the Yanks of New England had on him an indelible

impression. O'Neill felt that the racially suppressed were actually superior in their inner strength, spirituality and integrity to the brutal suppressors. This will bear fruit again in All God's Chillun Got Wings and the The Emperor Jones.

The autobiographical undercurrent in these three one-acters have drawn special attention. Whether the lost ship "Mary Allen" actually had a subconscious reference to O'Neill's mother Mary, Ellen Quinlan (as Louis Sheaffer suggests), may be a matter of conjecture, but similarity of strained relations between Abraham Bentley and Luke to that of James and Eugene cannot be overlooked. The same is true in case of Isaish and Nat. The Negro family of The Dreamy Kid testifies to O'Neill's real life experience about the blacks both in the Hell-Hole and the Greenwich Village.

O'Neill had written during this period another short play which he destroyed after its production by the Provincetown players on March 26, 1920. This was Exorcism, a direct autobiography narrating his suicide attempt. All these indicate that he was deliberately trying to reflect his inner self; of course, the critics have found many technical faults in the above plays. The characters and the setting in The Rope have been accused of lacking in life and imagination. The amateurish and forced plotting have already been referred to. Where The Cross is Made was a quick response to Provincetown's demand for play rearranging the last act of a previous work Gold. However, the central theme in the plays remained remarkably constant. There is an

ageing person, dying, waiting for a child to return which the fate won't allow to happen. Eugene would spell this nothingness more vividly in future. The death wish, one may see, is overtly expressed here, rather a little too blatant, and lacking in depth. The yearning does not have its grip. The holocaust has not enveloped the universe. More subtlety, more insight are yet to come for the consummation of O'Neill's art.

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