



Expressionist technique in the plays of Eugene O'Neill

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Abstract: Expressionism as an art form was a movement that began in Germany before World War I. It is revolt against realism, by distorting objects, exaggerating and breaking up time sequences. It is a dramatic technique which enables a dramatist to depict inner reality or the psyche of his characters. This paper tries to explore how Eugene O'Neill, one of the major American Dramatists has used expressionism in his plays with special reference to *Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*.

Key words: *Expressionism, realism, sentimentality, melodrama, inner reality, philistine.*

Eugene O'Neill is one of the greatest dramatist of America who caused the greatest revolution that led to the birth of American drama. The credit of securing international honour and recognition for American Drama also goes to him. From the beginning of his literary career he opened up new paths from the theatre of his time. When he took to writing plays, American drama was almost ailing and suffering from the disease of romance, sentimentality and melodrama. O'Neill indeed did more than any one else to destroy the stereotypes. He also tried to substitute an essentially different dramatic imagination. Sinclair Lewis has rightly opined that 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, fear and greatness. Doris V. Folk goes to the extent of observing that American Drama, in the true sense of the word, begins with Eugene O'Neill. In the earlier part of his literary career, there is much that is merely theatrical, melodramatic and purely which can be considered as conventional. Prosaic realism of John Galsworthy and other pre-war dramatists is found in these plays. From the beginning he opened up new paths from the theatre of his time. He tried to destroy the stereotypes and also

tried to substitute an essentially different dramatic imagination. He inspired us to probe into the darker immensities of the human heart. O'Neill's vision of life was basically tragic and he has chosen the human predicament as the theme of his plays and he wrote tragedies of modern life which did not follow the tradition. His tragic heroes or protagonists are all down from the humblest ranks of society. Each character has his own romantic illusion which is responsible for his or her downfall. His plays were full length productions, increasingly concerned with rejecting the philistine world of American society and business. O'Neill chose a means by which the dramatic action presented was what is sometimes referred to as Expressionism.

Expressionism as an art form was a movement that began in Germany before First World War. It was a revolt against realism. Expressionism distorted objects, exaggerations and it also tried to break up time sequences. Expressionism is less concerned with objective fact than with the external world as it appears to a troubled, sick or abnormal mind of a character.

Eugene O'Neill was very much influenced by Strindberg, who was the first dramatist to write expressionistic plays. Expressionism is a dramatic technique which enables a dramatist to depict the 'inner reality', the soul or psyche of his characters. Inner reality is given more importance than the external. The action in the play moves backward and forward without any restriction or hindrance in space and time in harmony with the thought processes of the character concerned. Sub Conscious action is given more importance and what goes on within the soul takes predominance. Dramatic sequence of events is not given importance, instead there is a concentration on the stream of consciousness. The surface of life becomes disjointed, scattered, as in a dream and this is done to suggest the inner reality which lies beneath the surface. The dramatist in the expressionist plays is not concerned with externals, he tries to explore the idea, the source of conduct. He continues this endeavor till reality becomes sub-conscious. Scenes these plays are often brief. Scenes sometimes succeed one another without time sequence. Order, unity are also not given prominence. The scenes in these plays suggest the alternative between reality and fantasy.

Giving his own views on expressionism Eugene O'Neill once remarked, "*As I understand it, expressionism tries to minimize everything on the stage that stands between the author and the audience. It strives to get the author talking directly to the audience.....The real contribution of the expressionist has been in the dynamic qualities of his plays.They express something in modern life better than did the old plays.*"

This dramatic technique is used when the dramatist aims at a probe in to the unconscious. Usually in the naturalistic or realistic plays, speech and action are given importance. They are used to given an idea of the method. But speech does not invariably reveal the working of the mind. Many a time it is used to conceal rather than reveal the thought. That is why, an expressionistic play wright depends for correct understanding of human psyche on slips of tongue, dreams and informal moments of the character. Symbols, metaphors, fables and allegories are used in order to help the audience to understand the inner working of the character. Blurred figures on the darkened stage to personify good or bad motives. Sometimes unseen voices are being heard to express the secret thoughts of the character. The expressionist uses the disconnected, distorted and fantastic form of a dream in order to approximate as closely as possible to the stream of consciousness of the given character.

The Emperor Jones and *The Hairy Ape*- these two diverse theatrical works pointing to a similar end, emphasize in style and manner to achieve a philosophic view of man. *The Emperor Jones* was the first play in which O'Neill used Expressionistic technique to express the psychological terrors and obsessions of Brutus Jones. He used this technique long before he had heard of Expressionism or had read the plays of Strindberg. From the point of view of theatrical effect, the dramatist has used dramatic monologue to dramatize psychological obsession-fear. There is no mere sound accessory, with their fog whistles, their raindrops, their whining children, and the whirr of wireless. The visions that rise before his eyes are such as fear beholds, and truer to genuine reality than would be a blank stage. There are hints of the cinema in the gradual unfolding of the past as the play progresses- a series of 'flashbacks' as it were; but this is no mere imitation of a medium; it is inherent in the character of the play. The dramatist merges symbols and psychology.

The Hairy Ape tells the story of Yank, Robert Smith, a stoker who begins as an embodiment of power and strength on an ocean liner. This play is written in eight short, abrupt scenes is an expressionistic tragic-comedy of modern industrial turbulence. O'Neill has effectively used the methods of the German Expressionists in this play. The realistic techniques have been used to serve non realistic purposes.

In an expressionistic play, minimum characters are used and this is done in order to focus more attention on the central character. The other characters are not individualized and they serve merely as a background to throw into sharp relief the central character. Thus in this play, the other stokers are merely a chorus of voices. Except Paddy and Long, other stokers are not given any names. Further, the scenes are very short and the number of scenes is cut down to a minimum. The scenes are connected logically and completeness of the realistic play is not found because of this reason. Much is left to the imagination of the audience. The connections between the scenes are not logical, they are rather emotional.

Both the plays *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape* take eight scenes for the completion of the play and it is to be noted that importance is not given to the story part or development of the plot and character. Gradual intensification of the feeling of the central character is given importance and consequently the scenes form a series in which incidents are singly displayed.

Use of Interior Monologue - the dramatist uses interior monologue in the play. He has exploited this technique to lay bare the suffering, anguished soul of Yank. Mental confusion of the central character has been skillfully rendered through this technique. The eighth scene of the play is one long monologue, the gorilla in the cage being the only conversational partner. This is an admirable study of Yank's thought processes and it aims at bringing out the disintegration of his personality. Yank sees himself as a hairy ape and addresses the Gorilla as a brother and expresses the opinion that they both belong to the same club of the Hairy Apes. He is obsessed with the idea of revenge and is no longer capable of any reasoning or rational thought. His mind has lost its balance. Yank does not belong to the beautiful world to which that Gorilla belongs. He has been rejected and thrown out by the world of man. He wants to have his revenge and he lets the gorilla out of the cage to achieve his goal. He shakes hand with Gorilla and wants to take it with him to take his revenge but Gorilla crushes him to take death. Through this episode he brings out the alienation and isolation in the common lot of man. That sense of alienation is brought out by the interior monologue technique.

Conclusion- It is to be noted that O'Neill has used expressionism on the basis of reality. The plays do not have the complete formlessness of the expressionistic plays of the contemporary German and Scandinavian dramatists. Plot and Characters are not ignored. There is realism in the characterization and setting. O'Neill in his plays has experimented with new methods and techniques. His early plays are realistic, but the plays of his middle period- *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape* reflect the expressionistic methods without completely neglecting the realism. In his later plays *Desire Under the Elms* was written in the realistic tradition. Psycho-analytical theories of Freud and Jung are used in *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Strange Interlude*. The greatness of O'Neill as a dramatist lies in the combination of realism and expressionism. Formlessness and incoherence of the extreme expressionists are not found in his plays. O'Neill has at his best a fine sense of dramatic values, and a penetrating insight into emotion. It is also obvious that his borrowing of expressionist devices was not an indiscriminate transference of ready images onto American Soil. It was also not a blind attempt to copy foreign experiments. In their application to American reality, devices discovered by the experimental theatre took a different turn or took on another meaning. He introduced new, realistic, artistic system into his plays. He changed the style of the work but not at the cost of its realistic foundations.

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