

Trajectory of exploration of self in the plays of Eugene O'Neill

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Abstract

The modern American playwright Eugene O'Neill's plays present the modern man in his varied versions ranging from a romantic dreamer to a neurotic lost in the machinations of the machine age and the one having fluid personality always in the process of reinventing himself. The present paper having traversed all the major plays of O'Neill attempts to demonstrate not only quintessential trials and tribulations of the modern man in his quest for the exploration of his real self but, more than this, it seeks to delve deep into the contemporary American psyche as well through the subtle portrayal of different shades of 'self'. The paper brings to fore a general point that in the journey called life it is pride that imprisons the free spirit of a human being and becomes the cause of his undoing i.e. hamartia of the tragedy called life. Ironically it is in this tragedy only that he explores himself and finds himself in true sense through the process of looking inside instead of looking outside, a common mistake that one tends to make. He comes to realize that man is just a speck on the infinite canvas of cosmos without any control whatsoever over himself and his destiny. But still he is given ample amount freedom to opt for certain choices which might enable him to slug it out in the battlefield of life in order to understand the basics of life. Obviously this fight or quest is doomed to be a mere mirage for self fulfillment, nevertheless it is worth pursuing as it gives the individual some meaning and significance in the beauty of 'fighting, willing and living' of this tragedy called life. The fighter peels off the masks after masks to reach the bare naked truth of his true self. So, the present paper bears significance in the light of its being a sort of documentary over life as it accords a testing ground to life as represented in the plays of O'Neill by subjecting it to certain experiments to arrive at some basic psychological truths in each individual case. Despite the tinge of pessimism embracing the researcher or any other reader for that matter along the way, he is bound to get enriched with the experiences of varied shades of life consequent upon his close shave with life as represented through a host of characters from O'Neill's plays.

Terms- tension of duality, mask, tragedy of life, realization of self

The modern American drama with Eugene O'Neill as its chief exponent is, on the one hand, is a study of the duality and tension plaguing American psyche in the contemporary America's cultural ethos and, on the other hand, the consequent quest for the exploration of the true self, if there is any, of an individual in this very environment. His drama provides endless variations of human struggle to seek harmony within the self. Whether writing expressionistic, realistic or naturalistic plays, O'Neill is relentless in pursuing the universal question of the self. Once O'Neill told his son, "You must find yourself; you've got to find

the guts in yourself to take hold of your own life. No one can do it for you and no one can help you. You have got to go alone without help or it won't mean anything to you." No wonder in his plays life and action exist in perpetual tension between the two opposite selves of the same person. The recurring theme of his plays is that we are not one but many persons. Life plays the cruel trick of forcing upon a person a mask, which others believe to be the true self while behind the mask the real person tries to emerge. O'Neill depicts the spiritual torture of a man with a tormented mind and body. In the modern age the people, in the absence of liberated mind and soul, lead a hypocritical and inauthentic life- a man whose outer life has passed in solitude haunted by the mask of others, his inner life being hounded by the mask of his own self. Thus it is a perpetual struggle between the masked and the real self.

Laying emphasis on self in play after play, O'Neill dramatizes in his plays the inner conflict arising out of the continuous tussle between contradictory forces on the mindscape of the characters under the underpinnings of platonic idealism, Freudian views on sex, the Jungian concepts of racial memory, Hindu mysticism, Nietzschean philosophy, Schopenhauer's imminent will, the postwar disillusionment and the reaction against Puritanism and middle class materialism. O'Neill may be an integrated writer, but his plays present not an integral self but the different aspects of struggle within it. In other words, his plays present modern man's problems at existential, sociological, philosophical and psychological levels.

In the beginning, O'Neill concerned himself with the illusion of the romantic dreamers and affirmed them against reality. Emphasizing the importance of dreams in life, in an interview, he remarked, "Life in itself is nothing. It is the dreams that keep us fighting, willing and living." The early one act plays of O'Neill present the image of man as a creature living in world of illusions and dreams. He is concerned with man's yearning for something beyond. Here the sailor seeks the good life on the land, on the farm even as the farmer yearning for something beyond the horizon -the sea or the faraway places. He is longing to escape from the land to the sea as well as from the sea to land. The difficulties and perils the characters are afflicted with arise from the fact that reality is at variance with the romantic conception of life held by the characters. Jack Crawford observes that O'Neill's plays reveal an excellent illusion of life. Dreaming big as they wander through the wood of the world. O'Neill's characters are bumping their heads against trees. "We are incurable romantics" O'Neill seems to say, "And good Heavens! What a tragedy it is, when a romantic collides with reality. The plays depict the conflict between the romantic self and the real self. According to Doris Alexander," O'Neill had seized upon Joseph Conrad's vision of human beings creating their own nobility against the backdrop of a vast and inscrutable mystery symbolized by the immensities of the sea and the sky". In the plays the protagonist, caught in the struggle between illusion and reality, experiences self realization when he becomes more aware of a new dimension in the midst of his struggle. Seeking his true self, man runs from one pillar to another, and his dreams not fulfilled anywhere. The dreams are defeated by aspiring for the unattainable; the higher the dream, the more difficult it is to realize it.

Michael cape in Welded ,Juan Ponce de Leon in The Fountain ,Stephen Murray in Straw, Frazer in Sevitude,Robert in Beyond the Horizon, the poet in Fog all are illusion -ridden characters. In their attempts to seek their selves, they hide from themselves and from the world. The protagonists are out of harmony with their environment; as a result they become dissociated from themselves. Unable to belong to their present, they run away from the reality of their self and are condemned to live between hope and despair. They live by illusion and die by reality. The seeds of their destruction are implanted in their dreams. Fog, a symbolic play, suggests the struggle between the two selves represented by the poet and the businessman .The businessman representing the materialistic is untouched by the others' woes, while the poet is burdened with a sense of futility of human life as a whole. The poet, the businessman and a polish peasant woman with a dead child are drifting in sea in a lifeboat. The sea is surrounded in the fog which symbolizes the fog of illusion as it prevents them from seeing the reality. Long Voyage Home is the voyage of self discovery .This play has depicted the conflict arising from man's involvement with the hostile forces of his own nature and those of the world he lives in. It is also a conflict between the harsh realities and comforting illusions. Olson, in making desperate bids to return home and to seek to establish a relationship with himself, only comes back to sea again .The long and unending journey brings not the fulfillment of the dream but frustration and death which finally leads to self realization. Victim of the inner aspiration, losing itself in muck of his own degraded appetite and sins of the world, an O'Neill's character is like the strings of a violin, giving forth music only when placed under strain. In Beyond the Horizon the man is shown as a tragic sufferer because of his romantic self refuses to live in harmony with what he is. Robert is torn between his longing to go to sea and his unfulfilled desires on the land. He seeks his self beyond the horizon. Robert seeks escape into death and hopes to find fulfillment of his dream of beauty at the moment of negation of self. Looking though superficially pessimistic, O'Neill in these plays gives his characters freedom of action and shows them making choices. Though man is lost, the hope of future makes him continue his quest. He makes a choice and his self- determined action dooms him to his endless quest, nevertheless he does not get lost in the rough weather of life and the triumph of human spirit asserts itself.

This romantic aura of adventure was dispelled in the later phase. Hairy Ape and Emperor Jones deals with the psychological and sociological implications of the machine age. Here the playwright brings in a new awareness of the social realities in the civilized world which thwarts the human spirit. The characters begin to question the romantic dream and their unrealities of society. In these plays, the protagonists in their quest for the self penetrate the ugly reality of the American scene.The fulfillment of their dreams and aspirations do not lie beyond the horizon but in the surrounding reality of society. Man is bewildered when his primitive pride and individualism are at war with the mechanistic developments of the society. Material civilization has created an atmosphere where human soul feels stifled and pines for the primitive. The Hairy Ape and The Emperor Jones project man's wish for the primitive simplicity -the pastoral dream of every civilization. These two plays "reveal man's inability to rise above his primitive nature."Here, O'Neill presents a bleak world where the baffled hairy ape in man seeks desperate salvation in an iron cage, and

a porter-turned emperor struggles towards self-realization in the jungle of his own psyche. They are symbols of protest against modern civilization, which divorces man from humanity. The plays establish harmony with the society when man comes back to himself. In The Emperor Jones, O'Neill incarnates the intractability of the conflict between an individual and a world hostile to him. For Bhagat S. Goyal, O'Neill dwells here on "man's disintegration in the world of bewildering contradictions, the loneliness and failure of modern white civilization to help him achieve a sense of identity and fulfillment..." By dint of unscrupulousness and ingenuity Brutus Jones, a porter and murderer, manages to become an emperor on an island in the West Indies but later plans to fight from the forest with five ordinary bullets for his enemies and one silver one for himself when threatened by a revolution there. Unknown fears and terror emerge from the shady forests and power of blackness haunts him, injuring his pride and crippling his will; he descends through the successive levels of the super ego, ego as personal unconscious until he descends to darkling maelstrom or radical unconsciousness with atavistic direction. Through visions, Jones have revealed the inner springs of his nature as they come in conflict with his assumed outward character. Brutus Jones gradually strips off the outward artificiality. He achieves his fundamental self at the time of his death from which he had been separated for long by his pride and by his self image. O'Neill shatters the external reality as it is perceived by the unconscious mind of Jones and exposes the inner reality of the sub-conscious mind, thus revealing his real self.

The Hairy Ape like The Emperor Jones presents the inner conflict of man who is trying to emerge from a brutal state of existence. In this play, O'Neill reveals one of the anxieties that haunted him throughout his life- the fear of rejection, of not belonging. Yank, the hero, who lives in self-glorification, completely accepts the industrialized society by identifying himself with the steel. He sees himself as the "first cause, a prime mover in a purposeful universe". His self image and pride are destroyed by Mildred who calls him a "filthy beast". His disillusionment collapses when he discovers that he is merely the helpless instrument of other forces, only a manipulated tool of the materialists. He moves towards becoming a man, but in the process inevitably destroys himself. Yank, by losing his sense of belonging, eventually becomes an animal. Yank's movement from the cage and hell of the stock hole to the actual cage is the journey of man seeking to belong somewhere. Yank experiences a psychological death at the hands of civilized world and a physical death at the hands of gorilla. He is caught between two worlds, the world of industrialized society and the world of primitivism. Yank's questions of what he is, where he is and why he is way he is are the questions that man has always asked in his quest for self-realization. The playwright seems to say that a man finds his true self only when his false image is shattered and his pride and ego are replaced by self hatred and sense of guilt. The process of self-realization begins when the self comes into conflict with the outside forces of the society or civilization.

The continuing objective of O'Neill's dramatic art remains the discovery of some mysterious equation between that might restore for him the once glorious but now shattered harmony between man and nature, man and man, the life force and ego. While presenting the

divided self in an individual, O'Neill was greatly influenced by Nietzsche's dichotomy of Apollo and Dionysus. In The Great God Brown O'Neill has tried to probe into the problem of man's search for inner unity and harmony. In Dion Anthony, the creative pagan acceptance of life is in conflict with the life denying spirit of Christianity. His personality changes under the strain of the conflict between the self indulgent outer nature and his self renouncing inner nature, two selves separated by the masks. When Billy Brown, the visionless demigod of new materialistic myth, assumes the mask of the dad Dion, he assumes his personality too. He keeps on switching from his own self to Dion's self. The disintegration of self continues and in the process he sheds his own self. The basic conflict in the play is between the two selves, represented in Dion's aspirations religious and artistic, the other represented in the doctrine of success in a materialistic world. The change of mask from Pan to Mephistopheles causes the complete disintegration of his personality. As he attempts to commit himself fully to life, he begins to withdraw from life. Dion's withdrawal from life is anti-Dionysian. Similarly Billy does not absorb the Apollonian because he is subdued. Unable to achieve Dion's self completely, he destroys his own self. One belongs neither here nor there and the result is the disintegration of the personality. In Great God Brown modern man's neurotic sensibility results from the disintegration of personality under the stress of a widening gulf between the spiritual and social values of life. The urge towards artistic creation is the urge towards self-fulfillment but the play with theological scheme tells that damned to suffering, men find a promise of life in the eternal Becoming. Lazarus in Lazarus Laughed says that it lies within man to save himself by converting his insignificant 'Being' into a significant 'Becoming'. O'Neill tries here to replace modern man's loss of faith in God and religion by Nietzschean philosophy. The play involves the Dionysian state of ecstasy, where man by exercising his free will, moves towards self-transcendence. Theme of the play is affirmation of life and denial of death. O'Neill was of the view that the Nietzschean philosophy enshrined in Thus Spake Zarathustra and The Birth of Tragedy could provide the answer to the alienated modern man's problem of identity. Lazarus is a Nietzschean superman. He argues that man, by willing his annihilation, must co-operate with the divine plan. If man can identify himself with universe and the universe with himself, he would find harmony and cease to be lonely. Lazarus's self is divided by the dual role of savior and the tragic hero. The struggle is between his Apollonian and Dionysian impulses, the savior and the tragic hero. He fights with the primary inhibiting forces of fear and pride, represented by Caligula, Tiberius whom he meets in Rome. His knowledge of death teaches him the meaning of life. He says "But there is no death, no fear of loneliness; there is only God's Eternal Laughter. His laughter flows into lonely heart. Lazarus is the only unmasked character because he has become integrated complete human being, who does not need to hide behind a mask. Other characters like Caligula, Pompeian and Tiberius are split personalities who fear not only death but life as well. Chabrowe explains that Lazarus is the incarnation of the vision of Zarathustra. He sums up 'like Zarathustra, he gives birth to a new and higher form of being out of himself. While the Hairy Ape sank too low in striving to belong, Lazarus soars too high. Using the pagan theme of becoming, O'Neill explores the American experience. The play lacks a formal theology but propounds a faith for the 20th century American. Lazarus

offers an answer to a civilization that is tottering on the very brink of its grave., O'Neill rebels against the narrow limitations of a religion of denial and attempts to propound a line of thinking, where man is free from the cross of fear and any kind of masks whatsoever, that enables him to discover himself in the very acceptance of life as it comes and in its participation and fulfillment.

The trajectory unfolding in the process of exploration of self in O'Neill's plays moves from the metaphysical level to the psychological level and from Nietzsche to Jung through Freud. In the plays like Desire Under the Elms, Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra, O'Neill presents the conflicting tides in the soul of man. O'Neill projected the inner stresses against the background of the rigid puritanical codes. The plays depict a dichotomy between sex and love, which divides the self. One can find the true self only when the two are blended. The inner division of self is caused by the fixations and suppressions. The characters are victimized by the tyranny of Puritanism because their natural sexual urges are repressed under the false and hypocritical codes of morality. In Desire under the Elms, the three main characters Eben, Abbie and Ephraim are trapped not only by circumstances but also psychologically. Their self can tear the psychological chains only by yielding to passion. The self wanders between lust and love. Eben is engaged in Oedipal conflict with his tyrannical father. In trying to avenge his dead mother on his father's third wife, he develops incestuous relationship with her. He submits to her charm but not without an inner struggle. Freudian patterns appear in his love for Abbie and also in his seeking the prostitute Min. Eben in his need to belong and in his quest for self seeks identification with nature. He too like his father has lust for land in the beginning but the play later reveals his need to seek his self in the security of his mother's love and in his identification with the farm. Abbie's response to nature echoes Eben's passion for nature. The two elms in a way suggest the conflict between Eben's two selves or two masks -one proud and paternal, the other submissive and maternal. There lies the contrast between natural human passions and the artificial and false moral principles in him. Abie like Eben sought security but became tragically involved with him. Her unsuppressed hunger for love turned into passion. She symbolizes love, creativity and fertility. Her true self emerges in her tragedy when, in the act of self-denial, she murders her child to prove her love. Eben becomes his true self when he casts off the pride and ego of his father but Ephraim is always locked in his pride and ego. His loneliness at the farm compelled him to take to different women but remained lost and lonely with them. Through the depiction of a range of sins and crimes like greed, lechery, incest, adultery, revenge, infanticide etc. and consequent feelings of guilt and self-hatred it is made clear that O'Neill, like Freud, believed that the forces of evil and darkness reside in man's soul. The play also reveals Jungian influence while interpreting the privation of soul in terms of sin and guilt. But O'Neill transcends both Freud and Jung. His plays are about awareness rather than about consciousness. It is not the unconsciousness but the will to live which guides the characters in his plays. His characters are not the victims of a blind determinism but caught in the web of their own willful desires as well as in the inertia of circumstances. As summed up by Morris Freedman, " Their play is a testimony finally to the

endurance, the beauty, the brute wisdom of sheer human strength. His characters seek to find themselves in a mysterious world while still retaining their identity, while still assimilating their transgressions " Like Desire, Strange Interludes shows that the suppression of the basic urges of life leads to tragic consequences and the annihilating forces of the dead past threaten the very existence of human beings and offer nothing but escape from reality. Nina, the protagonist of play, is in grip of guilt and self hatred after having tried to find her lost self in promiscuity after the death of her lover Gordon whom she was prevented from marrying to by her egoistic and self-centered father. The romantic ideal of love has destructive influence on her: "her prepossession of an ideal which being unattainable results in her feeling emptiness in her relationship with all men". The heroine ultimately, "tortured by the thoughts of encroaching old age and death, withdraws into a state of suspended animation peaceful dreaming and drifting". Unable to find something to belong to, she shrinks into futile insignificance. In fact, none in the play achieves self-realization. Nina has no life beyond the men and the men are defined only in relation to Nina. In Mourning Becomes Electra, O'Neill brings the evils of Puritanism and the evils of war in contrast with man's search for roots and his craving for love and beauty. This psychological drama based on the Greek legend justifies the dark impulses within human mind. The Mannon family represents life with its necessity for human relationship. Because of their Freudian impulses and Puritan heritage the Mannons can have no access to this 'hypothetical self'. Orin's oedipal desire for incestuous relationship with Lavinia is a longing to return to his mother who Lavinia resembles. He says, "can't you see i am now in Father's place and you're e Mother?:". In order to escape the reality of their lives, everyone yearns for release in love and death. Ezra Mannon tells his wife, "All victory ends in the defeat of death." They seek love and freedom on the island. Adam and Christine go there in search of love; Orin and Lavinia go there in search of freedom from their sin and guilt. Unable to find security they turn to past. Orin says that in the war he was murdering the same man over and over again and that he would find that that man was really himself. Fumbling to find himself, he identifies himself with Brant he had killed. He feels that the man's face changed into that of his father and finally his own. His self-destruction is his self-discovery. On the other hand, Lavinia does not want to escape into death but accepts life in death. Her final return to a life of perpetual frustrations within the walls of the family shows her heroic self recognition. He explores self in the murky depths of character and in the strained and divided psyche. Mourning Becomes Electra is an attempt at creating an equivalent of the Greek tragedy. There is no tragic explanation, no imposed affirmation but O'Neill depicts all the conflicting passions man is capable of in their archetypal intensity. The plays of O'Neill are an attempt at explaining that man is ultimately a free and responsible agent who brings most of his grief upon himself through pride. The very pride, which is the source of his aspiration and enables him to transcend many of his limitations, proves also the source of his destruction when it ignores these limitations. To recreate such a Greek spirit in modern life was the goal that O'Neill set for himself. But as a twentieth century man, he interpreted the ancient terms and symbols in the language of psychoanalysis. The tragic stature of his heroes depends on the qualities which they exhibit in the course of their conflict. Through his plays, O'Neill has

tried to prove that the real self that we are searching for lies not in the outside forces but within.

In his last plays O'Neill dramatized his private agony. David Daiches has correctly observed that O'Neill created dramas out of his own bitter sense of inadequacy and the resultant frustration when pitched against the sense of inevitable ultimate reality while considering himself a mere human, cursed and trapped. In the plays like The Iceman Cometh, O'Neill intensified the basic truths of self without adding even the slightest touch of romanticism. The characters feel an urgent need to recapture their lost sense of belonging or their earlier innocence in order to achieve harmony with their real selves. Mary Tyrone in Long Day's Journey into Night regresses to the time when she still lived a protected convented life away from the turmoil of domesticity. She is the spokesman of the entire family, in which each one is groping for the truth himself, turns back to some part of his past. The last plays are some kind of unmasking of the author himself. O'Neill's plays present ultimate realization in one's self after experiencing a dose of self proclaimed social alienation. His characters seek to return to innocence, to a state where there is no knowledge of sin and man is not tormented by hate, greed, power, lust and pride. The protagonists in early plays seek their self on the sea and on the land. Their romantic idealism refuses to accept the reality of self. Past is a refuse for many. Nina in Strange Interlude decides to return to the memories of childhood in her father's home; Jones' circular movements in Emperor Jones brings him back to his racial childhood, Jone loving in Days Without End reverts to his childhood faith in the catholic church; Dion in the Great God Brown is his true self in the lap of Mother Earth, Cybel; and in Moon for the Misbegotten, Jamie experiences the momentary self fulfillment in the night spent with Josie. Thus they all seek freedom from guilt and hatred so that so that they can find their true identity.

While working out the duality and complexity of self, O'Neill was led deeper and deeper into despair. While the religious critics find him insufficiently spiritual, the Marxists find him too metaphysical but nobody denies the inherent pessimism in his plays. Man emerges as a pitiable creature yearning for his lost self and clinging to his self delusions and pipe dreams. In the words of Lois Broussard, "O'Neill's men and women are essentially naked souls forked radishes trying to be God, helpless Lear's exposed to the thunder of high heaven and the pitiless rain of God". O'Neill's plays are parables of man's plight, his shipwrecked existence. Man is seen afloat on the sea of life awaiting death. The fear of life in loneliness results in an increase of his latent instinct and need for self delusion.

The American literature portrays the negative aspect of the quest born of disillusionment with lofty ideals. In drama this aspect is more prominent. In the plays of O'Neill, the quest for self never ends. Although it leans more towards hope than despair, it certainly affirms the tragic dignity of man in pursuing his quest. His study of the human situation led him to believe that notwithstanding a few millennia of civilization and culture, man is still very much a creature of his emotions. The twentieth century literature portrays man as devoid of the deeper springs of human emotions and of primitive impulses and

passions. To O'Neill, man is as much an emotional complex today as he was in the past. Existence devoid of passion is no existence at all. To exist means to stand out and to assert one's personality in moments of passionate intensity. O'Neill seems to say that man can discover the truth about himself by making choices in such moments. The occasion of choices arises because man is confronted with the objective uncertainties of life. By making the decisions and by shouldering the responsibility, he can find himself. The individual has significance and duration, existence has meaning even if the body perishes, soul is immortal –man's eternal being is maintained for ever.

No doubt the characters of O'Neill are afflicted, yet the spirit of man, while perceiving no meaning in the outward world, perceives all meaning in the self. Death, frustration, Despair and hopelessness bring out the truth of existence and the quintessential struggle finds its presence throughout. A person may not know his ultimate destination and yet find fulfillment in the very process of 'fighting, willing and living'. The struggle and defeat bring out the inner significance and thus pave the way to regain his self. Here is the tragic predicament of man who struggles for an understanding and justification of himself in a mysterious and even inimical universe. The struggle is important because, as O'Neill wrote to Lawrence Langer,

“...There are moments in it that suddenly strip the secret soul of a man stark naked, not with cruelty or moral superiority but with an understanding and compassion which sees him as a victim of the ironies of life and of himself. These moments are to me the depth of tragedy, with nothing more than that can possibly be said”.

O'Neill is primarily an artist, not a social and religious proselyte or even a philosopher of ideas. His drama as all true art addresses the totality of human existence and in the process takes all human knowledge, all human experience and all human vision to be its legitimate province. With O'Neill modern American drama has attempted to illuminate as well as reflect upon the conditions and predicament of man groping in the areas of darkness and tension, the modern consciousness, and his underlying need to find himself. O'Neill explored the American cultural and social ethos as it were a mine of typical American characters and their conflicts which continue to enrich and inspire the American dramatists to this day. The major American dramatists like Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Thornton Wilder, Edward Albee and many others, following the tradition of O'Neill, reveal their understanding of human situation. While pointing to the helplessness of modern man, they also describe the search for identity as the goal of man. While presenting the terrible negativity of society, the self is presented as the redeemer and the transformer also when the need arises. Thus fuller realization of life lies in the actual pursuit and hope of achieving the true self with all out efforts while gathering all the faculties of life and at the same time accepting the inadequacy of not getting the final achievement which remains as elusive and inaccessible as a mirage but ultimate beauty of dramatic art lies in presenting

different selves fighting their own battles and reaching self carved truths on the basis their present and past.

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