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Eugene O'Neill's Portrayal of Turbulent Familial Relationships - A Re-examination of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *Desire Under the Elms*, and *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

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Abstract

This paper examines the chaotic relationship among the characters of the family members that Eugene O'Neill depicts in the three plays *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *Desire Under the Elms*, and *Long Day's Journey into Night*. An attempt is made to illustrate that the author is never in sync with the kinfolk characters elucidated in his plays. Relationships like between a father and a child, between a husband and a wife, or between a mother and a child, or those between siblings are taken up for analysis. Characters that he portrays have never managed to fit harmoniously in a family setting. The present paper indicates that one of the contributing factor for such an overtone is the dysfunctionality of the author's own family background. During his childhood, O'Neill had an extremely turbulent life, which was followed by a troubled marriage and a stormy relationship with his children. The paper intends to scrutinize the unusual and abnormal interactions among his family members. Additionally, the paper explores the way O'Neill uses the Greek myth of fate and tragedy to create psychological fate in his dramas that manifests itself in the lives and nuances of all family members in an impactful way. Therefore, the circumstances are far beyond the dominance of his dramatic characters depicted in a familial setup.

Key Words: Eugene O'Neill, Family, conflict, characters, tragedy.

Introduction:

Throughout the three plays, family complexities are exemplified through extreme psychological elements such as depression, repression, love, and hatred. Each character in the Author's plays, however introspective, is connected in some way to his own personal plight.

Plays by the O'Neill expose human beings to their bare psychology; Consequently, in most of the dramas, the author has depicted intense family-related turmoil's among its members. These turmoil's offer the opportunity for larger conflicts which illustrate the rift between conscious intellect and subconscious desires. The present paper focuses on his three plays, *Desire under the Elms*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and *Long Day's Journey into Night* which demonstrates that conflict between love and hate is evident in all his characters, revolving around a family. According to O'Neill's interpretation of the character, love cannot be in any way characterized as unconditional or pure. The workings of a bare human mind consciously or unconsciously depict the lecherous nature of human traits. Likewise, several parameters of O'Neill's life are evaluated and their juxtaposition with his own character is attempted.

Throughout his work, the author was synchronized with tragedies. Hence, he was very much inspired by the Greek Tragedy. It would be fair to say that most of his characters are a contemporary version of the ancient Greek tragedy. In O'Neill's *oeuvre*, fate plays a pivotal role in exposing the way trauma affects family members without letting them escape. Additionally, parallels can be drawn between these family dramas and Greek mythology.

He was influenced by Nietzschean ideas, including Nihilism, due to his predilection for revealing the hidden features of the human psyche. As a young man, he was greatly influenced by the texts of Zarathustra and Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. The postulates of Freudian and Jungian theories of the Conscious and Subconscious mind also influenced the author greatly. Consciously or subconsciously, his works portray Electra and Oedipus complexes intertwined into his characters.

Dr. Sabreen Fathima

About the Author

As the only American playwright to have won a Nobel Prize for literature and four Pulitzer Prize for drama, O'Neill is regarded as the father of American literature. His work introduced psychological realism and social realism to American theatre; he was one of the earliest American-language artists and one of the first to emphasize on characters who were perceived by society as undesirable. O'Neill is notable as the first US playwright to portray American drama in an aesthetic and intellectual form, a far cry from the melodrama and farce that characterized Western theatre prior to his arrival. He was away from superficiality and shallowness. Of more than 50 completed plays, O'Neill wrote just one notable comedy, *Ah, Wilderness!* (1933), which also centres around drunkenness, prostitution, revenge, and repressed desire. The vast majority of O'Neill's plays deal with drunkenness, prostitution, revenge, and repressed desires. *Ah! Wilderness* is the only one that manages a happy ending. O'Neill does acknowledge the possibility of forgiveness in *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1946), however, the conclusion appears to be quixotic.

His first major success was *The Emperor Jones* in 1920, which established him as a successful playwright after winning the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in his first play, *Beyond the Horizon* (1920). *The Emperor Jones* appears in Burns Mantle's collection of the best plays published between 1920 and 1921. The same year also saw the release of *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, another groundbreaking piece exploring biracial relations that frightened the public. Plays such as *Anna Christie* and *Desire under the Elms* followed in 1922, earning him another Pulitzer Prize for the former. In 1928, he won yet another Pulitzer Prize for *Strange Interlude*. Three years later O'Neill completed *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Nobel laureate for literature was awarded to him in 1936. In his final decade of creative work, from 1939 to 1943, O'Neill wrote acclaimed plays, including *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. These plays are emotionally charged, passionate and reminiscent of the friends and family members who influenced him in his artistic development. O'Neill's play *Long Day's Journey into Night* was autobiographical. It was his wish that *Long Day's Journey Into Night* should not be performed on stage until more than 25 years after his death. Nevertheless, his widow published it after he died nearly three years later. In 1957, it was produced for the first time, and was immediately recognized as a triumph, winning O'Neill his posthumous Pulitzer and helping to spur the revival of American Literature.

O'Neill's debilitated self and family background

Having a father who was also a theatre artist, O'Neill was exposed to the world of theatre and the difficulties of maintaining artistic integrity. He was sent to boarding school at an extremely young age. As he was very attached to his mother, boarding school never appealed to him. It was mutual that he disliked his teachers and his peers. No longer able to complete the course, he left Princeton University. Despite his enormous achievements, he experienced a great deal of psychological pain.

A sailing expedition and alcoholic intoxication eluded him, and he even attempted suicide. Sea voyages allowed him to escape from the shackles of reality as they took him a long way from it. A state of emotional euphoria took him in, where he could do anything he wanted. As early as 24 years old, he was already addicted to alcohol and frequented brothels.

Drug abuse was a part of his mother's life. Because Ella was in great pain during Eugene's birth, Eugene's father James, by default employed morphine to minimise her pain, which later led to her lifelong addiction, rather than seeking an expensive treatment to ease Ella's suffering. He always blamed himself and from suffered massive guilt because of his mother's morphine addiction. As a result, he also felt an intense repulsion towards his father.

There was always a huge amount of high emotional expression in the marriages and his family. Having weak physical boundaries, he could easily merge with other people, which made him suffocate in relationships. The tendency to commit suicide had been present in his life for many years. The majority of Eugene's friends committed suicide. Jamie, his notorious alcohol-dependent brother, poisoned and killed himself after losing his mother and father. O'Neill attempted suicide and nearly killed himself with an overdose of Veronal. It is noteworthy that there are many deaths and suicides in his first nine plays. It is also a fact that O'Neill had long term psychotherapy. He was also diagnosed of Oedipus complex. O'Neill attempted to discharge his Oedipus complex through his wife and prostitutes.

O'Neill wanted to go beyond the realities of life, Robert Dowling in his "Critical Companion to O'Neill" quoted Bogard that Stephen Black, who was regarded as O'Neill's psychoanalytic biographer suggests that many of his dramas "reflected O'Neill's own incestuous feelings towards his mother" (363). This feeling was portrayed subconsciously in all the stated plays. "O'Neill has informed his friend Kenneth McGowan that he has been diagnosed by his Psychiatrist, Dr. G.V Hamilton as suffering from an Oedipus complex" (363)

The Emotional Turbulence that arose within O'Neill since childhood is evident of the fact that "Every Drama of O'Neill was autobiographical in nature" (Carpenter 48)

Furthermore, It was hard for O'Neill to relate to his children. Fitzgerald also said that He had a very brittle psyche including talking about suicide including two of his sons Shane and Eugene Jr committed suicide. After his daughter Oona O'Neill married Charlie Chaplin, who was 36 years older than her, he severed all ties with her. It is well noted that the author never experienced a healthy family bonding. Throughout his three plays, *Desire Under the Elms*, *Mourning becomes Electra* and *Long Day's Journey into Night* the portrayal of his dramatic characters conveys similar or in some cases more divergent family relationships.

Notorious Mother elms - *Desire Under the Elms*

"Desire Under the Elms" is about a widowed man who returns with a fresh bride, a young and beautiful Abbie. However Abbie indulges into an adulterous relationship with her step son Eben. The woman carries his child and smothers it to convince him of her love. Due to his fury and distress, Eben calls the police and confesses to being part of the infanticide. There is a great deal of dysfunction in the family and revenge and hatred is at the centre of the story. A central theme of the play is the way in which Eben is horrified by his father's puritanical attitude and how he extracts his revenge on him through a quasi-incestuous association with his father's wife. Ephraim Cabot is characterized as a man who lacks emotion. According to David W. Sievers in *Freud on Broadway: A History of Psychoanalysis and the American Drama* "O'Neill creates prototype of the primal father, hard, all powerful and ruthless" (113). The character is described in the play as a "stone". In his past life, he was very forceful on his former wives and children, who now have left him and are seeking the American dream of becoming rich. As a father, he is never emotionally connected to his sons instead he has a mechanical relationship with them. The patriarchal oppressor forced his sons to work on the farm in exchange of food and shelter. He subjected his family to severe mental and physical suffering in a merciless manner. On the other hand, Eben views his father as the sole reason for his mother's death, and he views Abbie as a means of retribution against Ephraim. The play is clearly driven by Oedipal passions. There is a clear dearth of unity or conformity of freedom between father and sons. Here, the son is perceived to be oppressed and the result of oppression is bitterness and hatred between the father and son.

A version of Nietzschean philosophy and conflict of Dionysian and Apollonian forces is adopted as an argument for the confrontation at the farm by O'Neill. In the Greek mythology, Dionysus was the God of wine, the embodiment of dreams and emotions and Apollo was the God of the sun, the expression of reason and wisdom. He had portrayed the rift between Eben and his father as Dionysus and Apollo forces battling within the universe. Eben's actions bear the attributes of Dionysus and are based on dreams and emotions, whereas Ephraim's is not entirely unambiguously Apollonian. His second marriage is not fully in line with the Apollonian philosophy. O'Neill, through his narratives, creates a myth around the Greek tragedies, and he envelops them in a backdrop of fate, 'the inscrutable force'. O'Neill himself asserted this in a letter he wrote to Barrett Clark, O'Neill quoted "perhaps I can explain the nature of my feeling for the impelling, inscrutable forces behind life which it is my ambition to at least faintly shadow at their works in my plays" (Cargill 100)

As a result of Ephraim's third marriage to a much younger woman, 35 as opposed to his age of 76, a conflict arose, further contributing to everything that happened in the family. In the play *Desire under the Elms*, O'Neill embodied the myth of the son in love with the mother and the father against the son. Horst Frenz, in his book *Eugene O'Neill*, stated that psychiatrist Philip Weissman made the interesting observation that "Desire under the Elms is an 'unconscious autobiography'" (47) and indeed O'Neill never resisted portraying his father again in his later plays.

Brietzke Zander also points out that *Desire under the Elms* is profoundly suffused with the relationship of mother and son "The sexual attraction between step – mother and step-son drives the

play, the infanticide clinches a tragic ending and the oedipal love of a son for his dead mother creates a setting for the action. Twentieth century psychology and Freud in particular influence an understanding. If not the actual writing of the play”(180).

Dissolute Daughter Electra – *Mourning Becomes Electra*

In describing the genius of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Moorton Richard says “Of all the Greek tragedies, he choose to retell the Oresteia because it has greater possibilities of revealing all the deep hidden relationships in a family than any other”(171)

Mourning Becomes Electra consists of three parts or plays, Homecoming, The Hunted, and The Haunted. 'Homecoming' is associated with Ezra Mannon, who returns from the civil war. Ezra is a judge, a General, and a successful businessman. He is an idealistic puritanical father figure. Christine, his wife, feels abandoned and neglected by him, doesn't like him anymore and has another lover. Lavinia, the daughter who has always been rejected by her mother Christine, hates her. Hatred becomes intense between Christine and Lavinia when Lavinia learns that Christine's new lover Adam Brant is the son of David, one of the Mannon's who got expelled for taking a servant's wife (Brant's mother). It is further complicated because Lavinia also loves Adam Brant since Ezra and Adam look alike.

She plot against Christine and asks her to promise that she will not see Adam Brant anymore, if Lavinia had to keep her secret. Christina breaks her promise and conspires with Adam Brant to kill Ezra. The streak of violence comes to the fore when Christine murders Ezra, and Lavinia knows her mother is a murderess and wants revenge. The Haunted involves Lavinia attempting to capture his brother Orin, who has come home to meet his mother Christine after serving in the war. She feels deeply incestuous towards her father, the father figure in her life, and her brother while abhorring her mother. When Lavinia tells Orin her mother's feelings for Adam Brant, he kills him in a fury. Christine later commits suicide when she learned about Orin's knowledge of her love affair with Brant. The Haunted deals with Lavinia's guilt. She is left alone as the only shattered Mannon after brother Orin kills himself when he finds his mother dead. Lavinia seals her house to be entombed for the rest of her life.

The relationship between husband Ezra and wife Christine is not shown in a positive light. Neglected state of Christine leads to depression followed by a repression that leads her to other tuneable options such as Adam Brant. The parents'-children's relationship is characterized by the presence of an intense state of Electra and Oedipus Complex. As a result of her complex feelings of love for her father Ezra and father life figure Adam Brant, Lavinia hates her mother and regards her as an arch rival. In a similar fashion, Orion is jealous when someone else wins his mother's love, including his father, and those feelings turn into hate when he discovers that Adam Brant has been in love with his mother.

When viewed the drama in the backdrop of Fate, it is probable to notice that the dramatist had been very continual in shaping the characters of the play, because every character in the family has been painted with a lewd and carnal trait. Doris Alexander is of the view that, while compiling the play, “O’Neill wanted to get a modern psychological approximation of the Greek sense of fate into the play” (923)

O’Neill went on to use Psychological fate as the prime principle for crafting the plot and characters of the drama. Alexander is of the notion that O’Neill had positioned psychological fate in the Puritan morality. Furthermore, O’Neill had bestowed the factor of fate in the parent- child affiliation. Hence “out of the synthesis of these two ideas, fate in the Puritan conscience, and the fate in the relationship between parent and child, O’Neill constructed his psychological fate”(Alexander, Doris 924).

It is evident that O’Neill in the play, had portrayed a family affair with its complexities in which every member is facing some conflicts with others and his own self, having failure and suffering. Hate and revenge runs into the psyche of which the family and is doomed to a ruin. Further, such hate and revenge is going about within the family's love ties.

Unending Journey -*Long Day's Journey into Night*

Long Day's Journey into Night is an autobiographical play. Eugene O'Neill depicts more than a story; he conveys a journey that a person takes in order to identify their true identity. The story takes place in a single room over a single day, and consists primarily of monologues and negative banter rather than actual movement or plot development. The family is represented by penny pincher husband James Tyrone, Mary his drug addict wife, and Jamie and Edmund their two sons. The elder son Jamie suffers from acute Oedipus complex, is desolated by his mother, spends time with concubines, and thrives on alcohol. His character is that of a misanthropic and a sarcastic boozier. Edmund Tyrone is continuously ill due to severe cold, and a later investigation reveals that his deteriorating health is caused by destructive tuberculosis. As the play progresses, the discordance and massive differences of opinion between each family member become apparent. When describing the struggles each character in the Tyrone family goes through, O'Neill illustrates how losing control of one's life leads to losing one's identity.

Throughout his life, Tyrone fought against his tough youth. While young, his father abandoned him, so he had to work hard to support his family. Tyrone was a Shakespearean actor with a promising future, but he took the chance to make easy money. By doing so, he assured his family's security, but he also lost control over his life. In exchange for a large sum of money, Tyrone had given up his love of theatre. It was in losing this love that he lost himself.

Mary is a drug addict who lives in a secluded world. With high goals in life and a strong desire to become a nun, she gives up her dream once she married Tyrone. She faces an internal conflict about her addiction and her desire to be a good mother and role model for her two sons, as she knows that she cannot give them the attention they need due to her dependence on morphine. Her discordance within herself sometimes leads to a self-conflict, requiring conflict resolution on a personal level while fighting two battles at the same time. As a result, she always escapes the real world and finds solace in her world of addiction. A psychological perception from Tyson is that "If the truth hidden by repression comes out before my conscious self in a manner I can neither disguise nor handle - then I am in crisis or trauma" (21)

This psychological entrapment of her past shows the level of regression within her mind. The sense of denial makes it even worse, compelling an individual to stress on that fact, which is not attainable, at least in reality. Edmund remarks, "Deliberately, that's the hell of it! You know something in her doesn't deliberately-to get beyond our reach, to be rid of us, to forget we're alive! It's as if, in spite of loving us, she hated us!(Long Day's Journey into Night 139).

In the relationship between husband and wife, the past traumatic experiences absolve them from the possibility of a happy future. She always blames Tyrone for the death of her son, Eugene, who was killed by measles. When Jamie has measles, she accuses her husband of deliberately going into Jamie's room and passing the disease on to him. Both the sons blame their father for administering Mary with morphine during Mary's delivery pain as a cheap solution rather than seeking the care of a qualified physician in order to mitigate her pain.

The characters of the family are all accusing each other of their problems. Among the characters, only Edmund Tyrone has some hope. In general, the psychological results are influenced by the thematic structure of the play. O'Neill first masks every character in order to conceal their truth, but then presses them to weakly exhibit their emotions in order to show their true colours. The Tyrone family remains trapped within the cage of destiny that cannot be broken out of. There is no way for the characters to escape their current predicament. While everybody recognizes this truth, the Tyrone's also know that there is very little they can do to change this situation. Apparently, there is a requirement in an emergency, but that 'something' is what neither of the Tyrone's are aware of. "It is their fight for the dream, doomed to failure for the something within" that gives tremendous significance and exaltation of O'Neill's family play, and by way of recreating struggle, O'Neill was able to face and resolve the pain of his own life" (Alexander, 68).

Conclusion

A clear conflict between the articulation of all family characters is apparent in the three plays. As it turned out, every family character presented by the author was an allegory of the author's own plight to some degree. Since O'Neill grew up in a turbulent household and his own family members suffered a lot of pain, this plays into his story. Dramatically, he tried to capture the same. It is apparent that O'Neill exposes the harsh and tragic truths of every family, as well as the hidden

truths behind their reputations. The plots of the above three dramas unravel, a combination of hatred and revenge mix with a bias for love and affection, within a family. O'Neill was suffering from an Oedipus complex and all of his characters possessed this trait to a greater extent. The author allows fate to play a pivotal role in all his dramas and in the lives of his characters. Anarchism and destruction were inevitable outcomes of the depiction of familial characters in his dramas, carved by fate.

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