

The Influence of Psychoanalysis Theory on Eugene O'Neill

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"Eugene O'Neill is one - and the most important one - of the dramatists who have made present - day tragedy possible. Without him contemporary tragedy would be virtually abandoned, deprived of force and impetus, of polemic discussions and models of realities"(Alfonso 98). In the shadow of O'Neill, tragedy had a stronghold despite the repressive presence of apathetic and phlegmatic society. Sastre Alphonso iterates that "In the shadow of Eugene O'Neill, it is possible to write a tragedy in today's world (98).

Though born into an Irish Catholic family, O'Neill (1888-1953) grew up in a world of unsolicited free will, courtesy his parents who extensively travelled, emanating a sense of solitude within the child, who every time craved for his mother's affection. He was then sent to an ascetic world, where children were rigorously governed by nuns and priests. The sense of intimacy towards his family, lead to cultivate a tendency within O'Neill, that was ought to be subjective and idiosyncratic. Black is very frank about the fact that though "Unconformity seemed to hold Eugene back, nevertheless, it was always tolerated. Long before he could have known in any disciplined way what knowledge is, he had the cast of mind that might suit a future psychoanalyst or a philosophical skeptic or a poet." (60)

The larger themes of O'Neill's work, their intensity and robustness, find magnificent reflection in the architectonic and well-pitched anatomy of his dramas. He exquisitely governs his individual carved figures as well as the Byzantine rhythms that percolate his entire work. His psychological eclipse and the convoluted concepts, both constitutional and peripheral, are conspicuously subordinated to meet, the basic rhythm of the larger image.

O'Neill had great adoration for the Ancient Greek Tragedy. The use of ancient myths was exquisitely sculpted in his dramas, which were later given a contemporary view by blending his own myth to give out a much unanticipated and real imagery of the characters and their situation psychologically. O'Neill can be categorically called as a myth maker. Mourning Becomes Electra(1931), Strange Interlude (1928), Desire under the Elms (1925), Long Day's Journey into Night (1940) to name a few can virtually be called as O'Neill's best plays, impacting psychoanalysis.

"He wrote in his " Notes and Extracts" from "a Fragmentary Diary", that it had occurred to him to write a "modern psychological Drama" using one of the old legend plots of Greek Tragedy" (qtd. Barrett, 128).

O'Neill as a dramatist was more interested in divulging the interior working of the human psyche. Tragedy ran within his blood. The characters spoke his feelings and dialogues were nothing but the depiction

of discordance within his own psyche. His attachment towards his mother was very intense. Later he was diagnosed with acute Oedipal conflict by his own psychiatrist friend. Long Day's Journey into Night was his award winning posthumous autobiographical drama, which was very close to his heart, dedicated to his third wife Carlotta, as every character was deeply inspired and driven by his own family.

Robert Dowling in his Critical Companion to Eugene O'Neill quoted Bogard, that Stephen Black, regarded as O'Neill's psychoanalytic Biographer suggests that many of his dramas "reflected O'Neill's own incestuous feelings toward his mother"(363) and also O'Neill had "informed his friend Kenneth MacGowen that he had been diagnosed by his Psychiatrist, Dr. G.V Hamilton as Suffering from an Oedipus Complex"(363)

Egil Tornqvist in his Eugene O'Neill: A Playwrights Theatre, states that O'Neill "underwent psychoanalysis for a period of six-weeks, after which he learned that he was suffering from unresolved Oedipus Complex" (153). The concepts of analysis in O'Neill's dramas are a reflection of his own experiences of life. Throughout his dramas, we can see the strong backing of mental analysis through dialogues, characterization's and psychoanalysis bring out the concealed images of the human psyche. According to Sievers "It is only after O'Neill underwent psychoanalysis in 1927, that his most mature and most Freudian plays were written, Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra."(132)

"When O'Neill brought his most mature psychoanalytic powers to bear, the results were the masterpieces of the twentieth-century drama -Desire Under the Elms, Strange Interlude, Mourning Becomes Electra" (Sievers 450).

Frederick Carpenter states that, "these psychiatric interviews of O'Neill served both to clarify some of his own problems and two interests him more deeply in Freudian psychology, and this interest found dramatic expression in Strange Interlude,"(33) which O'Neill compiled immediately after. This play, certainly can be regarded, the most consciously psychological of all says Carpenter. Yet even in it the elemental impassioned experiences, characterizations, and the psychological comprehensions were taken from the authors own previous experience and observation more than from bare Freudian concept. "His extraordinarily intense personal experiences and his extraordinarily acute sympathy with the emotional problems of all people contributed more to his tragic psychology than did Freudian theory. He was not being pretentious when he wrote earlier of "my own experience with hidden motives"(carpenter Frederick. 48)

If it can be thought, that all of O'Neill's dramatic art was autobiographical, for it was directed towards his apperception of his personal life and of his essential nature, the factual sensibility would be a bit different, for his unresolved inner disputes, which disturbed him

throughout his life, stimulated his perceptibility to dramatize the conflicts of all men, and eventually to clarify his own.

O'Neill affirmed his enthusiasm for Carl Jung. "Some of his suggestions I find extraordinarily illuminating in the light of my own experience with hidden motives"(qtd Carpenter. 47, 48). He particularly appreciated Jung's theory of the "collective unconscious ", and of the archetypal patterns and myths which advanced conscious apprehensions and literary creation. His thoughts and emotions were very profound. The emotional turbulence that arose within "O'Neill since childhood, encapsulated his conscious and even subconscious thoughts. Every drama of O'Neill was autobiographical in nature."(Carpenter, 48)

As early as 1922, O'Neill used his theory to explain his preference for emotion over conscious thought: "Our emotions... are the result not only of our individual experience, but of the experiences of the human race back through the ages"(qtd. Carpenter, 48). Long Day's Journey into Night showcased intense psychological action to the greatest magnitude.

In an interview published in 1922, O'Neill asserted,

"Our emotions are a better guide than our thoughts, our emotions are instinctive. They are the result not only of our individual experiences, but of the experiences of the whole human race, through the ages, they are deep undercurrent, whereas our thoughts are often only the small individual surface reactions. Truth usually goes deep. So it reaches you through your emotion". (Qtd. Carpenter 175)

In terms of psychoanalysis, says Richard Morton Jr, O'Neill sights the adventure to the interior as an unmasking. Yet the psyche itself, it appears, is composed of masks. In other words, although O'Neill articulation of psychoanalysis is nothing but an unmasking, and such a process itself can lead only in the discovery of more masks. "On this view, O'Neill seems to constitute the self as structured like an onion. Mask after mask might be removed, but underneath would lie only other masks and, ultimately: nothing, horror vacui. (58)

"Among the psychoanalytic leitmotifs which recur throughout his work, those which derive from Jung include the concept of the mask, the Earth-Mother, regression to the racial unconscious, and escape to the South Sea Islands as a form of regression". (Sievers. 132). There were varied concepts which he borrowed from Freud, but those were nothing less than the reflection of his own family. "From Freud seem to have come O'Neill's primal father and passive-dependent, hating sons, the theme of sexual denial and frustration, the discrepancy between the ego ideal and outer reality, the compulsion to degrade love, the Electra relationship, death wishes, latent homosexuality, guilt feelings, and the duality of sensual and tender love." (Sievers 132)

"O'Neill's finest work -- if not the masterpieces of the modern American drama--may very likely prove to be those plays in which his psychoanalytic insights were deepest and his mastery of form greatest: *Desire Under the Elms*, *Strange Interlude*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*" (Sievers 133).

Throughout his work, discrete as are his types, characters and settings, a distinguished realization transfuse his thoughts: the apprehension of the duality of the nature that the man poses. In his earlier plays it seems to be reflex, the instinctive assertion of his own psyche and environment. However, psychologists were examining varied attributes of human nature and analyzing the association between man's interpretation of self-reasoning and the subjacent tendencies that are the adversary of his peace. The dramatist started to examine this conflict more cautiously. "In *Strange Interlude* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Eugene O'Neill studies women of a neurasthenic, self-tormented and rather repellent type, shows them lost in the waste of their own barren passions, drowning in misery and despair." (Macardle Dorothy 56)

Women were the *prima facie* of his dramas. The complexity within every woman protagonist constituted the central theme of his story. O'Neill had walked the aisle three times in his life, but he was never literally happy with his marital relationship until his third wife Charlotta entered his life, every woman that he was knitted to in his marital association, he would search for his surrogate mother, he was even found telling Charlotta, "you're my mama now". (Lahr. *London Review of books*). Such was the unresolved Oedipal conflict that the dramatist was afflicted with.

In compiling the character of Nina in *Strange interlude*,

Eugene quoted "I have got hold of the right method of doing *Strange Interlude* when I come to it"(qtd. Black 336). He apparently meant the idea to reveal characters themselves by free associating aloud to the audience. He had been using psychoanalytic ideas and themes for his plays and now began applying the methods and processes of the discipline, Says Black. (336)

His spell upon his contemporaries was invaluable. From Owen Davis, with his generally frivolous dabbling in psychoanalysis, to the strong socio-psychological plays of Elmer Rice and John Howard Lawson, an entire generation of young American playwrights adopted Freudian insights in an assortment of ways and with original variations in shape. Some of the most sensitive writers of this group have been lost -- a few, like Sidney Howard and Philip Barry by death, and others, like Martin Flavin, Dan Totheroh, Lynn Riggs and John Steinbeck to other forms of literary endeavor. Next to O'Neill, Philip Barry, profoundly seems to have fulfilled, the implications of psychoanalysis and to have articulated them in individualistically experienced emotion. Reminiscing the past in order to re-analyze it and liberate oneself of its shackles was

Barry's most persistent theme, resulting in at least one great play, *Hotel Universe*, and several others.

By the thirties there were a substantial number of somber artists engaging in American drama and emulating a depth of insight, as a result Freud was accessible only to a Sophocles or a Shakespeare. To some extent by, Robert Sherwood, Thornton Wilder and Paul Green, Women play a significant role in the entire psychological dynamism - from which they had acquired much of their new independence in the works of Susan Glaspell, Rose Franken, Sophie Treadwell, Mary Chase, and Lillian Hellman (to name a few)

By the forties, the world of drama had shown its aptitude to probe intensely into the life of the child, the adolescent, the soldier, the psychotic, the criminal, and even the homosexual. In a war-torn world with few residual standards, derangement could for the first time be looked with a new perforation into cause-and-effect. The theatre became once again a place for psychological illumination.

Next in line with the concept of the Oedipus complex, the psychoanalytic concept, found a stronghold, most often in the drama of the twenties due to its intense theme of sexual repression and disgruntlement. Youth was predisposed to psychoanalysis as a justification for refractoriness from the conventional axioms of their parents. "With flasks on their hips and words like 'inhibited' and 'suppressed' on their lips, the younger generation was depicted as violating the pre-war moral codes in the name of self-expression and individual freedom." (Sievers. 79)

The works of Eugene O'Neill are very complex, yet they are the greatest impression of twentieth century drama. They reach out to the pinnacles of contemporary art otherwise obfuscated by fog and clouds. In the greatness of O'Neill's characters lies in this very fact: that they are too compounded, too intricate with the crosscurrents of life to be purely one thing or the other. Their contention gives them a quality which exhilarated fortitude in their character, assigns the reader's sympathy and comprehension in a manner that no consistent and unified personalities would ever could have. His characters live in two worlds: one, the external world of physical reality, the other, a world of malcontents and concupiscent ambitions. This latter world is the one which the dreamer urges for with all the pent-up powers of his existence. To this world he will surrender all that life has given him, for there is nothing in life that for a moment is commensurable to the demonstrable reality of his dream.

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