

The Theme of Spiritual Chaos in *Lazarus Laughed*

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ABSTRACT

O'Neill has depicted that contemporary Americans lack a formal theology resulting in spiritual chaos in them in almost all his plays. In *Lazarus Laughed*, he shows this by placing the action of this play in history. He preaches his gospel that spiritual peace would come to contemporary man only when he starts believing in God or life force or love. *Lazarus laughed* showing how faith in something is essential to counter the effects of fear, loneliness, and death as these are all products of false illusions.

KEYWORDS

Spiritual Chaos; *Lazarus Laughed*; Eugene O'Neill.

Lazarus Laughed is unique among O'Neill's dramas. In it, O'Neill preached through Lazarus and hoped his audience would be sufficiently roused to accept a faith for twentieth-century America, as contemporary America lacks a formal theology man might accept, leading to spiritual chaos in them. In this play, he preaches his gospel that spiritual peace would come to contemporary man only when he starts believing in God or life force or love. O'Neill used all the experimental techniques, which he had earlier developed to implement in his "theatre of tomorrow." (Frederic I. Carpenter, 1979, 114) *Lazarus laughed* is a new kind of drama. It is not a tragedy yet its story is tragic. It is neither realistic nor naturalistic. The dramatist wanted this play to appeal to the imagination. That's why O'Neill called his work a "Play of the imaginative theater." (Barrett H. Clark, 1967, 117) Consequently, it has always seemed unsuitable for commercial theatre. Its most effective theatre is the

reader's mind. It was first produced by a company of non-professional players under the direction of Gilmor Brown in 1928 and has not yet been professionally acted. To most followers of O'Neill, this work is known only in published form. *Lazarus Laughed* is all about the elucidation of a viewpoint of spiritual peace in life and death.

Lazarus Laughed is Christian in origin. The very title *Lazarus Laughed* was chosen to contrast with the shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept" (Eugene O'Neill, *Lazarus Laughed*, 275) and these are the first two words spoken in O'Neill's play. While the character of Lazarus as well as the spiritual life he lives is wholly the conception of O'Neill. The actual story of the raising of Lazarus is told very briefly in the Bible. We are more concerned with the idea and it has hardly any plot yet this powerfully grips its reader. O'Neill himself said that the play "has no plot of any sort as one knows the plot." (Arthur and Barbara Gelb, 1987, 601) As in Greek

tragedies, the playwright had made use of chorus on a very large scale in this play and its aural power tries to convince his followers and enemies of what is said by Lazarus through its massed power. O'Neill told Barrett H. Clark that he thought *Lazarus Laughed* was the:

Most successful thing I ever did. I think I've got it just right. It is, from my viewpoint. It's in seven scenes, and all the characters wear masks. And here I've used them right ... In *Lazarus* I believe I've managed the problem of big crowds, better than crowds are usually worked in plays. It's never quite right. My Jews all wear Jewish masks and it's the same with the Greeks and Romans... I also have a chorus of seven, who chant together, emphasizing and 'pointing' the action throughout. Then there are other new stunts. (Barrett H. Clark, 1967, 116-117)

Like Greek tragedies, through the chorus, we come to know that the dead man, Lazarus, has been raised from the dead after Jesus has been crucified and how he has become a prophet to the living, who is dead and suffering from spiritual chaos and fear. The plot moves from Judea to ancient Greece, and finally to Rome. This play, while advocating the philosophy of Lazarus that "He who believeth, shall never die!" (*LL*, 275) simultaneously shows the spiritual chaos and deep fear in him, his followers, and his enemies. To the present day man, O'Neill through *Lazarus Laughed* demonstrates that faith in something is essential for the presence of peace else a man will suffer from pain, fear, loneliness, and death which are all products of man's illusions regarding the real nature of life. Enemies of Lazarus, Tiberius, and Caligula (though part of a historical-theological tale developed by O'Neill in this play) seem to be the symbols of modern man who not

only believes in his great strength and power like Yank but also suffers from the same modern diseases like loneliness and fear due to lack of faith in the almighty. So, this play through its historical setting conveys to the contemporary man to once again believe in God or love for his mental peace.

The first scene in Act One depicts the reappearance of Lazarus among his family members and neighbours, to whom he preaches the new gospel "there is no death!" (*LL*, 280) The Second scene develops the conflict between his Christian followers and the Orthodox. Act two moves to Athens, where Lazarus is hailed as the new incarnation of the God Dionysus. Then the second scene moves to Rome, where he proclaims his new gospel to the Senators and Legionnaires. Acts three and four finally focus on the personal struggle between the faith of Lazarus and the cynical disbelief due to trust in false gods like materialism and the power of the state of Tiberius and Caligula, by whom he is finally burned at the stake at dawn.

In this play, all the seven periods of life are represented in the crowd characters- "Boyhood (or Girlhood), youth, young manhood (or womanhood), manhood middle age, Maturity, and old age." (*LL*, 273) They also include seven general types of characters:

The simple, ignorant; the happy, pager; the self-tortured, introspective; the proud, self-reliant; the servile, hypocritical; the revengeful, cruel; the sorrowful, resigned. (*LL*, 273)

O'Neill has used the rhythm of contrasts between death and life, hate and love, despair and ecstasy, Jews and Nazarenes, and so on to depict spiritual chaos among Lazarus' contemporaries. In *Lazarus Laughed*, he has presented characters in two contrasting groups to depict the spiritual condition of those who do not believe in God or love and those who

believe. Believers of power or state like Caligula and Tiberius, who live for their possessiveness always suffer from despair, fear, death, and loneliness. In contrast, he who believes in God lives a happy and blessed life. Raleigh observes:

On the one hand, there are experience, Caesar, the state, death, torture, fear, loneliness, lust, greed, satiety, innovation, sexual inversion, night terror, wakefulness, despair (this is the world most of them occupy); on the other hand, there is the intuitive, blessed, happy, natural, organic, affirmative, individualistic but non-egotistical life that Lazarus embodies and offers. (John Henry Raleigh, 1965, 42)

The protagonists of this play are realistic in representing a true mosaic of society, as well as symbolic of false faiths they believe in and consequent alienation in their life. Here the masks are the dramatic equivalents of illusions that always prevent men from ever belonging themselves anywhere. As a result, man doesn't find spiritual peace anywhere. By not understanding the importance of faith in God or life force, they negate and deny all that is creative, fruitful, and meaningful in life and affirm all that is destructive, sterile, and meaningless.

In this large-scale star cast, Lazarus, Miriam, Caligula, Tiberius, and Pompeia are the main characters. Among these Lazarus is unmasked because he has overcome his fear of death by believing in God and there is no need for him to hide his real self. On the contrary, other characters wear masks of different sizes showing pain, fear, loneliness, death, lust, and pessimism in their life due to lack of faith. In Act One, Scene I, Lazarus has been "freed now from the fear of death." (LL, 274) He is "tall and powerful, about fifty years of age, with a mass of gray-black hair and a heavy beard." (LL, 274) His face

looks like a statue of the divinity of Ancient Greece in its appearance having shining complete peace and contentment in his life. He has received a revelation that:

There is only life! I heard the heart of Jesus laughing in my heart; "There is eternal life in No," it said, "and there is the same eternal life in Yes! Death is the fear in between!" And my heart reborn to love of life cried "Yes!" and I laughed in the laughter of God! (He begins to laugh softly, at first- a laugh so full of complete acceptance of life...so devoid of all self-consciousness or fear... proud and powerful infectious with love, casting on the listener an enthralling spell... (LL, 279)

We come to know that complete spiritual peace has come in his life due to this revelation. But we simultaneously cannot forget that before this revelation, Lazarus' life has not been peaceful. Fourth guest says that "He wished for death!" (LL, 276) He said to him one day, "I have known my fill of life and the sorrow of living. Soon I shall know peace." (LL, 276) Third Guest says, "Yes, of late years his life had been one long misfortune." (LL, 276) Fifth Guest says, "He was a bad farmer, a poor breeder of sheep, and a bargainer so easy to cheat it hurt one's conscience to cheat him!" (LL, 276) One after another his children died. One of the guests says, "Not only died his son die but Miriam could never bear him more children." (LL, 276) These are but a few of the many echoes of the sorrow of Lazarus mentioned in Scene I. These views confirm that in a world of perverted values where everyone is after money and power, it is very difficult for an honest person like Lazarus to survive. Here, one comes to know that O'Neill has drawn him like Dion. Lazarus s also suffers from spiritual chaos before this revelation. When he

believed in God and accepted the reality of life that one should not fear death and love life only then spiritual peace comes into his life. Lazarus advocates the same philosophy to others which he has found through his revelation.

Soon after his revelation, Lazarus begins to laugh like a great triumphant bird casting on the listeners an enthralling spell. But it seems that his laughter reflects him being proud and powerful like Brutus Jones in generating spiritual chaos in and around him. "Laugh! Laugh with me!" (*LL*, 280) cries Lazarus and again he cries, "Death is dead! Fear is no more! There is only life! There is only laughter!" (*LL*, 280) Man is mortal and to say that there is no death is itself longing for the illusion of an ideal and peaceful life hiding spiritual chaos in his life. And it is difficult to say that the true spirit of Lazarus' laughter represents true peace or pride. One finds a man at peace when he accepts something greater and more powerful than himself working in and around him. It develops deep and abiding respect in him for a life-force working day and night to bring peace in man's life. There is peace in such a complete acceptance. But this pride brings deviations and so is happening with Lazarus. He is in "love with God" is the first note of his laughter. Then comes a change in that laughter reflecting pride and self-sufficiency. Richard Dana Skinner writes:

It is as if Lazarus, admitted to the secret of God's laughter, suddenly felt himself as God, one who bestows instead of a receiver, the player of a great instrument of understanding rather than the instrument itself. (Richard Dana Skinner, 1964, 186)

Based on the above discussion, we can say that Lazarus has deviated from his true spiritual path and feels himself a god. His deviation brings spiritual chaos instead of peace in and around him. The perfection of a saint might bring peace to his

followers, as does the laughter of Lazarus soon after the revelation. Pride has choked his words and he finds it difficult to communicate the truth he has discovered. So, his laughter brings the death of those who are dearest to him including his wife, Miriam. He becomes, slowly, not an incarnation of love but vain, contemptuous pride. He tries to root himself among men but his pride creates differences between him and his followers. Spiritual chaos generated in him by his pride makes him blind to the real circumstances in Rome leading to his own death and fear of death among others. Lazarus' spiritual chaos is on account of his deviation from his real faith.

On the contrary, Caligula, Tiberius, and Pompeia represent the men and women drunk with worldly power or materialism, the tyrants of the earth, who thrive on men's fear of death and believe in lust and hatred as the only "values" of life. But these are the values which are primarily responsible for spiritual chaos in a person. The way they have been brought up and their faith in living by killing others instead of believing in God, leading life, developing fear, and creating it reflects their chaotic mental state. They neither believe in their family nor love. Their lust for power had not only made the enemy of each other but also created a vacuum and loneliness in their life. As they are not able to belong to some faith, they feel alone and spiritually unsatisfied. Tiberius himself accepts that in his empire, "there is no man so base as I!" (*LL*, 354) He requests Lazarus to explain the reasons for his turning younger by reversing the natural process. One important question which will arise here is why Tiberius longs to become younger? He himself answers this question. He says:

Everyone admits therein Tiberius is by right their Caesar! (He laughs bitterly) Ha! So who would believe Tiberius if he said, I want youth

again because I loathe lust and long for purity ... I know it is folly to speak-but-one gets old, one becomes talkative, one wishes to confess, to say the thing one has always kept hidden, ... and one is alone! Therefore, the old – like children – talk to themselves, for they have reached that hopeless wisdom of experience which knows that though one were to cry it in the streets to multitudes, or whisper it in the kiss to one's beloved, the only ears that can ever hear one's secret are one's own! (He laughs bitterly) And so I talk aloud, Lazarus! I talk to my loneliness! (LL, 354-355)

It is a fact that Tiberius longs to become younger to live a life of purity and happiness because he is still alone and spiritually unsatisfied with his life even though he is a king. His upbringing has been the main cause. He was born the son of a Caesar. His mother wanted power so she used all crooked ways to achieve this aim. His circumstances made him love killing so that he could live by creating fear in others. His faith was an illusion of power. This illusion never made him understand the importance of true faith in love and family. So, he was never satisfied with his life and his cruelty culminated in more and more loneliness and a vacuum in life. He begs Lazarus to give him his youth so that he can feel what happiness means in life. He says:

I want youth, Lazarus, that I may play again about her feet with the love I felt for her before I learned to read her eyes! (LL, 355)

Tiberius says that he loves to kill because he envies those who are loved. "I kill the love for retribution's sake – but much of it escapes me." (LL, 356) In his killing others, he forgets one important aspect, he cannot get retribution in this way. He believed in all those faiths which were false. His courtiers, family members, and

his lustful wife Pompeia were never trustworthy. They were believers of the same false faith. So, Tiberius could never lead a peaceful life and there is loneliness and chaos in his life due to his lack of faith.

The same is the character of Caligula, the heir of Tiberius. Like Tiberius, he also lives a life of spiritual chaos. For Caligula, death and cruelty have been means to rule the world. He loves to kill because he fears death. He is scared of death as he doesn't believe in any faith. He longs to kill his own master because he has been brought up under the same system called materialism (insatiable desire for power and money) as has been Tiberius. He wants to grow by not believing in anything like family, God, love, etc. Animus (hardness) is Caligula and Anima (love) is his enemy. This emotional imbalance in his character is another reason for his spiritual chaos. He is a true symbol of Rome whose "Will is so sick that it must kill to be aware of life at all." He likes Lazarus because he wants to know the secret of Lazarus' youth. This is a special characteristic of materialists that they believe only in their aims. Lazarus is important for Caligula because he will help him live and rule the world for a longer period else, he would have killed him as he loves to kill. So, his faith is only to save himself by killing others. This is a false faith as he has never contended in his life. He always suffers from fear, loneliness, and alienation. This becomes quite evident in his discussion with Miriam:

Tell me! You love him, too, I do not understand this. Why, wherever he goes, is there joy? You heard even the galley slaves laugh and clank time with their chains! (Then with exasperation) And yet why can I not laugh, Jewess? (LL, 331)

Caligula cannot laugh as he fears death. He leads a life of loneliness. There is, therefore, spiritual chaos in his life. He also believes neither in God nor family or

love. He accepts that he is sick. His sickness is nothing else but spiritual chaos because he doesn't love anybody. As he couldn't believe in anything so he always fears from others and suffers from spiritual chaos. Caligula explains mournfully:

I am sick, Lazarus, sick of cruelty and lust and human flesh and all the imbecilities of pleasure – the unclean antics of half-witted children! (with a mounting agony of longing) I would be clean! If I could only laugh your laughter, Lazarus! That would purify my heart. For I could wish to love all men, as you love them – as I love you! If only I didn't fear them and despise them! If I could only believe in them – in life – in myself, believe that one man or woman in the world knew and loved the real Caligula – then I might have faith in Caligula myself – then I might laugh your laughter! (LL, 358-359)

But Caligula might love and believe in Lazarus and God! Why is he still showing the remote possibility of believing and living a spiritually contented life? It is because he represents the true nature of materialism. For materialists, money and power are God so their faith is false. The characteristics of materialists are universal, irrespective of time and space. Owing to these false faiths, they never live a spiritually contented life. So, Caligula suffers from spiritual chaos like Tiberius.

Likewise, Pompeia, the wife of Tiberius, also suffers from spiritual chaos. "Her complexion is pale, her gentle girlish mouth is set in an expression of agonized self-loathing and weariness of spirit." (LL, 337) She is the epitome of pleasure and lust. Like Caligula, she also does not believe in family relationships so suffers from loneliness, alienation, and a spiritual vacuum. Her faith and love change according to the demands of her lust which is the true character of materialists

which is to acquire everything they like without caring for their moral and spiritual conscience. When she longs to possess Lazarus, Caligula advises her, "Do not waste your lust. He is faithful to his wife, I warn you." (LL, 341) It means that Lazarus believes in true love and is spiritually satisfied in comparison to Pompeia who has no upright conscience. She is spiritually hollow as she believes in lust and enjoyment. She accepts that she has never loved her till now. A person who has never loved and believed cannot be spiritually satisfied. Pompeia says:

I want you to know my love, to give me back love-for me-only for the me-Pompeia-my body, my heart-me, a Woman, women! Do I love man, men? I hate men! I love you-as you loved that woman there (She points to Miriam) that I poisoned for love of you! (LL, 361)

Lazarus laughed is a modern religious idealism that is Christian in origin, Nietzschean in tragic conception, Oriental in mythology, but, perhaps, closest to the spirit of American Transcendentalism. The astonishing fact is that this play has been a success in translating this idealistic material into dramatic terms. It is achieved partly by employing psychology, partly by dramatic incident and symbol, and partly by occasional passages of poetic eloquence.

In this play, O'Neill shows that contemporary Americans lack a formal theology resulting in spiritual chaos in them. He shows this by placing the action of this play in history. He preaches his gospel that spiritual piece would come to the contemporary man only when he starts believing in God or life force or love. *Lazarus laughed* also shows that faith in something is essential to counter the effects of fear, loneliness, and death as these are all products of false illusions. In this play, all the important characters viz. Miriam, Tiberius, and Caligula have been

found suffering from spiritual chaos due to their faith in the power of state and materialism. Even behind the idealistic characterization of Lazarus, spiritual chaos can be easily recognized. Caligula, Tiberius, and Pompeia are just like contemporary people drunk with worldly

power or materialism, the tyrants of the state who thrive on men's fear of death and believe in lust and hatred as the only values of life. As a result, they suffer from fear, pain, loneliness, lust, pessimism, and spiritual chaos due to a lack of true faith in their lives.

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