

The Theatrical Art of Eugene O' Neill

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ABSTRACT

In the beginning of twentieth century, American drama started realizing its richness of American sense. The rise of the Little Theatre Movement was the sign of liberation of drama from the conventional bounds of the commercial theatre. The Provincetown players, a group of young and innovative artists and playwrights emerged under the leadership of Eugene O' Neill. In the modern literary context, the theme of expressionism has been effectively handled by playwrights like Eugene O' Neill, Arthur Miller etc. The American Theatre in the 1920's started experimenting in all possible directions. New methods of characterization, explorations of space and movement, new modes of dialogues have been employed with an objective of presenting a more realistic and concrete view of life. As the life of the modern man has been extremely complex, as a result of modern scientific inventions, dramatists also started experimenting newer theatrical techniques to present the complexity of modern life in a more realistic manner. Expressionism is one such modern technique which surpasses realism, which was imported to US from Europe. Expressionist writers were dissatisfied with naturalism or realism and they went beyond that. They wanted to project the inner psychological conflicts and the complex state of mind through external symbols. O'Neill has experimented both realism and expressionism in his plays like "The Emperor Jones" (1920), "The Hairy Ape" (1922) and so on. He made use of expressionist devices and settings combined with naturalistic details, so that the "real" achieved a symbolic quality through repetitions and exaggerations. This paper is aimed at tracing the characteristics of modern American drama with special reference to Eugene O' Neill

KEYWORDS

Little Theatre Movement; Prince town Players; Expressionism; Realism.

Introduction:

Modern American drama originated from the "Little Theatre Movement" of the second decade of the twentieth century. In this period, a group of young and enthusiastic players calling themselves as "Washington Square Players" opened the "Bandbox Theatre". Later another group established a company called "Provincetown Players" in which O'Neill performed as an amateur actor. During the four years of its existence the company

produced sixty two one act plays and six full length plays. Modern American drama evolved out as an amalgamation of such different schools. The playwrights of that period were much influenced by playwrights such as Ibsen and Shaw. The Provincetown Players performed many of O'Neill's early works in their theatres both in Provincetown and on MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village. Some of these early plays began to move downtown and then moved to Broadway. O'Neill's first

published play, *Beyond the Horizon*, opened on Broadway in 1920 to great acclaim, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The dramatists of the Provincetown Players accepted O'Neill as their leader for his genius in dramatic art.

Expressionism:

In the modern literary context, the theme of expressionism has been effectively handled by playwrights like Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller etc. Expressionism was originally imported to US from Europe. The American Theatre in the 1920's started experimenting in all possible directions. New methods of characterization, explorations of space and movement, new modes of dialogues have been employed with an objective of presenting a more realistic and concrete view of life. As the life of the modern man has been extremely complex, as a result of modern scientific inventions, dramatists also started experimenting newer theatrical techniques to present the complexity of modern life in a more realistic manner.

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Eugene Gladstone O'Neill (1888 –1953):

O'Neill's plays are among the first to introduce into American drama the techniques of realism, associated with Russian playwright Anton Chekhov, Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, and Swedish playwright August Strindberg. His plays were among the first to include speeches in American vernacular and involve characters on the fringes of society, engaging in depraved behavior, where they struggle to maintain their hopes and aspirations, but ultimately slide into

disillusionment and despair. Nearly all his plays involve some degree of tragedy and personal pessimism.

O'Neill experimented both realism and expressionism in his plays like "The Emperor Jones" (1920), and "The Hairy Ape" (1922). He made use of expressionist devices and settings combined with naturalistic details, so that the "real" achieved a symbolic quality through repetitions and exaggerations Eugene O'Neill established himself as a symbol of renaissance in the American stage as a rebel and an anti-conventional dramatist. He incorporated both realism and expressionism in his plays.

O'Neill's Contribution to American Drama:

O'Neill's devotion to playwriting might be roughly divided into three periods: the early apprentice years (1913-1920), the middle experimental years (1920-1934) and the late mature years (1934-1943). In the first period, the young writer composed mostly one-act plays among which *Bound East for Cardiff* and *Ile* are comparatively popular. The second period is full of experiments *God's Chillun Got Wings*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *The Hairy Ape*, *Emperor Jones*, *The Great God Brown*, *Strange Interlude*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *Lazarus Laughed*, and *Days without End* all belong to this period. In the third period, O'Neill produced mainly four plays, one one-act play *Hughie* and three full-length plays *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. The style of this period was raw, spare, and utterly devoid of theatrical tricks and machinery.

O'Neill's Secret of Success:

O'Neill's tremendous success as a dramatist depends to a great extent, upon the fact that he had something to say about the modern social order that has been worth saying. In O'Neill's eyes, the mechanized

industrial process of the materialistic America distorted man's spirit and divorced man from the qualities of humanity which gave him dignity and the sense of manhood. For a period of time, man might be content with or even proud of his position in such a materialistic society. However, the loss of normal identity as a self-sufficient human being will surely smash man's spiritual world sooner or later. The Hairy Ape is an extreme instance of the alienation and deformation of modern man living in a cold and materialistic society dominated by mechanized industry.

Eugene O'Neill's body of work displays an obvious progression in its sympathetic depiction of humanity, from the playwright's tentative early one-act plays through his more developed expressionistic period and finally his primarily realistic full length dramas, with each stage of development delineating the struggle of both bourgeois and working classes, "fog people" and realists, men and women to escape from their too human primal urges and their weaknesses for booze, affection, and recognition.

O'Neill's character development keeps pace with the increasingly rich structural and thematic achievements of his plays, with the early works inhabited by characters that are sometimes more caricature than character and his later plays peopled by more complex, emotionally and psychologically articulated men and women. Critic John Gassner claims that, as a result of O'Neill's efforts to simultaneously develop character and dramatic method, "The American drama entered the century and made contributions to world theatre that could be considered significantly modern."

Despite critical controversy concerning his methods and results, the same process of development evidences itself with particular notice among several of O'Neill's plays wherein black characters bear significant dramatic weight. O'Neill

made a consistent and progressively successful effort to include black characters as part of the illusory American "pipe dream." O'Neill was in portraying the humanity of his black characters is as important as the degree to which he was able (or unable) to transcend the pervasive racism of the time. It is important to keep in mind that O'Neill was operating within a white society in which the black man was popularly perceived of as primitive, even atavistic, with such beliefs reinforced by the scientific community and often supported by the black community as well.

The Rhetoric of Eugene O'Neill's Art:

O'Neill's language and his characters continue to be controversial even in the context of his historical position and his achievements as both artist and political being, including those relying on black characters to carry the weight of O'Neill's aesthetic sense, scrutinize the dilemma of contemporary American life. Trapped by an inescapable past yet reaching toward the future, the characters explore their personal and cultural experiences in order to find some order and significance in the ultimate doom of human existence. Ultimately, Eugene O'Neill was not writing about black people or white people, but about people who are haunted by a past that refuses to die even as they themselves strive to journey beyond the horizon and into the unknown.

Conclusion:

O'Neill was the first American dramatist to regard the stage as a literary medium and the only American playwright ever to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. Eugene O'Neill is generally considered as the foremost American dramatist whose works reflect truly the lives and pursuits of the American people in the 20th century and reveal vividly their rich inner world. In his lifetime, O'Neill wrote about fifty plays and won three Pulitzer Prizes. In 1936, he was awarded

Nobel Prize for his great contribution to world literature, which was a precedent in the dramatic history of America. Three years after his death, O'Neill, for the fourth time, was granted the Pulitzer Prize for the great theatrical success of his autobiographical play *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956). Of all the American playwrights, O'Neill is today best known in England, France, Germany, Russia, and he is highly esteemed by most Chinese dramatic experts. Zhou Xiao-ping has quoted Wang Yiqun's lines as "What

America owed to O'Neill is just like what England owed to Shakespeare, Norway to Ibsen, Russia to Chekov, and Germany to Brecht." (30). O'Neill saw the theatre as a valid forum for the presentation of serious ideas. Imbued with the tragic sense of life, he aimed for a contemporary drama that had its roots in the most powerful of ancient Greek tragedies--a drama that could rise to the emotional heights of Shakespeare.

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