

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

ONE ACT SEA PLAYS OF EUGENE O'NEILL

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper has been attempted to explore the one act 'Sea Plays' of Eugene O'Neill. O'Neill's early attempts are dealing with the miseries, delusions and obsessions of men adrift in the world. He started his career and expressed his talent with one-act plays, which he wrote between 1912 and 1920—his early phase. Most of them deal with the sea-life and are known for their honest realism. Realism is a literary technique practiced by many schools of writing. It is a movement of art which started in the mid 19th century in France and later spread to the entire world. In literature writers use realism as a literary technique to describe plot, setting, character, theme and dialogues without using any decorative language and way like simile, metaphor etc. Realism is something opposite to romanticism and idealism. O'Neill provided realistic dialogues, natural acting and scenes. He dramatized sea-people and their lives realistically.

Keywords: Sea, Fog, Ship, Silence, Realism

About the Author

Nobel Prize winner for Literature in 1936, the monument figure of American drama, Eugene O'Neill, born on October 16, 1888 in a Broadway hotel situated at the corner of what is now Times Square in New York, was the third son of James O'Neill, a tall and handsome, but uneducated romantic actor and Ella Quinlan, a quiet, beautiful, educated, sophisticated and a gold medalist for piano playing Catholic lady. Their different temperaments resulted in a destructive marital incompatibility which formed the theme of O'Neill's several important plays. He wrote his first play 'The Web' at twenty four. On April 12, 1918, he married Agnes Boulton. There were two children a boy and a girl. After his divorce he married Carlotta Monterey on July 22, 1929 in Paris. Against him, his daughter Oona married with Charlie Chaplin who was at the age of O'Neill. Both his sons commit suicide. So, his personal life is the reason of his pessimistic dramas.

On November 24, 1953 he became critically ill. During this time he clenched his fists, raised himself slightly in his bed and gasped: "Born in a hotel room- and God damn it-died in a hotel room." He remained in coma for thirty six hours and died on November 27, 1953.

Realism

Realism has been a revolt against classicism. Classicists show life as rational while realists show the incidents and events as they observe in the society. O'Neill was not an academically trained dramatist. Whatever he learnt, he had learnt from life. His personal life is the main reason for his pessimism and writing tragedies and realistic plays. Through the techniques like realism, naturalism, expressionism, symbolism and myth, he has added valuable work of art in theatre.

One Act Sea Plays

In 1912-1913, he wrote eleven one-act and two long plays in which five plays were published

under the title *Thirst* and other One-Act Plays. He dramatized sea-people and their lives realistically. His own experience as a sea-man helped him in his portrayal of characters that appeared to be real people and are trapped in the tragic universe by their fate. So, O'Neill's one-act plays are also called the Sea-Plays. From 1916-1920 he expressed his talent through one-act plays. *Bound East for Cardiff* (1916), *Cardiff* (1916), *Thirst* (1916), *Before Breakfast* (1916) is in the form of a dramatic monologue in one-act, *Fog* (1917), *The Sniper* (1917), *In the Zone* (1917), *The Long Voyage Home* (1917), *Ile* (1917), *The Rope* (1918), *The Moon of the Caribbees* (1918), *The Dreamy Kid* (1919) and *Exorcism* (1920) are his one act plays.

In his early plays, the fog and the sea are developed as motifs. The fog symbolizes menacing silence and obscure mystery. Fog can be symbolic of the mystery behind existence. It may mean meaninglessness and cruelty of life. The fog is also a symbol of the "veiled borderland between life and death." It is also connected with violent deaths or with foreboding of such deaths. The past in O'Neill is often described in terms of fog. Sea is another important symbol in O'Neill's plays and it has multiple meanings. For O'Neill, sea is a source of fear and suspense. It can stand for timelessness and eternity. Sea was not only the wide expanse of water but also a symbol of the Collective Unconscious.

Bound East for Cardiff (1916) setting suggests Yank's anguished feeling of loneliness and confinement in life and ultimately Yank dies an unknown death. He dies cheerfully with hope of heaven because he has been living innocently. He has lived a pure but meaningless life. His innocence is clear from his one secret ambition that he confides to his friend only at the point of death—the desire to settle on a farm, with a wife and brats! His secret desire to settle on land symbolizes a carving for more experience; in that case his life becomes more meaningful, but he would have become less innocent. The play shows that the experience that gives meaning to life makes one less pure. It was quite natural for the playwright to feel sentimental about the work that brought him luck and fame.

Thirst (1916) dramatizes the fate of three nameless type characters, namely, the Gentleman, the Dancer and the Negro sailor and they are on the raft of a wrecked steamer in mid-ocean. The three remnants of humanity are dying of thirst. The gentleman and the dancer are convinced that they have a supply of drinking water hidden somewhere, and the woman offers him her necklace for a drink, but the sailor informs that he has no water. Then the woman offers herself but Negro sailor is not affected. After sometime, she dies. Death releases the Dancer from the life-and-death struggle in which she is involved. Then Negro glancing toward the body sharpens his knife and addresses the gentleman. "We shall eat. We shall drink." The gentleman pushes the woman's body into the sea. The Negro plunges his knife into the other's back and in this way two persons went off the edge of the raft. The characters struggle for survival against the fury of the Sun, 'The great angry eye of God' which is symbolic of the natural forces. On the raft "the diamond necklace lies glittering in the blazing sunshine." The play is written in an exaggerated, violent and rhetorical style.

Before Breakfast is a monologue written in the summer of 1916 in which the only visible character Mrs. Rowland lives with her husband Alfred in a dingy flat. She prepares breakfast and talks to Alfred who is in the next room. She complains of her struggle and taunts him for having married her. The more Mrs. Rowland speaks in self-praise or about her trouble, our sympathy goes to the invisible man whom she is trying to paint in the blackest colours. But when she waits for an answer—then she hears drip-drip of something in the bedroom. Alfred has cut his throat with razor. O'Neill uses symbolic notes. When Mrs. Rowland starts with a yawn, she suggests the dullness of her life. Her taunting, laughter and angry outbursts—all represent the cracking of a microcosm. Her sweeping suggests the raising of the settled dust of the past. Her cutting the bread outside is symbolic representation of a similar cut received within; her coffee symbolizes her sipping his blood. The use of symbols in this superb way shows O'Neill's growing maturity. The artist's suicide may not be a cowardly escape from reality, but it is by no means a heroic gesture to

punish himself from his guilt. In the play, we do not see him, but the speeches and behavior of his wife reflect his reactions. In this mood, an accidental cut possibly suggests to him the mode of suicide and thus out of disgust, he chooses to cut his own throat. O'Neill's own father exclaimed, 'My boy, why don't you write pleasanter plays?' (Ahuja 29)

The Web represents life as "a web" and points to the modern man's exact dilemma in this world. Only death can make a person get rid of life. Thus, the very title *The Web* is full of symbolic implications. The Web is a melodramatic piece about a prostitute and her protector. The play shows how the sudden arrival of a bully saves the life of a woman who is going to be killed by her cruel husband. The killing of the bully by Steve and the planting of the revolver in order to implicate the woman when police arrives is another melodramatic incident in the action of the play. The woman is taken away and the baby cries "Maamaaaa." One of the plain clothing men takes the infant and speaks to it: "Mama's gone now. I'm your mama now."

Fog (1917) is a symbolic One-Act play. In it fog symbolizes blurring of vision. The symbol of glassy sea, the iceberg and menacing silence also create the atmosphere of inscrutable and mysterious forces. In the play, a dense fog lies heavily upon the sea. The characters are a Poet, a Man of Business, a Polish Peasant Woman, a Dead child, Sailor and an officer. The Poet, the Businessman, the Woman and her Dead Child are in the boat. They drift up to the edge of an iceberg, where they wait for help. They hear a steamer whistle, but the Poet, to save the steamer from running into the iceberg, prevents the Businessman from calling. Here Poet is symbolic of idealism and the Businessman is symbolic of materialism. In the mean time the Peasant Woman has died. The officer said that the child is all right, but the poet tells that the child has been dead twenty-four hours. He died at dawn yesterday. Death is looked upon as a "fine sleep" which frees the child from the drudgery of its existence. In this play, the Business represents material values, the Poet, creative art, and the peasant Woman with her dead child, the blind faith.

The Sniper (1917) is the story of a Belgian peasant whose son and wife have been killed by

German soldiers. In desperation he defies orders and begins shooting Prussian soldiers as they march through his village. He is soon captured and shot.

In *The Zone*, the year is 1915, and the time midnight, just after the ship has entered the submarine zone. In the forecandle the sailors are in a state of high nervous tension. One of them, Smitty, behaves suspiciously, and this leads the others to believe he is a German spy. They start to take a box from his trunk which they fear may be filled with explosives. They try to open it, then Smitty comes in quietly and discovers what his shipmates are about, but his shipmates seize him and tie him to his bunk. In the box they discover only a bundle of letters from the girl Smitty had been engaged to, and in reading them they learn what has happened: she has thrown him over because he drank, and he had gone to sea in desperation. As the story unfolds, the men are ashamed, and at the end they release Smitty in silence. From one of the letters a dried flower flutters and falls to the floor. This is a sentimental drama. This is the weakest of the sea-plays in the series because what happens in the play could as well happen anywhere else.

The Long Voyage Home (1917) shows Olson, a Swedish sailor's feeling of alienation and his desire to go back to his family. O'Neill ironically observed the life and fate of the sea-man who are besieged by these forces which made their lives full of the elements of pessimism. According to George Middleton, "The Long Voyage Home is the epitome of a larger drama which is suggested in the background." Ironically, the long voyage home proves to be another long voyage away from home. (Tornqvist 92) Egil Tornqvist suggests that home in the title is the Eternal Home and that the voyage at the end implies death.

In *Ile* (1917) and *Gold* (1921) 'sea' acts as an agent against material greed of man. It kills man's lust for gain and represents a quasi-religious poetic function to solve the problem of evil. In *Ile*, Captain Keeney in his choice maniac between pride and his wife's love, opts for the former—a mad choice that pushes the wife to the other side of sanity. O'Neill has brought a tragic situation; here is a man who gains victory over nature by sacrificing his soul. When he enters on ship with hard eyes and tight

lips, we learn to treat him not as a hero but as a villain of melodrama. According to O'Neill, material pursuit for its own sake kills man's soul. Captain Keeney is suffering from spiritual atrophy. We may fear such a man but we can not pity him. In fact, our pity is reserved for Mrs. Keeney who suffers for no fault of her own.

The Rope (1918) is a tragedy of greed, hatred and madness which shows the destructive possibilities of the romantic ideal.

In The Moon of the Caribees (1918) Smity drinks to forget but does not overcome his despair and frustration. There is practically no story in it: a sailor speaks aloud his dreams and disappointments, while his mates carouse. There is a fight, a man is killed and the curtain falls. O'Neill says, "It was my first real break with theatrical traditions. Once I had taken this initial step, other plays followed logically." The characters in The Moon of the Caribees are the people whom O'Neill had actually met at "Jimmy-the-Priest's" and "The Hell Hole" during his early sea-voyage. Many have been identified with actual sea-men with whom O'Neill sailed the sea, or with whom he drank.

In Recklessness, a husband learns that his wife is having an affair with the chauffeur when he returns home. After getting the facts from a jealous maid, he sends the chauffeur out, knowing that the steering-gear of the car is out of order. He dies and when his body is brought in, the woman kills herself.

The Dreamy Kid (1919), written in the summer of 1918 is a story of Negro. It tells of a murderer pursued by the police, who returns home to see his dying mother and gets caught. The old woman, who is so full of affection for this kid and so keen to die in his presence, becomes the unwitting instrument of his downfall.

Exorcism (1920) tells of a young man who finds life hard to bear in the slum. He takes poison but two drunken friends call a doctor, who arrives just in time to save him.

In all these plays, the innocence of sea life is brought under strain by the contrary life on land which appears in the form of women, war or a longing for land and its memories. These plays are technically smooth and theatrically effective. O'Neill is known for his realism, bold presentation of ugly

truths, the hard pathos, the handling of atmosphere and growing interest in characters.

Having perfected the one-act form in drama, O'Neill turned his attention to longer plays. In an interview he said:

I am no longer interested in the one-act play. It is an unsatisfactory form—cannot go far enough. The one-act play, however, is a fine vehicle for something poetical, for something spiritual in feeling that cannot be carried through a long play. (Goyal 57)

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