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## Eugene O'Neill: Pessimistic American

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The present research paper has been attempted to explore the elements of pessimism in the plays of Eugene O'Neill. O'Neill served as a link between the ancient classical and modern tragedy. The dramatist converted his autobiographical experiences into art. Tragedy is concerned with suffering and defeat and O'Neill's tragic heroes are not titans and supermen whose death can affect millions but they are always common persons like us. O'Neill's early attempts are short "slice-life" dramas dealing with the miseries, delusions and obsessions of men adrift in the world. His career can be divided into three phases. In the first phase 'The Naturalistic and Realistic phase' he used naturalism in his dramatic creations. In the next phase 'the Expressionistic Symbolic phase' he wrote plays of psychological study expressing man's loss of earlier identity with soul or belongingness of faith in religious or social institutions. In the psychological and autobiographical phase, he again wrote on realism but included it with auto-biographical and psycho-realism.

Nobel Prize winner, 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.

### **Pessimism: dark social reality of modern American Drama:**

The optimist sees the rose and not its thrones; the pessimist stares at the thrones, oblivious to the rose. There are two types of people in the world—optimistic and pessimistic. Optimistic persons always look the positive side of the thing even in tragic consequences and live a cheerful life. On the other hand, pessimistic persons always look at the dark side of a thing even in happy conditions. The negative attitude of these persons makes their life tragic and full of tension.

Economic depression, rapid social change, disillusionment and pessimism became the dark social realities of the modern age. It is in the twentieth century that man's faith

in the accepted values and established institutions of life were shattered with the result that man found himself lonely. The literature of the century in general and drama in particular, became powerful expression of this sense of nihilism. It was taken up and expressed beautifully by Eugene O'Neill in his almost each expressionistic play.

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill, Nobel Prize winner for Literature in 1936, is one of the few American playwrights of the twentieth century to acquire world stature and reputation. It was O'Neill who, though deeply influenced by the classical drama, started modern American drama. He was an analyst of the American society and of the human situation.

The cause of the sickness of today was the death of the old God and the failure to find a new one and the duty of the modern playwright was to dig at the roots of the sickness of today. Life, without God has no meaning and the fear of death cannot be comforted. In the modern times, the term "behind-life" relates to O'Neill's concept of Fate and it suggests the existence of an external, supernatural force ruling man's life and he calls it Fate or God.

O'Neill served as a link between the ancient classical and modern tragedy. He was deeply influenced by Greek tragedy and because of its religious rituals he tried to recreate the Greek spirit in his plays. Like Greeks, his plays also contain a moral purpose. Like Greek tragedy O'Neill's plays are organic with a single theme devoid of sub-plots. He chose New England names for his characters resembling Greek counterparts.

The dramatist converted his autobiographical experiences into art. Many of his characters reveal his own thoughts and experiences and give expression to his views and ideas. Tragedy is concerned with suffering and defeat. O'Neill's tragic heroes are not men of high social position like other traditional heroes. They are not titans and supermen whose death can affect millions but they are always common persons like us. Andrew and Robert in *Beyond the Horizon* are the sons of farmer. In *Straw*, Eileen, because of the heavy burden of the family, is unable to complete her education. Anna in *Anna Christie* is a prostitute. The tragic protagonist in *Desire Under the Elms* is also associated with farm. Brutus Jones in *The Emperor Jones* is not an 'emperor' but a Negro porter. Yank in *The Hairy Ape* is just a poor worker with no place in any social set-up. A never-failing spirit of defiance is the chief quality of O'Neill's tragic-heroes. Characters face life-and-death struggle but they never accept defeat or give up fighting. O'Neill's vision of life was essentially tragic, but he was not a born tragedian. In an interview at the posthumous presentation of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Mrs. Carlotta Monterey gives us a very personal and revealing assessment of O'Neill as a young boy:

He was never in good health. He talked about his early life—that he had no real home, no mother in the real sense, or father, no one to treat him as a child should be treated—and his face became sadder and sadder. (Sharma1)

His personal life is the main reason for his pessimism and writing tragedies. His plays are known for their tragic beauty and sublimity. Man's alienation from Society, Nature and God, materialism which can create tragic tensions, mechanization of the modern life which also generate a sense of loneliness and insecurity, conflict between reality and illusion, love-relationships, psychological conflicts are the main sources of his tragedies. Society plays a significant role for the tragic disaster and his knowledge of American society is both deep and factual and he never feels shy of discussing it in a very

free and frank manner. He was always concerned with gloom and the sorrow of life. The human predicament is the theme of his plays. Of the thirty-seven O'Neill plays, there are only five in which there is no murder, death, suicide or insanity. In the others, we find a totle of eight suicides and one unsuccessful attempt, twelve important murders, twenty-six deaths, nearly all due to violence and eight cases of insanity.

O'Neill's early attempts are short "slice-life" dramas dealing with the miseries, delusions and obsessions of men adrift in the world. 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*. From 1916 to 1920 he expressed his talent through one-act plays. *Bound East for Cardiff* (1916), *Cardiff* (1916), *Thirst* (1916), *Before Breakfast* (1916) is 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), *Where the Cross is Made* (1918), *The Moon of the Caribbees* (1918), *The Dreamy Kid* (1919) and *Exorcism* (1920) are his one-act plays. Having perfected the one-act form in drama, O'Neill turned his attention to longer plays.

O'Neill's career can be divided into three phases. In the first phase 'The Naturalistic and Realistic phase', he wrote *Beyond the Horizon*, *The Straw*, *Anna Christie*, *The First Man* and *Desire Under the Elms*. O'Neill was the first American dramatist to use naturalism in his dramatic creations. Naturalistic literature concentrated on slums, poverty, disease and dirt in society. The theme was usually picked from the lower strata of society. He provided realistic dialogues, natural acting, elaborate stage - setting and scenes. He dramatized sea - people and their lives realistically.

In the next phase 'the Expressionistic Symbolic phase' he wrote plays of psychological study expressing man's loss of earlier identity with soul or belongingness of faith in religious or social institutions. The plays written during this phase were *The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape*, *The Fountain*, *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, *The Great God Brown*, *Lazarus Laughed*, *Strange Interlude*, *Dynamo* and *Days without End*. Expressionist main purpose was to express the inner conflicts instead presenting the external situations and wish to dramatize man's struggle with himself instead of outside world. He also used interior monologues.

In the psychological and autobiographical phase, he again wrote on realism but included it with auto-biographical and psycho realism in *Ah, Wilderness!*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. The plays of this period can be put under two separate parts of realism—the psychological realism and autobiographical realism. *Mourning Becomes Electra* and the cycle plays can be put under psychological realism and the last two plays under autobiographical realism.

It becomes evident from the survey that almost all modern themes find an artistic expression in O'Neill's works—man's quest for love, peace and happiness; the tragic conflict between human aspirations and forces preventing their realization; the inevitable clash between illusion and reality, between life and death, between war and peace, between past and present, between guilt and innocence and between alienation and belonging.

He was awarded Pulitzer Prize, a medal for artistic achievement by the American academy of Arts and Science, first in 1920 for *Beyond the Horizon*, second in 1921 for *Anna Christie*, third time in 1928 for *Strange Interlude* and fourth time in 1957 for *Long Day's Journey into Night*. On November 12, 1936, O'Neill was awarded the Nobel Prize

for literature. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech he declared:

I feel so deeply that it is not only my work which is being honored but work of all my colleagues in America—that the Nobel Prize is a symbol of the coming of age of the American theatre. (Goyal 39)

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