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A Symbolic Reading of Eugene O'Neill's *Thirst*

Akash Satpati

Pursuing M.A in English Literature,
Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University,
Purulia, West Bengal,
India.

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Abstract:

This paper offers a symbolic reading of Eugene O'Neill's one act play *Thirst* (1914). Symbol is a very useful method to convey the thematic texture of a literary art. In present day the use of symbol is almost like a mere tradition in any form of art. O'Neill in his *Thirst* very carefully uses several symbols and images to establish the theme of his play. The characters, their thirst, the sky, colour red, diamond necklace, presence of sharks all have symbolic connotations. Although the plot of the play is aptly discussed here. Also the present paper clearly upholds the miserable condition of so called civilized human beings in a hostile world.

Keywords: Thirst, Sharks, Necklace, Blood, Symbol, Imagery

America's premier playwright Eugene Gladstone O'Neill is a prominent name in the fields of English literature. He has significant contributions to the American drama and the dramatic literature of the world. He combines great theatrical talent with an enormous knowledge of the human soul. O'Neill's plays touch tragic issues and he plumbs the depths of human problems. O'Neill won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1936 and was awarded with Pulitzer Prizes for four of his plays; *Beyond the Horizon* (1920), *Anna Christie* (1922), *Strange Interlude* (1928) and posthumously for *Long Day's Journey into Night* in 1957.

Thirst is a one act play published in the year 1914. The whole play sets in a life raft. There are only three survivors - A Gentleman, A Dancer and A West Indian Mulatto Sailor. Actually *Thirst* is a symbolic play. But it does not have the grotesque symbolism of the *Hairy Ape*. But it probes into the minds of the three characters and symbols are useful means for an impressionistic play that lays emphasis on the states of human mind.

Symbolism is a distinct feature in modern literature. It can be defined in words of Prof. Kalyannath Dutta :

There is a trend in modern literature to have recourse to the use of certain things or elements to represent or mark certain aspects or matters. The particular thing is the 'symbol' that, out of its apparent form or sense, carries a deeper sense. Thus, 'a rose' may well be used to indicate 'beauty' and 'white' of 'purity'. These symbols may be used to indicate beauty and purity respectively.

Similarly, any other element may be dexterously exploited symbolically by an author to express his point of view or a certain shade of life, of course in a highly sophisticated manner.

To begin with, the very opening of the play *Thirst* is presented in a symbolic pattern. Nature as a background has a symbolic role to play. The 'glassy tropic sea' with its incessant upheavals has a great impact upon the characters. If in Synge's *Riders to the Sea* the sea is at once a bread-giver and a life-taker for the Irish fisher folk and again if in Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea* the sea becomes a symbol of man's endless struggle for sustenance, in O'Neill's present play the sea is objectively correlated with the tragic situation. Like Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* here is too the sea stands for punishment, terror and to agility. The tropical climate - the excessively hot one is symbolically related to the patience of the characters. The 'pitilessly clear' sky and the sun, 'great angry eye of God' are instruments of torture. The 'lazy circles' created by the fins of the sharks in the surface of the water may well be transmuted to the cannibalistic transformation of the Negro folk.

The three characters, Gentleman, Dancer and West Indian Mulatto have symbolic representation. Actually here the playwright takes all the three characters from three different sections of society. The Gentleman represents the civilized social and moral values. In the wild nature he feels hopeless and helpless. The Dancer represents rich, luxurious and artificial life. As a dancer, she is habituated with sound and music. This silence of the situation is unbearable to her. Like *Emperor Jones* this play presents a Negro, a mulatto who is a symbol of displaced superstitious humanity. He represents the confused human identity between primitive and civilized selves.

The colour symbolism is another vital aspect of the play. The recurrent shade of the play evolves round the colours - blue and red. The sky is 'of a steel-blue colour' and everywhere there are 'great crimson spots'. The 'crimson spots' convey the idea of death. To the Gentleman "the very sea itself seems changed to blood". The Dancer exclaims with pain ".....mine sea great drops of blood that dance upon the sea". She also falsely visualizes the 'raining drops of blood'. The Negro wears a blue uniform bearing some words in red letters. The combination prophecies the final catastrophe of the play - the merging of the gory bodies into the deep blue sea.

The dress imagery then becomes prominent. The Gentleman's evening gown has been reduced into a 'mere caricature of such a garment' destructing the class-barrier at the time of human misery. The Negro, as mentioned earlier, has an ambiguous colour combination of red and blue in his uniform. The Dancer is in 'a complete short-skirted dancer's costume of black velvet covered with spangles'. The diamond necklace 'glittering coldly on the protruding collarbones of her' is particularly noticeable since it becomes the only valueless object in this thirst ridden world. The Negro does not look at it when she tries to offer him. Significantly enough, it glitters in the same way even when the final curtain falls.

Deep silence of the surroundings is also a prominent symbol. The dramatist has used the idea of silence 'profound and breathless' to suggest the ultimate silence. The Dancer is the first to pray



"God! God! This silence is driving me mad". Silence is the instrument that brings loss of communication among the characters. In contrast to the silence, the dull droning song of the sailor makes the atmosphere heavy. As the beating of tom-tom in *Emperor Jones* symbolizes the pervasive and inescapable presence of the primitive, the Sailor's song has a root of faith "it is a charm. I have been told it is very strong. If I sing long enough they will not eat us ".

An expressionistic playwright sometimes depends on human psyche including the fragmented dreams and moments of life. Dream is an effective way to express situation. In the play *Thirst* this dream reflects the suppressed psychological disorder. The Gentleman dreams that the Negro sailor has a knife in his hand and looks at him. They see hallucination of island and waterfall in the state of terrible thirst. The Dancer sees an island "all green and clean looking with a clear stream ran into the sea" and she "could hear the water running over the stones".

The words like 'strange', 'madness' occur frequently giving symbolic suggestions. At the beginning, the sensations of the body are emphasized as indicative of the sufferings of the characters on the stranded ship. "How my eyes ache! How my throat burns. " The Dancer has become a mocking specter of a dancer". He licks his swollen cracked lips." Thirst image is suggested. The Mulatto Sailor is eager for water. He is roused from his strange crooning and asks. "Who's got water?" His swollen tongue shows between his dry lips. Thirst causes the agony of the body and the mind also. The Gentleman says, " Oh, if we only had some water." The Dancer is, however, afraid of the silence at first. Profound silence of the sea, strange song of the rough Sailor and loneliness of the sea frighten her and make her hysterical. The Dancer is stricken with fear psychosis at first. He fears the Sailor from the beginning. His strange song strikes terror in her heart. "It is a strange song he sings." Actually here "Thirst" symbolizes various things. Like thirst for water, thirst for food, thirst for rescue, thirst for sound and thirst for man's primitive needs also.

In *Thirst*, the most powerful symbol is taken from a myth, the dance of Salome. While the legendary dancer danced to avenge herself on John the Baptist, here in this play the Dancer prepares herself to offer her art to the Sailor, the Negro for a drop of water. The degraded and deformed state is ridiculed by the Gentleman "Dance! Dance! Dance! Salome! "The dramatist develops the image of Salome to another more grave significance. When at the end she really starts her mad dance, the dramatist describes "She is like some ghastly marionette jerked by invisible wires ". The image of a puppet bound by invisible thread of life connotes the subtle and uncertain existence of man in the world dominated by a higher power. The puppet image also takes us back to the world of pagan rituals of superstitions and mystical rites performed to satisfy an angry god. Actually this biblical allusion to Salome (Matthew, Mark) is used in satirical sense. The dramatist implies that in extreme situation man's dignity is shattered. The mock-epical parallel between King Herod and the Negro Sailor suggests the absurd pride of men as civilized being.

The Gentleman imagined a happy life at home after years of work abroad. The image of death coming slowly to them fills him with agony and anguish. He often refers to madness - " this silence is driving me mad " ; his laughter is like the " shrill cackle of madness " ; " I was going mad " - he dreams that the sailor had a knife in his hand.....". The dream image is the manifestation of his distortion of mind and his unknown fear of the Sailor. This is also anticipatory image. The reference to the souvenir menu of a banquet is the ironical image to a man dying for a crust of bread. It is as the Gentleman says a grotesque image.

The Dancer says that "To wait and wait for something that never comes ". This very speech of the Dancer symbolizes her despair and hopelessness. The three survivors on the raft are thirsty for water and food but also for survival. The Dancer is thirsty for food, for companionship. But they are waiting in vain. The Dancer exclaims with sorrow that they are just waiting to be rescued and this waiting only increases the suffering. The dramatist here actually implies the absurdity of our desire. In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Sisyphus was fated to roll a stone up to the top of a peak only to see it rolling down again. His suffering so was eternal. Similar idea is echoed in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In the play two characters wait with hope to meet one Mr. Godot who never appears. In the present play *Thirst* the waiting actually symbolizes the fruitless hope of man. Also this play has several qualities of an absurd play. The character of the play almost repeats same kind of words with same expression. The entire plot of the play discusses same theme. Also the dramatist gives no name to his characters, he only mention their classes. It also has symbolic connotations. O'Neill's *Thirst* is symbolically portrays man's isolation in a world of self-significance. So by not giving name to his characters the playwright wants to show that in extreme situation name is insignificant and unnecessary or useless.

Sharks are a terror image. The Dancer hears of the sharks that "eat us". Sailor's words terrify the lady. The Gentleman assures the lady that sharks do not eat men. Actually 'sharks' are repeatedly recurred in the talks of the characters because out of fear that leads them to their ultimate destination, death. Sharks can anticipate their terrible end. 'Sharks' symbolizes the ultimate destination of human beings, death. There is no escapement from it. With this, 'sharks' also symbolizes the futility of human hopes and desires. Actually they expose the vanity of human wishes. In other sense 'sharks' are the symbols of enmity and they always carry a sinister suggestion for the survivors.

Another important symbol of the play is 'fire'. Fire in Bible symbolizes the wrath of God. But in this extreme situation this three people are tortured by the fire of nature. The Gentleman feels that his eyes are like balls of fire and they bore his brain.

The most striking symbol used in this play is the concept of diamond necklace. The Dancer offers it to the Sailor to buy water, and it is justly rejected. The Gentleman reminds her " you will take the necklace to the sharks with you? " at the end of the play, the necklace lies glittering in the blazing sunshine thus signifying that only lifeless objects remain alive in the world of hunger and thirst. Actually through mentioning the glittering necklace at the end of the play the



dramatist mocks on our civilization. The necklace glitters because it is beyond hunger and thirst. Ironically this necklace is valueless in this lifeless raft. The sharks have no interest in it. Its glittering brightness is useless here. He shows here that the pride of vanity of material world looks insignificant and ridiculous before the infinite.

Eugene O'Neill's credit as an expressionist lies in the fact that he often fused realism with symbolic and suggestive modes. While in *Beyond the Horizon* there is a conflict between the fixed prison and the desire for freedom, in *Anna Christie* the Nature and the Natural objects like fog becomes symbolic, in *The Emperor Jones* the uses of the silver bullet, the Great Forest, the tom-tom, and the crocodile god have a symbolic overtone, in the *Thirst* there is an abundance in the use of symbols and imageries. And it also enriches the grandeur of the play and its value.

Finally, there are the symbolic contrasts played between the sound (song of the Sailor) and silence (muteness of the situation), light ('gleaming trail of phosphorescence' of the sharks), and darkness (the Sailor, ' the black animal ') and visible (the sharks) and invisible (the presence of Marie). So it would not be an exaggeration to say that the symbolic overtones and the suggestive imageries have a great role to increase the gloomy surrounding of the play.

So after the pathetic death of all the members of the raft, the black stain on the water widens. The fins circle no longer. The 'thirst' of the sharks may satisfy. The raft floats in the midst of a vast silence. The sun glares down like a great angry eye of god. It suggests the wrath of god towards human beings. The eerie heat waves float upward in the still air like the souls of the drowned. On the raft a diamond necklace lies glittering in the blazing sunshine. It mocks the human existence. So, after all the end of the play shows us that in extreme situation the civilized rules are meaningless. Nature rules over Culture.

At the end, the characters enact their symbolic roles by the reckless laughter and complete insensibility of the Gentleman, the shameless, wildness of the dancer and the cannibalistic desire of the Sailor. Thus the major symbols in the play reveal the ultimate truth of life. The symbols effectively reveal the absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence against a powerful hostile nature. So in a word, the drama is a powerful medium through which the dark side of man's inner life sheds for a moment its unreal mask.

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