

Tragic Vision of Eugene O'Neill

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Abstract – Eugene O'Neill's tragic vision is largely based on his influence from such great writers as Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides, Dante, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Cervantes, Melville, Tennessee Williams, Kafka, Camus, Samuel Beckett, and others. In order to have an explicit idea of what O'Neill's conception of tragic vision is based on, we shall first know the origin of the concept of tragedy. In his book *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche brought forth his conception of tragic vision in the form of two energies/forces-- Dionysian and Apollonian. O'Neill's tragic vision is often said to be the product of his ill health, his habitual alcoholic brother, Jamie, and the uncaring attitude of his mother during the early period of his life. O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* is a perfect example of it. O'Neill tried to adapt Greek tragedy into a twentieth century model. One very important aspect of O'Neill's tragic vision is the conception that the mysterious structure of man's mind itself is responsible for its tragedy. In his search for identity, man moves out in society and confronts problems. In *The Hairy Ape*, Yank's mind is all split up as a result of the "inner-outer" struggle, which threatens his very existence. The evolution of tragic vision in O'Neill's plays seems to be similar to that of Shakespeare's, both of whom followed the pattern adopted by Dante in his *Divina Commedia*, and both employed double vision lending a complexity to the characters and themes coupled with the typical tragic quest for happiness and fulfillment As is cited by R. R. Khare in his book, *Eugene O'Neill and His Visionary Quest*, we have three kinds of tragic plays in both Shakespeare and O'Neill. O'Neill's characters are sustained by pipe-dreams; Shakespeare's characters are haunted by dreams more complex and tragic. According to O'Neill, the significance of tragedy lies in its ability to produce truth which is essentially beautiful and which in turn gives meaning to hope and life. This very idea of truth finds its fullest expression in almost all his tragic plays which, according various critics, enshrined in them a highly pessimistic view of life making his tragedies an outcry of sordid and depressing view of life. So the search for the lost identity as in case of Yank in *The Hairy Ape* and the pipe-dreams as in the case of all the bums of Harry Hope's Saloon in *The Iceman Cometh* give us power to willing-living in the sordid world of harsh and unbearable realities of life where illusive hope and hope against hope can sustain life which in turn constitute the very thrust of almost all the tragic plays of O'Neill making his plays a deep, profound and comprehensive study of his tragic vision.

Keywords : Tragic vision, Dionysian forces, Apollonian forces, Greeks tragedy, pipe-dreams, dream-world, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *The Emperor Jones*, *The Iceman Cometh*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*

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INTRODUCTION

All tragic literature, from the ancient times to the present, makes assertions of some kind, however equivocal, about the nature of man, and these assertions, most of the time, emerge ambiguously, not explicitly, from the context of the work of art of such great writers as Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides, Dante, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Cervantes, Melville, Tennessee Williams, Kafka, Camus, Samuel Beckett, and others. The American playwright Eugene O'Neill, who is the subject of the present study, is not an exception. His contribution to the world drama in general and American drama in particular is not only colossal but also significant by virtue of his essentially humanistic vision enshrined in his intensely dramatic and living creation. Each of these playwrights is holding up a many sided mirror

to the ever-changing spiritual face of man. One of such playwrights is the renowned German philosopher, Nietzsche who propounded his theory on dramatic work in his book titled as *The Birth of Tragedy* from the Spirit of Music (1872). In the revised edition of his above mentioned book with the title *The Birth of Tragedy or: Hellenism and Pessimism* (1886), Nietzsche brought forth his conception of tragic vision in the form of two energies/forces-- Dionysian and Apollonian. By Dionysian energy, he means a wild, strongly instinctual and amoral force which is essentially creative and healthy. The Dionysian forces find the most significant and explicit expressions in the tragic chorus constituting the very life of tragedy. On the other hand, the Apollonian force is symbolic of stiff sobriety and logical order. Nietzsche here claims that there remains a constant struggle

between these two diverse forces with an effort to have a complete control over the existence of humanity and this struggle is essentially significant for maintaining a striking balance in the life. After a careful reading of the history of the Western culture since the time of Greeks, Nietzsche comes to a philosophical conclusion where he expresses his regret over the overpowering, subduing and dominating nature of the Apollonian forces over the Dionysian – the creative forces. In Nietzsche's words, "Wherever the Dionysian prevailed; the Apollonian was checked and destroyed...."¹ O'Neill's tragic vision of life was influenced by the Greek dramatists. "What has influenced my plays the most," O'Neill stated in 1929, "is my knowledge of the drama of all time - particularly Greek tragedy."²

As a writer of tragedy, O'Neill is often misunderstood. It is an established trend in America that a playwright who has an optimistic and positive view of life is often misunderstood and vehemently denounced by those who live in the world of illusive hope i.e. hope against hope because of their inability to face the harsh reality of life. O'Neill's view is vehemently disliked and decried by such people. In fact they don't possess the ability to understand him. It is ironical to say that these are the people who can acknowledge the similar thing both in the Greeks as well as in Shakespeare, are often shocked and horrified when they see a modern playwright like O'Neill expressing a similar grim truth in term of modern life because tradition, according to them, is nothing less than a god that purifies all things. Like most modern dramatists - Ibsen, Synge, Chekhov, to mention the ones who can lay a great claim to having written modern tragedies and who have at the same time influenced O'Neill, he never evolved any elaborate theory of tragedy. Yet in interviews and letters, especially in the early twenties, he occasionally expressed his tragic vision. In a letter to the New York Tribune (Feb. 13, 1921) he declared that to him "the tragic alone" had "that significant beauty which is truth. It is the meaning of life- and the hope."³ However, he gave the most complete formulation of his tragic vision in an interview a year later: "I suppose it is the idea I try to put into all my plays. People talk of the "tragedy" in them, and call it 'sordid', 'depressing', 'pessimistic'- the words usually applied to anything of a tragic nature. But tragedy, I think, has the meaning the Greeks gave it. To them it brought exaltation, an urge toward life and even more life. It roused them to deeper spiritual understandings and released them from the petty greeds of everyday existence. When they saw a tragedy on the stage they felt their own hopeless hopes ennobled into art.....Any victory we may win is never the one we dreamed of winning. The point is that life in itself is nothing. It is the dream that keeps us fighting, willing- living!"⁴

O'Neill's tragic vision is often said to be the product of his ill health, , his habitual alcoholic brother, Jamie, and the uncaring attitude of his mother during

the early period of his life. 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 real 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."⁵ O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* is a perfect example of it. The main four characters, who form a family, care a lot about each other. Unfortunately the mother's long history of addiction and the relapse she experiences during the length of the play pull apart whatever the family unity had achieved during her last episode of recovery. In their own emotional pain, the father, who may put into much emphasis on money; the elder brother, an incipient alcoholic himself; and the younger brother, an unhealthy young man in need of care, turn on her and each other as the mother slips further and further into morphine fog. By the end of the play, the individual relationships are terribly damaged and the family's fragile happiness built during mother's sobriety is gone. While none of these people are evil individuals, their inherent flaws make it inevitable that they will fail.

O'Neill tried to adapt Greek tragedy into a twentieth century model. In his own words, "I'm always actually conscious of the Force behind- (Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it – Mystery certainly) - and of the eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. And my profound conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about and that is possible – or can be – to develop a tragic expression in term of transfigured modern values and symbols in the theatre"⁶ To understand this transfiguration, he looked to psychoanalysis. Man's struggle for understanding turns inwards, a search to penetrate the dark of his soul. This struggle between the conscious and unconscious is expressed dramatically in *The Emperor Jones* in terms of psychological obsessive fear in the mind of Brutus Jones who flees into a jungle to escape the rebellious native Negroes only to face nightmares of his imagination. He may be compared to Marlow of *Heart of Darkness*, who also escapes the relentless hounds of inner dark consciousness and finds his redemption in the dark jungles of Congo. Clark observes, *The Emperor Jones* is a magnificent presentation of panic fear in the breast of a half-civilized Negro."⁷ His fear puts him in a state of hallucination and he comes across visions which are directly or indirectly connected with his life. The sources of his fear are both personal and impersonal, both conscious and unconscious. Jones is the victim of personification of his lonely fear. He meets visions having a marked resemblance to persons who had met him in the past and these visions look like living beings

with definite shapes, movements or gestures. Nowhere does he doubt the reality of these scenes. They are clearly seen and heard during the course of his journey through the impenetrable Forest and these visions chase him to his downfall, disintegration and death.

One very important aspect of O'Neill's tragic vision is the conception that the mysterious structure of man's mind itself is responsible for his tragedy. In his search for identity, to know what exactly he is, man moves out in society and confronts problems. The struggle between the conscious and unconscious, the rational choice of the solution to the irrational forces continues. Man's failure to understand the nature of this struggle results in self-destruction in life. In *The Hairy Ape*, Yank's mind is all split up as a result of the "inner-outer" struggle, which threatens his very existence. O'Neill believes that the only thing that should matter in life is struggle: "The individual life is made significant just by the struggle. The struggle of man is to dominate life, to assert and insist that life has no meaning outside himself where he comes in conflict with life, which he does not at every turn; and his attempt to adopt life to his own needs, in which he does not succeed, is what I mean when I say Man is the hero."⁸

To understand the tragic vision of O'Neill, it is necessary to have a clear idea of the nature of his heroes and of the world they live in. The heroes of O'Neill's plays are boldly defiant and courageous. It is this quality in them which gives exhilaration to the grimmest tragedy of O'Neill. They may and they do go down to defeat but they never cringe or ask to be forgiven, rather they face it boldly. Yank was game to the end and even when death was upon him he faced it with knowledge that 'I know whatever it is that comes after it can't be no worse 'n this.' And Smitty's 'damned from here to eternity,' reflects a spirit that is good to live with. His heroes are said to be sick for they are not happy and contended and in their quest for happiness as the ultimate goal of their life they struggle and when their struggle nears the end they are more defiant than submissive. Brutus Jones is such a character. He is pursued by the most harassing experiences that man is capable of meeting in this world, and while he is not without fear of the ghastly shadows that pursue him, always when they have pushed him far enough he defies them, and in that defiance lies his greatness and also his meaning for the audience. The modern society with its ruthless machine of psychological tortures is out to crush persons like Yank, but he defies these forces as long as he can. His final end is no exception, for although he is killed, he never asked forgiveness from life. Nina, in *Strange Interlude*, battles with the adversities of circumstances to a victory that only heroic courage and great fortitude could achieve. Old Ephraim Cabot in *Desire Under the Elms* is another of that strange nobility which lives in the world of O'Neill. Although beaten and thwarted at every turn, still he did not give up. His spirit is well expressed when he says to Abbie: "Ye'd

ought t' loved me. I'm a man. If ye'd loved me, I'd never told sheriff on ye no matter what you did, if they was t'brile me alive!"⁹

The evolution of tragic vision in O'Neill's plays seems to be similar to that of Shakespeare's, both of whom followed the pattern adopted by Dante in his *Divina Commedia*, and both employed double vision lending a complexity to the characters and themes coupled with the typical tragic quest for happiness and fulfillment. These similarities are so striking that "any study of O'Neill's tragic vision would remain incomplete without bringing them out with reference to the typical plays of Shakespeare."¹⁰ The similarities between the two dramatists can be established by virtue of their dramatic vision in two forms -- the positive and the negative- corresponding to a revelation of the possibilities of happiness and redemption of sin and evil through virtue, and of suffering and agony born of human error and evil in the absolute. As is cited by R. R. Khare in his book, *Eugene O'Neill and His Visionary Quest*, we have three kinds of tragic plays in both Shakespeare and O'Neill. In the first kind of plays- which include O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, preceded by *The Hairy Ape* and *Dynamo* and followed by *Hughie*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* followed by the three great tragedies as *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth* -- the tragic vision, which is extremely tragic, confines itself to an inferno. In the second category, the tragic vision also projects the next to stages of purgatory and paradise. The plays in this category include O'Neill's *The Fountain*, *Lazarus Laughed*, *Days without End*, *A Moon for the Misbegotte*, *The Emperor Jones*, *Anna Christie* and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* and the last plays of Shakespeare which are also called the Romances like *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. The third category is of the plays of double vision and includes O'Neill's *The Great God Brown*, *Strange Interlude*, *Morning Becomes Electra*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and Shakespeare's problem plays like *All's well that Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus Cressida*.

The comparison of O'Neill with Shakespeare shows that in case of great dramatists whose vision is not circumscribed by place and time, the exploration of the human condition reveals similar mental and spiritual states and the same truths are implied by each of them. Our conclusions regarding O'Neill's tragic vision will now be concerned with these mental and spiritual states which prove more significant by a comparison with Shakespeare. The comparison is all the more significant because Shakespeare's final object is as much to depict evil and its impact as to show the possibility of happiness in an evil-infected world.¹¹ The vision of evil in *Hamlet*, and in *The Iceman Cometh* and *Hughie* is, however, most nearly the same -- undefined and absolute. What is more striking is a commonness of the element of 'dream.' O'Neill's characters are sustained by pipe-dreams; Shakespeare's characters are haunted by dreams

more complex and tragic. Hamlet seeks refuge in the dream-world of speculation which is no better than tossing about on a death-bed. Thus death is the culminating point in the quest for happiness in Hamlet as O'Neill also implies through Larry who says to Parritt in *The Iceman Cometh*, "I have no answer to give anyone, not even myself. Unless you can call what Heine wrote in his poem to morphine an answer?"

Lo, sleep is good; better is death, in sooths

The best of all were never to be born."¹²

In *Othello*, the quest for happiness makes a more creative use of death. *Othello* kills Desdemona with the same intense conviction with which Hickey kills his wife. The crude irony of Hickey's conscious act is paralleled by the tragic irony of Desdemona's insinuated murder. But irrespective of this crime of which *Othello*'s own suicide does not exonerate him, there are pure moments of ecstasy and exaltation which show the prospect of happiness in death approached from a new angle. It is paralleled by O'Neill's *The Fountain and Lazarus Laughed*. It links death with eternal life and suggests transfiguration, though momentarily and also validates death as a positive source of happiness. On the other hand, *The Hairy Ape* and *Dynamo* are plays of unrelieved and consistent downward movement to the nadir of faith. In this respect they resemble Hamlet. They illustrate a descent to infernal depths by the way of rejection illuminated by the negative vision.

CONCLUSION

O'Neill's tragic vision is one of the most striking qualities of his plays. Though O'Neill lacks poetic imagination of Shakespeare, which could bring out, to an equivalent degree, the spiritual possibilities of a tragic situation in all its depth and intensity, beauty and variety, yet O'Neill's tragic is as magnificent and all-inclusive and very often, if not always, he evokes a sense of this completeness and finality of the tragic experience through powerful symbols and images. The tragic vision of O'Neill was largely based on the influence of the Greek tragedy on his work since he has borrowed his concept of tragic vision from the great Greek dramatists. According to O'Neill, the significance of tragedy lies in its ability to produce truth which is essentially beautiful and which in turn gives meaning to hope and life and this very idea of truth finds its fullest expression in almost all his tragic plays which, according to various critics, enshrined in them a highly pessimistic view of life making his tragedies an outcry of sordid and depressing view of life. Another very important aspect of O'Neill's tragic vision is the conception that the mysterious structure of man's mind itself is responsible for its tragedy. In his search for identity, man moves out in society and confronts problems So the search for the lost identity as in case of Yank in *The Hairy Ape* and the pipe-dreams as in the case of all the bums of Harry

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