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CRITICISM OF EUGENE O'NEILL'S WORKS

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Criticism of Eugene O'Neill's Works

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Abstract – Being a prominent literary figure, Eugene O'Neill won friends as well as critics through his plays. Scholarship and criticism on O'Neill's works is vast and varied. His works are analyzed from various points of views by renowned scholars not only in America but in the parts of the world, including India. It is worthwhile to have a study of the present criticism on O'Neill. The scope of present study will also become evident from the study of the existing criticism on O'Neill. The existing criticism on O'Neill consists of biographies, critical books, collections of critical essays and articles. The first biography of O'Neill is Barrett H. Clark's Eugene O'Neill (New York: McBride, 1926). This was revised and reissued in 1929 as Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays. This is a pioneer work, and it covers O'Neill's life and career up to the production of The Fountain. It has scanty information, but interesting, chiefly because of the biographical information which O'Neill himself imparted to Clark.

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In 1958 and 1959 two books on O'Neill's life appeared, one by Croswell Bowen and the other by Agnes Boulton, O'Neill's second wife. Boulton's book *Part of a Long Story* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1958) is written in the form of a novel. As the title suggests it covers only a part of O'Neill's life. The book is marred by its sentimentality, and by the fact that she stops her narrative with the birth of her son Shane, and thus, gives a happy ending to her story. Agnes writes with herself as a heroine, and omits the unhappy episodes of her relationship with O'Neill, which ends in divorce. Bowen's *The Curse of the Misbegotten* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959) comprehensively deals with O'Neill's life, from birth to death. The book is journalistic, and does not have much to say about plays. Written with the cooperation of Shane O'Neill, it focuses upon the life of the dramatist, and the lives of people around him.

The first scholarly biography of O'Neill appeared in 1960s, and was written by Doris Alexander. The book was entitled *The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962). The book takes O'Neill up to his first Broadway success with *Beyond the Horizon* in 1920. It attempts to give a consistent account of O'Neill's intellectual development, changes in his ideas, and the major influences that brought those changes. In 1962 Arthur and Barbara Gelb published *O'Neill* (New York: Harper and Row), which was later revised in 1973. It is a study of playwright's life based not only on documents but, even in greater part, on personal interviews. It captures the drama and torment of his life. Well written, rich in detail, it is an outstanding biography, and is an invaluable source of information. Another excellent biography is Louis Sheaffer's *O'Neill: Son*

and Playwright (1968) that covers O'Neill's life up to 1920's. Its second volume *O'Neill: Son and Artist* (Boston: Little Brown, 1973) covers O'Neill's rise to celebrity, and the period of the decline of his reputation as well. This carefully researched and massive biography is considered, along with Gelb's, as the most significant of all O'Neill's biographies. Frederic I. Carpenter's *Eugene O'Neill* (Boston: Twayne, 1979) provides an outstanding briefer look at the dramatist and his drama. Carpenter selects twenty plays for analysis but gives an intelligent and balanced general picture of O'Neill's career and his development as a dramatist. He sees O'Neill as vacillating between, the duality of the romantic dream of the early plays and the American reality of the later plays. He is of the opinion that O'Neill converted the raw material of his own life and suffering into the finished material of art. Carpenter quotes Sartre to sum up O'Neill's human predicament: "life begins on the far side of despair." (Carpenter: 34) In 1999, Stephen A. Black also, through his biography *Eugene O'Neill: Beyond Mourning and Tragedy* (N.J.: Yale University Press, 1999), throws light on O'Neill's life.

Apart from biographies lots of critical books have been published on O'Neill's plays. The first full-length and major critical book on O'Neill is Sophus Keith Winther's *Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study* (New York: Random House, 1934). It presents a highly favourable estimation of O'Neill. The theme of the book is the significance of O'Neill's work in relation to the thought of today. O'Neill is seen as the profound social critic of a sick society, and as an enemy of repression in all spheres. He opposes the pessimistic vision towards life, and creates characters with heroic will to live while defying the tragic world. Discussing

the general mood of the plays, he finds that they are wrought out of the agony and pain of life. O'Neill presents "man against the background of his biological and environmental heritage... and the contrast between the old ideas and the new gives rise to a conflict" (Winther 47) which leads to life-long anxiety, anguish and alienation that finds resolution in the inevitability of death. In an enlarged second edition (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961), Winther adds a brief final chapter on the four plays published after the publication of the first edition. In 1930's, Richard Dana Skinner, a catholic critic, published *Eugene O'Neill: A Poet's Quest* (1935). The book was revised three decades later in 1964 (New York: Russell & Russell). It is concerned with O'Neill's morality, and sees O'Neill as a writer representing the turmoil of individual soul. It examines the drama in chronological order from *Bound East for Cardiff* to *Days Without End*.

The first extensive, solid, critical-scholarly analysis of O'Neill is Edwin A. Engel's *The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1953). The book focuses on O'Neill's plays to the exclusion of other critics and O'Neill's own statements. It pays attention to background analogues for O'Neill's plays in European and American culture. The book is concerned with tracing out various themes that O'Neill pursued throughout his career. "The abiding theme of his plays was the struggle between life and death." (Engel: 299) His heroes were outsiders, "at odds with society." (299) Since O'Neill wrote nothing else but his own life, he "concerned man in his own image And sought the source of suffering in such dark areas as existence itself, the ill concerned universe and the stupidity of the human beings...." (299) Doris V. Falk's *Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension: An Interpretive Study of the Plays* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1958) is valuable contribution to O'Neill's criticism which appeared in the wake of the enthusiasm generated by the playwright's death. The interest here is psychological or psychoanalytical, in order to point out an important psychological pattern in the plays, and thus, in the mind of the playwright. As Falk herself tells that "The primary purpose here, however, is less to make the plays reveal their author than to use the author's thought patterns to illuminate his work." (10) O'Neill is thought to have analogies to Jung in the conception of the unconscious as an autonomous force and more importantly for Miss Falk's main thesis, to have unconsciously anticipated the findings of the Neo-Freudians, Eric Fromm and particularly, Karen Horney. She strikes to a single complex pattern, which depicts "the lifelong torment of a mind in conflict". (3) In her opinion, in the last plays, "O'Neill walked into the valley not of death alone but of nothingness in which all values are illusions and all meanings fades before the terrors of ambiguity." (28)

Clifford Leech's *Eugene O'Neill* (New York: Grove, 1963) is a brief and general introduction, covering life and writings, and is part of a series on modern writers. Leech sees O'Neill's career as falling into a systolic-diastolic pattern of failure and success. He

emphasizes that O'Neill's plays can be better understood if one is equipped with the knowledge of his life and circumstances, and that his plays explore, "some of the more painful aspects of human conditions." (1) Robert Brustein in his book *The Theatre of Revolt: an Approach to Modern Drama* (Boston: Little Brown, 1964) observes that the quality of O'Neill's works improved with the passage of time. O'Neill's uniquely probing vision, "centers on the dilemma of modern man in a world without God." (Brustein: 3) The playwright reflects metaphysically "on the very quality of existence" (3) in the last phase.

John Gassner's *Eugene O'Neill* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 1965) gives a good but brief introduction to his plays. John Henry Raleigh in *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1965) studies O'Neill's plays not in chronological order but as one organic whole made up of a variety of themes characters and preoccupations. Raleigh observes that there is the principle of polarity that underlies O'Neill's works. His overall scheme is to show O'Neill's development from an interesting but flawed playwright to a great playwright. A concluding chapter tries to show the relationship between O'Neill's plays and American culture. D.V.K. Raghavacharayulu's *Eugene O'Neill: A Study is a philosophical analysis of O'Neill's plays* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1965) is written during the decade of sixties. According to Raghavacharayulu, O'Neill's mind was 'Bi-polar', and the predominant quality of his vision was dialectical. Within the overall duality, O'Neill had four distinct stages: belonging, becoming, being and nothingness. O'Neill looks at man as an eternal wanderer who is caught in the life's dilemmas which can neither comprehend nor resolve, and the vision of the human state and predicament is the single ideas and the single theme and the single image that has dramatized in play after play.

Olivia Coolidge's *Eugene O'Neill* (New York: McBride, 1966) describes the playwright's association with the avant-garde Provincetown playhouse group, and her opinion is that O'Neill's plays are attempts to mirror the turmoil of a whole generation. In her views, "O'Neill is a man who lost his rudder...All his major characters are creatures of passion, unable to dominate force, which they do not understand. They are lost in a world, which is too big for them. It matters little that their struggle is not with an everyday world but an inner one." (126) Chester C. Long's *The Role of Nemesis in the Structure of Selected Plays by Eugene O'Neill* (The Hague: Mouton, 1968) discusses how 'Nemesis', justice in action, operates in O'Neill's plays. Timo Tiusanen's *O'Neill's Scenic Images* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968) studies O'Neill's use of setting, costumes, sound and lighting effects, music, the actor's individual expression for dramatic effect. Egil Tornqvist in his book *A drama of Souls* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969) studies O'Neill's use of super naturalistic techniques. Referring to Nietzsche's influence on O'Neill, he observes that O'Neill's view of life bears on unmistakable kinship with Nietzsche's. He

finds in the works of O'Neill frequent description of men and women, who have repressed their true-self in favour of some more pleasing image, their actions are by no means always the truthful often they play a part not so much of others as to themselves.

Horst Frenz's *Eugene O'Neill* (New York: Frederick Unger, 1971) gives a glimpse O'Neill whose suffering and sacrifice distinguish him from any other American playwright. Travis Bogard's *Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972) provides another major critical study on O'Neill's work as a playwright's effort at self-understanding. It contains outstanding discussion of the individual plays. Bogard's approach is straightforward, looking at O'Neill's development from early adolescence to full maturity, always in context of his plays. Each play is dealt with, as well as theatrical conditions of its production and the critical and popular response it received. Bhagwat S. Goyal in *The Strategy of Survival: Human Significance of O'Neill's Plays* (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1975) finds his plays dealing with the fundamental problem of human survival in an indifferent universe. Leonard Chabrowe in *Ritual and Pathos: The Theatre of O'Neill* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1976) observes that O'Neill's idea of theatre as a temple of 'God Dionysus' complemented with an idea of life as an inevitable tragedy. Discussion is focused on production and theatrical setting of the plays. Julien Lind Philips' *The Mask: Theory and Practical Use in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (Chicago: Cappella Books, 1977) deals with O'Neill's use of mask in his plays as a way of getting at the inner reality of characters.

The first book that appeared on O'Neill in the eighties was C.P. Sinha's *Eugene O'Neill's Tragic Vision* (New Delhi: New Statesman Publishing Company, 1983). Sinha observes the common man as tragic hero of O'Neill's plays who suffers because of his failure in realizing his ideal, to fulfill his dreams, to live a life as he wants it. It is a sincere effort "to investigate the source that contributed to the evaluation of O'Neill's 'Dionysian' tragic vision which sees tragedy as a 'celebration of life'". (Sinha: V) The last chapter attempts to establish that O'Neill moves from negation to affirmation, from denial of God to acceptance of God, from hopelessness to hope. Normand Berlin's *Eugene O'Neill* (New York: Grove, 1982) refers to the playwright's feelings of homelessness in this world. He observes O'Neill's protagonists as strangers who never feel at home, who do not really want and are not wanted, who can never belong, and are always in love with the dead. It presents an analysis of O'Neill's development as a playwright. Prof. Chaman Ahuja's *Tragedy, Modern Temper and O'Neill* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1984) discusses O'Neill as a writer of tragedy in the accepted norms. He finds that O'Neill has realized that there was something sickly in the modern age itself which has perverted man's nature. So he decided to diagnose this modern malaise with its diverse strains which had inflected the concentrated

faceless masses. Deborah Marie Long's *Existential Quest: Family and Form in Selected American Plays* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1986) discusses that the plays of major American dramatists present an identical vision of reality which is translated into concrete objects. The existential tenets such as consciousness, alienation, the affirmation of life, freedom and man's capacity to create his own being, the call of care and spiritual growth and authentic values are hallmarks of O'Neill's vision according to Long. Tej Pal Singh's *Eugene O'Neill: Quest For reality in His Plays* (New Delhi: National Book Organisation, 1987) is a valuable, scholarly and comprehensive study containing outstanding discussions of the individual plays from his earliest ones to the last masterpieces. It "aims at interpreting and evaluating the major dramatic works of O'Neill on the basis of the broad principles of Marxist literary criticism rather than traditional bourgeois literary criticism". (Singh: XI) John Wingate Jordon's *An Examination of Eugene O'Neill's plays in the Light of C.G. Jung collected works and Recorded conversation* (Philadelphia: John Benjamin's Publishing House, 1987) studies O'Neill's plays in psychological terms.

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