

# Psychological Study of Middle Plays

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**Abstract – From the plays of his middle phase (1926-1934), three plays, namely, *The Great God Brown* (1926), *Strange Interlude* (1928), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), have been selected for the present study in the light of the 'play' of the unconscious or bad faith and the conscious. While in his early plays, O'Neill's characters find it difficult to come out of their unconsciously cultivated desires or their bad faith, in the plays of his middle phase, they in the end, through their suffering, grow conscious, though not completely, the futility of their dreams, and indeed show signs of understanding of what it means to be living in bad faith.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Thus, they try to find their true selves, and shun their assumed selves which they had taken as a cover to hide what they really are. Through the use of expressionistic techniques, O'Neill brings out the split personality of his characters. As in *The Great God Brown*, Eugene O'Neill experiments with the use of masks to show the double self of being which results from suppression of his natural self.

O'Neill uses expressionist technique to lay bare the soul of his protagonists. The main advantage of expressionistic technique lies in ignoring the surface reality, and probing the irrational inside. There is a constant struggle between the unconscious plenitude and the conscious incompleteness. There is an in-depth probing into the sub-conscious, in order thus, to reveal the human self, struggles to fill his lack. He shows how man can enable himself to face the society; but instead of facing it frontally, he hides himself behind a mask by way of bad-faith. Bad-faith is a form of unconscious in which a man tries to ignore his conscious and reality. We need to wear a mask sometimes as a protection against onslaught of forces operating in the world of distorted values and visions. The mask, however, assumes a menacing power to such an extent that the actual face of its wearer begins to suffer from an unexpressed anguish, and is ultimately annihilated under the mask's grim and consuming shadow. Sometimes man's psychological need to wear another person's mask, to become what one is not, results in a tragic suspension between opposites. The ultimate effect of O'Neill's use of mask is:

To portray inner action and penetrate the depths of his characters' personalities. This is accomplished by the

visible relationship between the mask and the real face behind it. The mask represents not only what the world sees but what the character wants them to see – an attitude towards the world expressed in the mask. The real face expresses the true inner state of the character, which is covered by the mask." (Tedesco 115)

In such a case, the wearer of the mask has to suffer from a double agony- the excruciating pain arising out of losing his real identity, and his failure to assume the identity of one he wants to become. This agony becomes more intensified when he experiences the torture of the aspired life, without showing any of its creative urges. This reduces him to a mere lifeless 'mask' instead of being a loving, creative man. As Macgowan has rightly observed about *The Great God Brown*:

...O'Neill uses the naked face and masked face to picture the conflicts between inner characters and the distortions which outer life thrusts upon it... He goes on to use the mask as a means to dramatize the transfer of personality from one man to another... and sometimes, if they do not know how and when to take off that mask they die possessed and tortured. (qtd. in Bogard 267)

O'Neill uses masks only to distinguish between the assumed self and the original self of a character. The play shows the fight of split personality. Masks are generally used to represent the good and the evil in a character. Masks symbolize the inner conflict of man. They are used to reveal what is going on in the unconscious or the sub-conscious mind as the human psyche is too complex to understand. The need of mask arises when the real, naked self of a human being is not accepted as it is by the corrupt value

system of the surrounding social system. It is a sheer irony that man has to wear a mask in order to exist, to feel alive. In a world where illusions appear to be real, masks are worshipped as the real faces, and the real self of a person cry for recognition in despair. Besides showing the two faces of man, mask expresses the polarities inherent in human existence such as Paganism and Christianity; life and death; father and mother; saint and Satan; art and materialism; and creation and destruction. About the use of mask in this play O'Neill has himself said in his 'Memoranda on Masks':

In *The Great God Brown* I would now make the masks symbolize more definitely the abstract theme of the play instead of, as in the old production, stressing the more superficial meaning that people are mistaken by them for their masks. (119)

The central problem of the play is both subtle and complex. It is the deformation of a creative impulse in a hostile environment, an urge towards spiritual self-fulfillment. O'Neill very aptly points out the dogma of masks in the play as "one's outer self passes in a solitude haunted by the masks of others; One's inner life passes in a solitude hounded by the mask of one-self." (117) The play represents the duality of man through two different characters. It also brings to light that to live in this hostile world man has to suppress his natural instincts.

In *The Great God Brown*, Dion Anthony and William Brown are two principal characters who symbolize man's self-destructive struggle "to exist as a mask among the masks of living." (122) Though physically they are two different characters, psychologically they represent the composite man of today, divided against himself; his real identity lost between the conscious and the sub-conscious, between appearance and reality, between the external social self and the suppressed true self. The name of Dion Anthony itself is symbolic. As O'Neill explains:

Dion Anthony – Dionysus and St. Anthony – the creative pagan acceptance of life, fighting eternal war with masochistic, life-denying spirit of Christianity as represented by St. Anthony the whole struggle resulting in this creative joy in life for life's sake, frustrated rendered, abortive distorted by morality from Pan into Satan, into a Mephistopheles mocking himself in order to feel alive. (qtd. in Goyal 88)

Dion's problem is how to live in a world where one cannot be one-self, and more importantly, how to get his creative talent recognized by a society which worships material success only. Dion has experienced an early traumatic shock, which compels him to employ defensive mechanism in order to protect his over-sensitive soul from a rapacious outside world. Dion from the outset is confronted with a world that is unaware of his inner nature and responds to his

probing insensitively. His outer world is determined by life-frustrating drives of materialism represented by William Brown, the great god of success. Brown is compelled to suppress and sell his creative talent for visionless routine of getting and spending. He is unable to live up to the ideals he has discovered as an imaginative seeker after truth, and is forced to exist as a mere shadow of himself amidst the indifferent neutralizing forces of life. He has lost his touch with the creative resources within.

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