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Eugene O'Neill

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EUGENE O'NEILL

An Honors Study Report
Presented to

Mr. Dennis Holt

by

Robert W. Moore

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December 6, 1974

EUGENE O'NEILL

The American theatre owes the place it has in the world scene to many lives and their efforts, to people who helped bring it along in the slow development. Nevertheless, few would deny that if one person could be said to be most responsible for that development, that person would be Eugene O'Neill. It was O'Neill that first made the other parts of the world stand up and take notice of the American stage. And what they noticed were the plays of O'Neill. He remains to this day one of the two or three best known American authors in foreign countries, as well as one of the most performed playwrights. The four Pulitzer prizes and the Nobel prize he won show the gratitude of his contemporaries. The critics reviews of the 1973 Broadway revival of A Moon for the Misbegotten show the gratitude of a new generation.

Because of the influence O'Neill has had, and the preeminence he enjoys with America's playwrights, we undertook to study his plays and his life, and see what conclusions we could draw. This is what we hoped to do here, to draw conclusions. Since the main emphasis in the study was laid upon the reading, this will be a rather brief introduction. We will talk first about the major and recurring themes in O'Neill's plays, then his weaknesses, and finally his strengths.

THE THEMES

Several issues held enough importance with O'Neill to resurface in several dramas. Despite this, however, two themes

possessed O'Neill more than any others. The primary can be termed "the search for God," or "the transcendent," and the secondary, using the language of The Iceman Cometh, the number of people numbed by "pipedreams." The two are very closely related, the failure in the first causing the need for the second.

From the time that he began writing full length plays, O'Neill expressed in his work the overwhelming desire to discover something "beyond," transcending life, which could give his existence an inkling of meaning. This constitutes the major theme of almost all of his plays, and exists in the others as well. The results of this search are different in various stages in O'Neill's career. For instance, the search for God in the early plays often meant mysticism. The mystic way can be seen as early as The Emperor Jones, and later in The Fountain, The Great God Brown, Lazarus Laughed, and Dynamo. The mystic elements fail miserably as art, but do reveal what much of the concern he had at this time.

An experience of relationship or union with the rest of humanity (which is seen as an interconnected whole) constitutes the second type of transcendence. This is seen symbolically in The Hairy Ape, with Yank's struggle to find a place in the world. This is found as early as the one act play Bound East for Cardiff where Driscoll finds a religion of sorts by being bedside with another Yank at the point of his death. Other plays in this type include All God's Chillun Got Wings, Marco Millions, The Great God Brown, Strange Interlude, and Morning

Becomes Electra. The play which perhaps presents this best is the last play O'Neill ever finished, A Moon for the Misbegotten, based on the last few weeks of his brother's life. The union of spirits of Jamie and Josie on her porch under moonlit sky is the nearest thing to a salvation experience either could hope to know.

The experience in A Moon for the Misbegotten is somewhat unique, for there seems to be breakthrough to something. In the other plays he expresses doubt as to whether one is getting through or not. In at least two plays, Lazarus Laughed and The Iceman Cometh, the conclusion is that you can not get through. In the former Lazarus has "come back to tell you all" about death. And he tells it all. Death is "et nulla", nothingness. In Iceman young Parrit feels guilt in which there is no earthly propitiation, so leaves life from a third story fire escape. This is tragic, a man wanting to find transcendence, but failing to, and therefore admitting the meaninglessness of death, and life, as well. For O'Neill, however, the problem is complicated by the fact when one's object of worship is taken away, life becomes unbearable. This leads to O'Neill's comments on "pipedreams" and their place in society.

The pipedream, the escape from the realities of life, is presented as a necessary alternative in human lives. In fact, O'Neill understands it fully. In Long Day's Journey Into Night we have the story of O'Neill's own home in which all four "haunted Tyrone's" live supported by their pipedreams: Mary by her falsified childhood memories and morphine addiction; James by a

blind pride in his abilities as a business man, good provider, and actor; Jamie by a growing dependence on John Barleycorn; and Edmund through poetry. In the play Edmund quotes a prose poem by Baudelaire that one senses sums up O'Neill's feeling as well:

Be drunken, always. That is the point: nothing else matters. If you would not feel the horrible burden of Time weighing on your shoulders and crushing you to the earth, be drunken continually.

Drunken with what? With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you will. But be drunken.

And, if sometimes, on the stairs of a palace, or on the green side of a ditch, or in the dreary solitude of your own room, you should awaken and the drunkenness be half or wholly slipped away from you, ask of the wind, or of the wave, or of the star, or of the bird, or of the clock, of whatever flies, or sighs, or rocks, or sings, or speads, ask what hour it is; and the wind, wave, star, bird clock, will answer you: "It is the hour to be drunken! Be drunken, if you would not be martyred slaves of Time; be drunken continually! With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you will."

In The Iceman Cometh, the prophet Hickey gets the roomers at Harry Hope's to look at reality, with the result of crushing the spirits of each. The "hope" is restored when Hickey is gone. Many other plays have this theme. It is represented by the masks of The Great God Brown and Lazarus Laughed. In The Fountain Ponce de Leon believes that he will find the waters that will return his yesterday. All O'Neill plays have examples of this, from the one-acters all the way to the late plays.

THE WEAKNESSES

It is easier to talk of the weaknesses of O'Neill than the strengths, possible because they are so paradoxical in nature. How anyone could have survive after so many outstanding weaknesses is hard to imagine. It is a testimony to the great-

ness of O'Neill that he has overcome his weaknesses.

There was a time when O'Neill was discredited to such a degree, however, that no one was capable of judging his work objectively. It was in vogue to put him down. This occurred in the early thirties, but his international reputation was still strong enough to cause him to be elected as the Nobel Prize winner in 1936. The poor home reputation was a result of poor work and flaws in the good, complicated with the fact that he spent a good deal of time overseas, which hurt him on the homefront. O'Neill stayed in disfavor with the critics until after his death.

The debt that O'Neill owes producer-director Jose Quintero perhaps cannot be measured. When he brought the revival of The Iceman Cometh in 1956, and the first production of Long Day's Journey Into Night that same year, a serious reappraisal of O'Neill work took place, which was favorable in results. Revivals of A Touch of the Poet and, in 1973, A Moon for the Misbegotten seem to have secured O'Neill's reputation for many years to come. All were under the direction of Quintero.

The weaknesses that caused the discreditation of O'Neill are legion. Possibly the most damaging of all is the inability of O'Neill to turn a phrase or to add sparkle to sentences. There are not great poetic speeches in O'Neill because O'Neill was not great with words. This does not mean that many scenes do not have poetic beauty, however. He was good in recapturing the sound of dialects, but his ability did not go much beyond that. Clive Barnes remarked that while the banality of language

did not keep him from greatness, it did keep him from a greater greatness.

O'Neill experimented a great deal, and many of his experimental plays failed, most notably The Fountain, The Great God Brown, and Dynamo. Others, like Lazarus Laughed, are written with devices, here the continuous laughter of title role, that make performance of them nearly impossible.

In the early plays, there is a feeling that scenes are often rushed in order to get to the main parts. This was cured in the later plays, in such as Long ...Night being timed perfectly throughout.

Repetition to the point of monotony (Paul Crabtree, who played Don Parritt in the original production of The Iceman Cometh, counted eighteen times where he expressed the same idea), the tendency to philosophize through monologues, and at times, poor characterization, all hurt to an extent the quality of some O'Neill plays.

THE STRENGTHS

The strongest point of an O'Neill drama is that it is dramatic. He had a sense of the dramatic that is rarely equalled. Some are so strong as to be overpowering. The dramatic thing is that before you on stage or on the page you can see the human drama played out with all its intensity and emotions. This is heightened in the late plays where all of the characters are so incredibly down on our level with all of my problems and hopes.

While O'Neill does have some weak characters, he also has

some truly great ones. As in most areas, this is especially true in his late plays, especially in A Moon for the Misbegotten, where he did not have the subjectivity inherent in Long Day's Journey Into Night.

By the time O'Neill had entered his late forties, he had matured into the playwright with complete mastery in his craft. In these plays there is completeness. This doesn't mean that they are flawless, but that they are everything a play should be.

A truly amazing thing about O'Neill is that he improved with age. Many seem to burn out when young and then go down. O'Neill soared higher and higher with age. One must speculate that if disease had not crept in ten years before death, ending his writing, he would have produced more great works.

There are other things to add to the list of his strong points, but his plays are quite difficult to explain in terms of why they are good, while viewing one is assurance enough that they are.

Someone has said that O'Neill is the most read playwright in the world excepting Shakespeare and possibly Shaw. That would be difficult to prove but the statement is indicative of the place Eugene O'Neill holds in drama and literature. I believe that his greatest moment in Southern sections of the United States, because the honest language in his dramas make performances of any save Beyond the Horizon rare.

Why does O'Neill enjoy such a broad following? One very possible reason might be that he had deep convictions about

plays and the playwright. He envisioned the playwright as a prophet. He wrote:

Most modern plays are concerned with the relation between man and man, but that does not interest me at all. I am interested only in the relation between man and God. The playwright today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it--the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with. It seems to me that anyone trying to do big work nowadays must have this big subject behind all the little subjects of his plays or novels, or he is simply scribbling around the surface of things and has no more real status than a parlor entertainer.

O'Neill had this quality in his work. Perhaps this is one of the things that went together to make Eugene O'Neill one of our greatest playwrights.

Material Read in Project

Plays

Bound East for Cardiff(1914)
Ile(1917)
In the Zone(1917)
The Long Voyage Home(1917)
The Moon of the Caribees(1917)
The Rope(1918)
Where the Cross is Made(1918)
Anna Christie(1920)
The Emperor Jones(1920)
The Hairy Ape(1921)
The Fountain(1923)
All God's Chillun Got Wings(1923)
The Great God Brown(1925)
Marco Millions(1925)
Lazarus Laughed(1926)
Strange Interlude(1927)
Dynamo(1928)
Mourning Becomes Electra(1931)
Ah, Wilderness(1932)
The Iceman Cometh(1939)
More Stately Mansions(1940, unfinished)
Long Day's Journey Into Night(1941)
A Touch of the Poet(1942)
A Moon for the Misbegotten(1943)

Books

O'Neill, Arthur and Barbara Gelb.