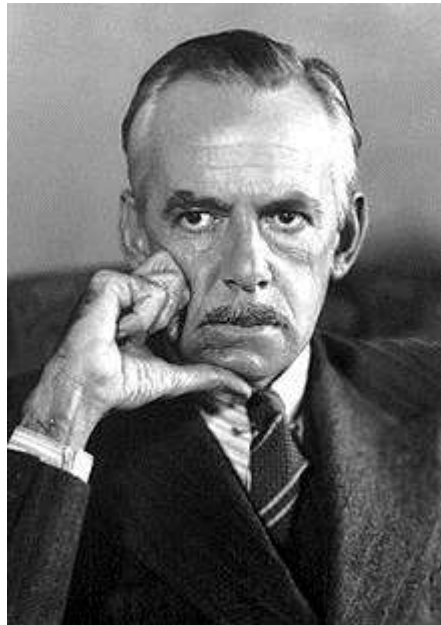


Tragic Vision in the Works of Eugene O'Neill

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Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eugene_O'Neill

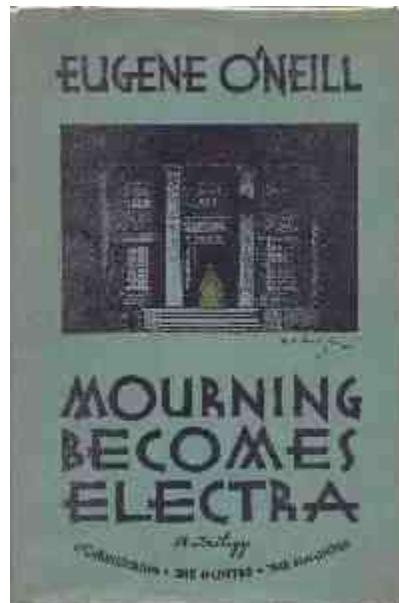
Introduction

Eugene O'Neill's position in the history of American drama is well established. He is a sincere and conscientious writer who gains popularity and fame as a serious playwright by virtue of his remarkable social consciousness. He has paved the way for an understanding of the predicament by presenting the basic concepts of life through a picture of the American society. The more O'Neill's characters yearn for some higher ideal, for spiritual fulfillment or intellectual or moral freedom, the more mired they become in doomed relationships, addiction, and squalor. O'Neill was a finer thinker than has often been acknowledged, and not quite as solipsistic as his plays can seem in isolation. He wrote not only out of his own suffering and damage, but also rooting his sense of America's modern failures in a framework of classical tragedy.

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O'Neill's Tragic Vision



Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mourning_Becomes_Electra.jpg

O'Neill is a modern tragic artist who has a fine sense of dramatic values and a penetrating insight into emotion. His imagination has a fiery heat which uplifts and ennobles everything it touches, even the sordid and the mean. Masood Ali Khan maintains that, "O'Neill's sense of the dramatic in life and its realization in the theatre is ever present, and certainly nothing can cancel out his innate ability to tell a story." (p. 124). His plays portray man in relation to his social environment, and in one play after another he criticized the whole structure of contemporary American society. That is why his plays are more than moment's entertainment. It is not man as an individual alone that concerns O'Neill; it is man in a social order, tortured, starved, disillusioned, thwarted and driven to disaster by the forces of a system which cares nothing for the general welfare of society. Man moves across the stage of O'Neill's plays not as a free and undetached individual, not merely as an individual in relation to a few characters who are associated with him in the immediate drama which makes the play, but he treats man against a rich background of social forces. It is the social implication that makes his plays to have a life in the minds of the audience after they have left the theatre and scattered the quiet of individual thought.

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O'Neill's plays are mostly tragedies, but they are tragedies which strike at the very roots of the sickness of today. They attempt to explain human sufferings and the way to justify it. In a letter to George Jean Nathan O'Neill wrote,

The playwright must dig at the roots of 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 ... (xvii).

Dramatizing Subconscious Emotions

O'Neill has made a consistent and impassioned attempt to dramatize subconscious emotions. Life is his theme and life is often violent, mean, squalid, spiteful, confusing, maddening; but there is beauty too and love and peace though only fitfully. What God (or nature) has made for man, and what man has made for man, and what man has made for himself are the three tortuous streams that meet in the pool of human misery and tragedy. Raymond Williams quotes of O'Neill in his book *Modern Tragedy* as follows:

The tragedy of man is perhaps the only significant thing about him. What I am after is to get an audience leaving the theatre with an exultant feeling from seeing somebody on stage facing life, fighting against the eternal odds, not conquering, but perhaps inevitably being conquered. The individual life is made significant just by the struggle. (P.116)

Heart Rending

O'Neill's *Beyond the Horizon*, *The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape*, *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *The Great God Brown* are heart rending plays and they are mostly concerned with men. His works reveal strong originality and the effect of forces in the world outside himself which sometimes help mould and sometimes distort the expression of his own talents. The life force in his plays is not a part of

life; even the motion is negative, working in man's heart to accomplish his destruction. The plays show that the modern fate is both in man and outside him; it paralyzes his mind, his consciousness and his will and his emotions are his worst enemies.

Beyond the Horizon and Other Plays

In his play *Beyond the Horizon*, we see the mental and physical degradation of a man who cannot live without illusions. Each character in this play is obsessed by his desire for what he can never have for what lives in beyond the horizon.

O' Neill's use of expressionistic technique is remarkable. *The Hairy Ape* and *The Emperor Jones* are fine examples. In both plays, the attention is focused on the central figure, and the other characters are not individualized.

The Hairy Ape dramatizes the vision of the tragic and alienated condition of men in the modern complex social system. The play symbolizes the struggle of modern men within industrial society following an individual's (Yank) baffled search for identity to recover his sense of belongingness. Yank is a representative of not only a representative of lower working class but also of the modern man in general and his alienation from society is reflective of one of the main challenges faced by all men of today.

We see the psychological terrors and obsessions of Brutus Jones in the play *The Emperor Jones*.

All God's Chillun Got Wings is sharp and pertinent analysis of the intermarriage between whites and Blacks, its psychology is good enough and it is more didactic than O'Neill has ever before attempted to be.

In *The Great God Brown*, O'Neill has sought to exhibit, in a vibrant and lyrical style, man's aspirations: it is a dramatic paean to man's struggle to identify himself with nature. The

tone throughout is mystically ecstatic. Man's way is seen here winding through a vale of tragedy, but it wins.

Tragic Heroes – Neither Kings nor Princes

O'Neill's tragic heroes are neither kings nor princes, nor great military generals. Aristotle had laid down that the tragic hero must be an exceptional individual so that his fall from his former greatness may raise the tragic emotions of pity and fear. But O'Neill's tragic personages are all drawn from the humblest ranks of the society. They are all ordinary men and women, suffering and downtrodden.

O'Neill has been influenced greatly by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, the psychoanalysts, who stressed the importance of the subconscious in human motivation. He wrote only for the stage unhampered by the conventions of the stage, and he wrote to explore the unexplored regions of the human mind and not solely to entertain.

Freudian Concept and *Mourning Becomes Electra*

Mourning Becomes Electra is based on Freudian concept Electra Complex. Written in three parts requiring a performance of over five hours, O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* sets the family tragedy of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* during the American Civil War. For the supernatural Furies that haunt Orestes in the original, O'Neill substitutes subconscious psychological forces, in particular hidden incestuous desires.

Lavinia (parallel to Electra) loves her father with more than childlike affection. When he dies mysteriously in the presence of her mother Christine, she suspects foul play. Christine poisoned her husband because of her affair with a distant cousin, who resembles her son. When Orin (Orestes) returns from the war, Lavinia informs him of recent events and, despite hints of unnatural love for his mother, the two murder Christine's lover; in a fit of grief she kills herself. In a major change from the original, Orin's motivation is not to avenge his father (whom he

doesn't like) but jealousy over his mother's betrayal with another man. The children's latter days are haunted by guilt and their suppressed desire for each other. Only in the end do the characters face the reality of their longings, and Orin kills himself in despair. O'Neill's attempt to substitute Freudian theories for the influence of fate and the gods appears forced and artificial to many critics today, but few would fault his ambitious goal of following the Greek example.

New Gods – Heredity and Environment

O' Neill believes that heredity and environment are the new Gods governing the destiny of men. Man may not be able to change his past or heredity, but he can certainly modify his social environment or at least adjust himself to it, and in this way escape much sorrow and suffering. As a social critic he stresses the evils of the present social structure, so that a way to the betterment may be found.

O' Neill's view about human life is remarkable. Human life has no intrinsic meaning or order, no harmony like that of nature except that meaning than man projects upon it. He must create his own values and impose upon universe whatever significance and whatever moral order he except to adopt as a *raison d'être* or as a basic for an ethical code.

Conclusion

O'Neill greatly admired the Greeks and wanted to emulate their tragic vision which he thought exulted in human potential, raising spiritual understanding of them above the pettiness of everyday life. However, he acknowledged the challenge of writing tragedy today. Throughout his career, O'Neill spoke seriously to and for a wide variety of Americans from the city to the country, from farm and factory to the ivory tower. He is a uniquely American playwright. His language is fascinating because it is so familiar an American diction while it probes so deep. He digs into the well- springs of human emotions in the fashions of the American frontiersman pushing into the wide openness of a new land.

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