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## **Communication and Inarticulation – Symbols and Images in the Plays of O’Neill**

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## **Communication Strategies Employed by Creative Writers**

Different strategies of communication are employed by playwrights, novelists and poets to communicate their ideas in written form to their readers.

A novelist may present a character virtually whole in as many pages as he chooses to write. Often a few sentences or a few paragraphs present the outlining features of a character in a novel, and the story slowly unfolds the details.

A poet speaks in his or her own voice.

Both novelists and poets may assume their reader to be an individual. But a playwright has to think of an audience even as he or she relates to the individuals. The playwright must always translate his or her thoughts in terms of the theatre. They can speak only through their actors and the atmosphere they create in a scene. The actors must transform the playwright's words into signals of sight and sound to the spectators in the theatre.

## **Eugene O'Neill and His Communication Strategies**

In this paper, I discuss some of the strategies adopted by Eugene O'Neill in his plays to communicate what he intends. These strategies include not only the use of Standard American English but also a variety of social and regional dialects, sometimes bordering on slang and ultimately to silence or simply inarticulation, which in itself articulates. Eugene O'Neill's use of the American idiom is very impressive, and relates not only to the characterization of his characters, but also as an aid for his ideology.

## **Language of Suffering**

Eugene O'Neill attempts to explain human suffering and even try to justify it. He wrote,

I'm always, always, trying to interpret Life in terms of lives....I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind-fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it-Mystery certainly- and of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Forces express him....And my profound conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about and that it is possible-or can be-to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values and symbols in the theatre which may to some degree bring home to members of a modern audience their

ennobling identity with the tragic figures on the stage. (Eugene O'Neill Newsletter, <http://www.eoneill.com/library/newsletter/subject-htm>).

### **Nonverbal Communication**

In an attempt to communicate his ideas, O'Neill employs non-verbal interpretations like symbols, images, settings, lighting and verbal interpretations like the layman's language and sometimes mere actions without words to signify meanings to the audience.

### **Symbolic Characters**

In order to communicate his vision of life, O'Neill made use of symbolic characters. For example, Yank in *The Hairy Ape* is Everyman.

O'Neill himself wrote,

*The Hairy Ape* was propaganda in the sense that it was a symbol of a man, who has lost his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not yet acquired in a spiritual way. Thus, not being able to find it on earth nor in heaven, he's in the middle, trying to make peace, taking the 'woist punches from bot' of 'em.' ... The subject here is the same ancient one that always was and always will be the one subject for drama, and that is man and his struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with the gods, but is now with himself, his own past, his attempt to belong. (Eugene O'Neill in *Playwrights on Playwriting*, ed. by Toby Cole, 1961).

In the Fifth Avenue scene in *The Hairy Ape*, the brilliant electric lights work as substitute for the divine light of God. The lighting takes on a more significant role in Yank's confrontation with the Gorilla, as it dissolves into darkness.

Loss of light and light turning into darkness are easy symbols, but the way these are used have great effect on the reader and the spectator.

The descriptions of the scenes of *Beyond the Horizon* offer yet another set of interesting symbols that focus on the earthly and the spiritual, joy and sorrow, love and hate, etc.

### **The Sea and the Fog**

The ship on the vast ocean is easily likened to human existence in this world which is full of uncertainties, even as it offers challenges and beauties of its own. The movement of the ship is enabled by burning coal within, stoked by human hands. The vast modern ships constructed with steel symbolize the victory and dominance of the age of science and industry. Reason becomes the bedrock of all these, but, then, reason is seen to be dry and almost inhuman in its dealing with affairs of humans.

"The fog was O'Neill's first and last symbol of man's inability to know himself, or other men, or his destiny" (*Eugene O'Neill and Tragic Tension* by Doris V. Falk, 181).

## **Experiments with the Manifestations of Language: Deep and Surface Structures**

There is something unusual about O'Neill's plays. O'Neill's experiments with language deal with a variety of manifestations and uses of language.

"His portrayal of language as inherently ambivalent also may function as a caution to critics who chastise him for his failure to develop a believable language (at least early in his career): don't pay attention to the words themselves, but pay attention to what they both mask and reveal" (*Pipe Dreams and Primitivism* by Donald P. Gagnon p.68).

### **Broken Down Communication**

The plays also create a world in which communication has broken down. Characters' inability to communicate is emphasized as part of O'Neill's portrayal of life. Where communication could have solved a problem, characters choose not to confront and communicate. For instance, in his play *Long Day's Journey into Night* the men often fight amongst themselves over Mary's addiction, but no one is willing to confront her directly. Instead, they allow her to lie to herself about her own addiction and about Edmund's illness. Edmund and Jamie do not communicate well until the last act, when Jamie finally confesses his own jealousy of his brother and desire to see him fail.

In other words, O'Neill seems to bemoan the fact that language which is species specific and is created as the crown symbol of humanity is hardly exploited for the betterment of humanity. Humans' downfall comes mainly because humans either do not recognize or fail to use this powerful tool to solve problems they face. Knowledge is acquired through language and experience. Accumulated knowledge is transferred from one generation to another through language, but generations fail to make use of the healing power of language.

### **Inarticulation**

Inarticulation is not failure or unwillingness to articulate. It may not even mean the inability to articulate. It becomes part of the being of an individual for various reasons, which may be social, individual, ethnic, etc. The concept is found more vividly employed in *The Hairy Ape*. His characters do not express exactly what they mean. It looks like that neither the characters nor the playwright make a deliberate choice in favor of brevity and pregnant meanings, but these just happen. We are forced to interpret and trace the original intent. We often assume the meanings of expressions. Conversation is more a symbolic act for what is not expressed than for what is found in the surface level. The conversation is symbolic of their attitudes and these reveal the undercurrents. Certain expressions are frequently repeated by the characters to bring out their obsessions. Repetition of expressions in conversations is exploited to bring out the salient features of the characters. Abbreviations and distortions are also employed for this purpose.

*The Hairy Ape* employs telegraphic abbreviations and truncations. The first scene reads like this:

Gif me a drink dere, you!  
'Ave a wet!  
Salute  
Gerundheit!  
Skoal  
Drunk as a lord, God stiffen you! Luck!

The words spoken by the characters are not elegant nor are they refined. These words are uttered as if these were discoveries or even inventions. But these bring reality to the scene and the characters in it. O'Neill himself confessed that he "does not think that great language is possible for any one living in the discordant, broken, faithless rhythm of our time. The best one can do is to be pathetically eloquent by one's moving dramatic inarticulations."

### **Creative Writing in India Languages**

The arguments in favor of such use in Indian writing often revolve around writers' commitment to bring reality through creating and recreating the social, regional and vocational pursuits of the characters. For example, Vairamuthu, a leading poet, songster and now a great novelist in Tamil, employs primarily caste dialect/s to bring social and contextual realism. There were many others before him, both in Tamil and other Indian languages, who have adopted this strategy. Even Kalidasa exploits the regional and social dialects in the utterances of his characters. Sometimes, for the portrayal of the psychological status of the characters, authors use this strategy of using colloquialisms, slangs, and linguistic innovations such as employing nouns as verbs, reduplication, coinages, etc.

On the other hand, O'Neill seems to take a different kind of view of language use when he focuses on the Man's journey back to his "roots" and the helplessness of humanity, so to say. For O'Neill, going back to our animal roots should naturally begin with the destruction of the species specific institution, language.

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