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THE FEROCITY OF COVID-19 AND THE DRAMA OF 'SLICE OF LIFE' IN THE PLAYS OF EUGENE O'NEILL

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ABSTRACT



Covid-19 brought with it age old fear and horror that struck the world with unimaginable anguish and destruction, worse than a war. Plague, epidemic, pandemic creates absolute crisis which threatens human race of extinction. The wretched and dismal situation lay to waste the reckless progress of nations all over the world. This paper explores the similar psychological and pathological impacts in the plays of *Eugene O'Neill*. *O'Neill's* plays have been true to life bringing his audience face to face with human sufferings and sadness presenting the vanity of human efforts through it. This paper explores the drama of 'slice of life' in his major plays *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *The Hairy Ape*. The vastness with which he represents life assumes an absurdist and expressionistic form with a touch of poetry in his Drama. He successfully contextualized life in all its possibilities that could be relevant for any time and space.

O'Neill juxtaposed the life of different classes and ages within a growing society and economy. The lives of Characters on his stage are affected with depression, sorrow, guilt, sadness, etc that stimulate painful emotions. *O'Neill's* inability to pursue an optimistic approach to life due to due to unhappy familial relationships gave him a tragic vision towards Life. There is no reconciliation to be found on his stage which leads to utter desolation and dejection in his plays.



The ferocity of Covid-19 has traumatized the world with rocketing cases and deaths everywhere. The death toll has led to a decline of cognitive function in people which ultimately increases their susceptibility to the virus. People have suffered physically as well as mentally as deaths have increased anxiety, indelible horror, fear, depression in the society. A shock wave of uncertainty, insecurity, vulnerability, fragility has taken hold of every individual who thinks he isn't safe anywhere. Every level of safety is threatened, recreating the abysmal situation of despair and hopelessness like that of war only this time it is warfare of our immune systems. The initial waves of corona had created even worsening conditions when dead bodies were not even given to the family for last rites which created a different kind of pain in people altogether. It came as a cultural and ideological shock to the majority when people still couldn't understand the system and the virus kept changing its genetic material. The preparedness of countries was evaluated every hour and the world was brought a little closer through news channels by knowing the updated situations of other countries.

Staying home for an unusual period of time only added to the unending horror of life as the threat of virus was still the same and the income of people went down. A reduced earnings have hit the working class and middle class the most leading to a rise in anxiety, sleeplessness, apprehensions, agitation, stress, tension, trepidation, palpitation etc in men and especially a working woman who is burdened with extra work at home too. Covid-19 has affected every strata of life with the same intensity and disintegrated the strongest economy and polity of the world. This paper is going to explore the aforementioned themes prevalent in the plays and times of *Eugene O'Neill*. His drama extensively deals with the cause and effect of depression, anxiety, despair, desolation, stress etc.

The Dramatic Arts evolved in Grecian and English civilization with a common idea to represent reality of the time. The most popular themes of those times were plagues, wars, religious conflict, national hostility, economic depression etc. A global crisis like covid-19 has led to medical, social, economic, bureaucratic emergencies since past one year; eventually nations have been confronted with new challenges specific to their demography. Illness and diseases have never been out of vogue when it comes to the choice of subject by an author. They even find metaphorical, symbolic, figurative and archetypal use in the artistic productions of the time. In spite of the literary significance of these terms their effects on the society are employed by artists to create a symbol that has intrinsic value of its own. Covid-19 has led to infinite deaths, suicides, depression, anxiety, alienation, etc and poses even worse questions to the world and its powers. *Eugene O'Neill*, like Camus invented his Drama around bigger questions of Life revolving around a similar atmosphere. He uses confrontational, argumentative, accusative, introspective devices to create a highly sensitive atmosphere on the stage. The dialectic of life that he initiated on the American stage has come to prominence in the present time.

While Shakespeare saw the world as a stage *O'Neill* saw life in theatre and wanted to bring out the natural course of drama by linking it to the point of its conception in Greek Tragedy. *O'Neill* wrote between the wars when the essence of life had begun to be questioned by poets and philosophers alike to the point where existentialists and deconstructionists began reinterpreting canonical texts from new points of view. *O'Neill's* attempted a purposeful as well as absurdist approach towards art, making it difficult to place him in a specific tradition. He can be said to have included a little element of every form emerging in his time to achieve a certain kind of transitional dramatist's attributes. He eventually introduced a strong theme of death and madness through stray pregnancies and destruction of life, addiction, violence, suicide etc. It is difficult to say whether *O'Neill* was marred or haunted by suicides while being aware of his own unsuccessful attempt at it. Again losing his family in a span of a few years worsened his perspective towards life and he attempts to make tragedy more important and authentic than comedies on the American stage. *O'Neill's* drama seems more relevant today in the post-covid atmosphere when the spread of a deadly virus has given rise to many situations almost forgotten after the decade-old two wars. The dilemma and insecurity of an unpredictable future dates back to the early part of the 20th century when the world hung between the two destructive wars, economic, social



and political crisis. The viability and authenticity of life has yet again been questioned in a time of advancing health care, science, technology. An upholding development must eradicate the age old adversities but instead it has lead to a significant increase in the prevailing plights of human suffering. A complete transition to internet has brought new predicaments like cyber bullying; zoom fatigue etc has invaded human life. Insecurities and depression has reached a new high leading to new kinds of addiction. Thus the same problems prevail with newer intensity in the common life.

Guilt, depression, tension, anxiety has invaded everyday language in *O'Neill's* drama where characters are put under pressure and observed. The mood and settings employed by *O'Neill* are tightly packed with a sharp ironic silence that makes itself heard more than the verbal battle between the characters for example in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Mary in defending herself raises her voice surprisingly higher and so does other Tyrones. The over protectiveness shown by James towards his wife 'If I've watched you it was to admire how fat and beautiful you looked.' is indicative of issues and anxiety beneath cordiality of the speaker and the receiver. Through the language of the characters the struggle is transmitted on to the audience without the knowledge of others present on the stage. The stage resounds or is brought to life in the accusation of the family members, forghorns etc. The representation of the Tyrones without a shift in scene to outside can be related to the situation of lockdown when families got enormous time to face eachother. The domestic space that was almost getting lost in the new capitalist environment has been revived in the lockdown where no one can escape the tense domestic space by going out.

The confrontational position leads to real conversation within families instead of virtual chats which broke the essential bond required to create familial relationships just before the pandemic. The lockdown gave people opportunities to think about neglected relations and repair their selves like the Tyrones, who on a vacation by a sea get some time to focus on each other. Two members of the households are most talked about due to their health issues that are Mary's drug addiction and Edmund's impending tuberculosis not yet confirmed medically. Prolonged illness and dangerous diseases like syphilis, tuberculosis, cancer, amnesia etc have an ability to create new spaces of fear and horror. Mary struggling with her morphine addiction and horror of unusual coughing sequences heightens the already emotional turmoil of the Tyron household. An intriguing atmosphere of suspicion and speculation prevailed with an occasional outbursts or spasms in the play. Jamie in the presence of her mother is hushed by his father while hinting towards chronic condition of his younger brother. Further his suggestion of going to a quack brings back memories when Mary was carelessly put under his inexperienced guidance of that field. James has often been pointed by other members for his limited and tight-fisted habits and behaviors.

Eugene O'Neill has been the first dramatist to revitalize the seriousness involved in the form of tragedy by deconstructing it with the help of a renowned philosopher Frederic Nietzsche who in his phenomenal work *Birth of Tragedy* reoriented the way in which tragedy would be interpreted by future generation. O'Neill's is more of a vision unlike his European counterparts that seeks to transform the preexisting American drama by introducing expressionism and nihilistic forces in the American society of the time. He went on to infuse the psychological and metaphysical aspects of modern and classical themes on the stage. A different narrative of life took shape in the kind of theatre Eugene O'Neill had imagined and eventually realized in his plays. Even with a crude and absurdist idea of life, *Eugene O'Neill* has dragged the essentiality in it by drawing great amount of interest from modernist and late Victorian dramarists and philosophers. But there is a point of difference where he departs from the writers of his time.

O'Neill's idea of life has evolved from different aspect of his own presence in the American society a dramatist's son, Irish immigrant family etc. The initial period, when he began to write, he was under uncontrolled influence of the immediate environment as Brenda Murphy puts "at the beginning, his father's influence was as evident as Ibsen's, Shaw's, Strindberg's, or Sheldon's, for several of the plays aimed at directly



at the popular audience. It includes the social drama of *Recklessness*; a farcical satire of the movie industry called *The Movie Man*; and *Abortion*, a one-act melodrama..” O’Neill goes on to portray the life of those living on the fringes of a society like prostitutes, drunkards, sailors, addicts etc with a glaring contrast in comparison to other dramatists of the time. The sufferings of the downtrodden are portrayed with realism and sensitivity by the dramatist as he closely observed all the aforementioned lives. And he can alchemically mix sufferings and desires with the theatre and represent it on the stage. C.W. E. Bigsby in his book *Twentieth century American Drama* points out O’Neill’s early stand on the continuity in life and theatre “The theatre to me is life—the substance and interpretation of life [And] life is struggle, often, if not usually, unsuccessful struggle; for most of us have something within us which prevent us from accomplishing what we dream and desire.”

The play in the garb of an outpouring of the playwright has become an apt representation of his life like that of domestic plays of ancient Greece. O’Neill didn’t derive a theory of life for his drama but enthusiastically borrowed it from the ancients and precisely recreated the original themes like sufferings, pain, violence, mystery, etc. While his European counterparts tried to evolve ways to defamiliarize audiences with the stage, O’Neill’s audience was emotionally and sentimentally drawn to his characters and stories. Anna, Jones, Yank, Jamie are all modern characters who are capable of both good and evil that the public empathized with. The three heroes meet with a tragic end and so does the heroine according to O’Neill who couldn’t side with audience and critics who thought marriage meant happy ending by the playwright. For him marriage was the tragic ending where both the persons were doomed, and he wanted to make his idea of tragedy as the norm.

C. W. E. Bigsby says ‘his dramatic strategy in the play lay in the deconstruction of character, in the dismantling of social forms and the unhooking of language. Assurance about sustainability of self, the sequentiality of history and the subordinate nature of event and environment crumbles under pressure. The collapse is not simply atavism of a kind which might make the play racially suspect. His concern is with dramatizing an unconscious whose irrationalisms are ultimately the generators of meaning and the expressions of an anarchy within, which the conscious mind is designed to suppress.’ The playwright feels an urge to explain everything from physical features of subjects and objects to atmospheric shifts of the scenes for the reader and spectator. And his elaborate descriptions give a metaphysical touch to his plays making him differ from his contemporaries. There is a doubleness of everything that occupies the atmosphere projected on the stage trying to reveal the secret of life for example the sea, elm tree, vast farming fields, houses, etc. Frederic I. Carpenter in *The Romantic Tragedy of Eugene O’Neill* says ‘All of O’Neill’s power of invention has dramatized the contrast between dream and reality. Sometimes by means of theatrical lightings, in visions of Jones and Macro Millions; sometimes by means of two planes or of divided stage in *Desire under the Elms* and *Dynamo*; but more often by masks, asides, and frank unrealism, he has made objective this inner division of human mind.’

His early drama is greatly influenced by the philosopher Nietzsche who talked at great length about life for example in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* as pointed by C W E Bigsby “‘life is hard to bear” says Zarathustra ‘but if it were otherwise why should you have pride in the morning and your resignation in the evening’”. The chronic effect of life is felt by such philosophers and playwrights who cannot step out of this suffering like the Sisyphian soul who cannot even dream of removing the boulder for a few seconds and relax. Since O’Neill carries his life sufferings everywhere then how can his characters be relieved of its pain and for him this is the tragedy of life, to always uphold pain and suffering. O’Neill brings the painful existence in the purview of working classes for example Yank in *The Hairy Ape* while authenticating his presence in the immediate environment poses existential questions. He almost gets out of his wits listening to his fellow’s woes of a romantic past, reaffirmation of their social status etc. Yank of all knows his worth and importance for the steel company he works for, only esteeming it higher than he should have.



Thus, life and its criticism have achieved a new stage in his plays that can be disliked by futurity but couldn't be ignored. He can be attributed for creating an American expression of existentialism in the form of 'slice of life' drama in the early part of twentieth century. Each of his plays differed in the intensity or scale of this type of drama depending on the phases of his own life. Finally C. W. E. Bigsby says 'For *O'Neill* the struggle remained a central fact of existence but it became a struggle in which the will could operate as something other than a thirst for power. It became a resistant force, a boundary marking a clear-edged division between man and the absurdity which suffused and defined him but to which he was not obliged to submit.' He drew a blurred line between the binaries of existence as he observed absence and presence, life and lifelessness often too closely in his real life.

O'Neill has unified antithetical themes in his plays for a more classical and primordial effect. Dramatists and Poets have an ability to gather knowledge of the society and translate them into a serialized narration. This process applies to *O'Neill* more than any dramatist as he truthfully brought to stage modern art, pathologies, economic, religious and political issues etc. *O'Neill's* plays transcend time and space to provide a natural as well as realistic settings to American Drama.

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