

Allusions in Eugene O'Neill's Plays

Kumi Ohno

O'Neill continued to pursue realism of human nature in his plays. On the other hand, mysticism and symbolism are also partly used in O'Neill's plays.

As his plays matured, the use of symbolism evolved and changed. His first one-act play, *Bound East for Cardiff* (1916), for example, curtains up with a seriously injured seaman lying down with a pale face. Before the main character dies, he talks to his friend Driscoll about his dream of living on a ranch with a beloved family which he was not able to realize. In this play, the ocean represents a hopeless despair.

However, in the first Pulitzer award winning play, *Beyond the Horizon*, Robert, the main character, fantasies about traversing the ocean and the world. The ocean here signifies the relief, security and freedom that Robert yearns for. In both plays, the ocean is used to express clarity and simplicity (ease-of-understanding).

In *Anna Christie*, one of the plays he wrote during the same period, sea, land and fog appear on stage as the symbols to show the audience the complexity and depth of the psychology of the characters.

In this thesis, I will use an analytic approach to reveal the true meaning and significance behind the symbols used in O'Neill's plays as they progressively matured in complexity.

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Introduction

The genius of Eugene O'Neill as a playwright is a well-known fact but what are the elements that enabled him to climb the ladder as the father of American modern drama? When he started out his career as a dramatist, his exceptional talent inherent in his drama was preeminently clear in the use of expressionism and realism, which are completely the opposites. O'Neill's divined skill and genius enabled him to blend these two different methods. His gifted talent outrivaled the others in writing both one-act and multi-act plays.

The multi-layered diversities of forms and techniques are found in many plays of Eugene O'Neill. These tools are used to dramatize the duality of the characters' personality and their internal conflicts. His experiments to show the complex human psychology through his plays was his quest in search of the moral idealism. To virtualize the inner most human conflict of the characters on the stage, he used the Freudian psychoanalysis as well as Jungian archetypal psychology.¹

"Human fate" and "theological universe in which man dwells" were the main them of all of his plays. He did not show any interest in other subjects which signifies that his quest was basically philosophical. Internal conflicts and emotional transitions of the characters in his plays, love into hatred and hatred into love, are webbed into the story of the complexity. The family conflict of the people who are chained with the rings of deep desires of a human nature and the challenges of the characters to confront their destiny.

He did not stop to pursue the realism of human nature in his plays. On the other hand, mysticism and symbolism are partly used in O'Neill's plays.

As his plays matured, the use of symbolism evolved and changed. His very first one-act play, *Bound East for Cardiff* (1916), for example, curtains up with a seriously injured seaman who lies down with a pale face. Before the main character dies, he talks about his dream of living in a ranch with a beloved family which he was not able to realize to his friend Driscoll. In this play, ocean represents a hopeless despair.

However, in the first Pulitzer award winning play, *Beyond the Horizon*, Robert, the main character fantasies to voyage the ocean which symbolizes the world he dreams and longs for. Ocean signifies relief and security, freedom that Robert yearns for. In both plays, the vision of the ocean is clear and easy-to-understand.

Following the *Beyond Horizon*, the speed of his play writing accelerated. Soon the public and critic recognized his genius as a playwright. In *Anna Christie*, one of the plays he wrote during those periods, sea, land and fog appear on stage as the symbol to show the audience the complex deep psychology of the characters.

In this thesis, I will study and analyze the transitional development of symbolism uses as the plays matured in complexity to reveal the true meaning and significance behind these symbols.

I Stage Effects and Symbols

O'Neill's playwright style evolved with time, especially during 1920s due to the influence of German expressionism and his commitment in experimentation plays. One of the characteristics of German expressionism is the destruction of syntactical structure of language and repetitive phrase. Telegraphic type of sentence is used to express the feelings of a character. Scream theatre or Schreidrama is one of the examples. Typical characteristics of German Expressionism can be seen in the way scenes are set, artificial sets with realistic details, 3-dimensional stage, the use of mob/crowd and lightings.

O'Neill faithfully used these characteristics in his plays and successfully merged with the American drama without losing the core elements of German Expressionism. He did not just copy the methodologies but he extracted the key characteristics and submerged them into his stages in his own unique way.

The Emperor Jones (1920) premiered in November of 1920 at

Provincetown Players in New York. The play digs into the fear of the main character, Brutus Jones and his deep psychology is reflected in his monologue. Jones, the black American, commits murder and later escapes to a small Caribbean island where he sets himself up as an emperor with lies to the natives. The subjects rebel against the emperor who escapes into the forest but hunted down by them. The play features Jones' fear of the rebels approaching.

Except Scene One which takes place at the palace, the rest of the scenes take place in the forest. Reminisce of his past life in the modern city awakens him as a black American. His guilty conscience and the fear of being hunted are vividly expressed on the stage. In the final scene, he reveals his naked self un-wearing the skin of fake emperor. The scene curtains with his regrets while escaping.

O'Neill's genius to use psycho-expressionism with his unique method made his work stand out in the history. Besides Scene One and Eight, the main theme is the stream of consciousness of the main character. This reflects the O'Neill's interest in the Freudian psychoanalysis.

The first scene curtains up in the audience chamber of the palace. White is the color specifically used in the scene as apparent from the stage instruction:

The audience chamber in the palace of the Emperor – a spacious, high-ceiling room with bare, white-washed walls. The floor is of white tiles. In the rear, to the left of center, a wide archway giving out on a portico with white pillars.²

The white color stands out on the stage and this is one of the stage effects that the author used to give the strong impact to the audience. The first title of the play *The Silver Bullet* gives the reader the impression of color white which is the symbol of power. The main character, Jones is a black man who lives in the suppressed environment where white man has the power. To Jones, bullet symbolizes protection. The author uses white in his other plays. The emphasis of the white color on the stage stands out in the play *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), the adaptation of the Greek trilogy or Oresteia. He turned the Greek tragedy into modern psychological play. In the stage instruction of Act One, he writes:

Behind the driveway the white Grecian temple portico with its six tall columns extend across the stage. A big pine trees is on the lawn at the edge of the drive before the right corner of the house. Its trunk is a black column in striking contrast to the shite columns of the portico....

It is shortly before sunset and the soft light of the declining sun shines directly on the front of the house, shimmering in a luminous mist on the white portico and the gray stone wall behind, intensifying the whiteness of the columns, the comber grayness of the wall, the green of the open shutters, the green of the lawn and shrubbery, the black and green of the pine tree. The white columns cast black bars of shadow on the gray wall behind them. The windows of the lower floor reflect the sun's rays in a resentful glare. The temple portico is like an incongruous white mask fixed on the house to hide its somber gray ugliness.³

Mannon's house on the stage resembles that of the Greek tragedy. It gives the audience the image of a white mask with no significance. At first, the white color of the grand Mannon's residence resembles power without any deeper significance but later, white wall turns to the white graveyard stone as the tension heightens with greed and conflicts deep inside the psychology of the characters are revealed. The characters die one by one as if they are possessed by death and Lavinia is the only person alive in the Mannon's. She spent the rest of her life blaming herself with the dead. She decides to stay in the white Mannon's which resembles the white graveyard stone surrounded by the spirits of the cursed family. The color "white" represents the tragedy of the cursed Mannon family.

In *All God's Chillun Got Wngs* (1924), "white" is used:

A corner in lower New York, at the edge of a colored district. Three narrow streets converge.....In the street leading left, the faces are all white; in the street leading right, all black.⁴

The main theme of this play is racial discrimination as apparent from the Act One where the street for white man and black man is separated in parallel. The black young man Jim marries Ella and ambitions to be an attorney but fails. Jim and Ella try to escape from the black and white society but eventually wander around without any secured place. The relationship of

white girl, Ella who resembles the American society and Jim who wants to become white is similar to that of Yank and Mildred in *The Hairy Ape* (1922).

White is the color used in many of O'Neill's plays. White symbolizes admiration or dream but something the characters admire or dream. However, the admiration provokes envy and hatred. Self-inhibition evolves in the minds of the characters and later they find themselves that they do not belong to anywhere. The author tried to dig deep in the issues of modern world and posed a question to the society.

The Emperor Jones is a drama that describes the mind of a black man, Jones who ran away from the hunt by the rebels. Sound effects are used effectively. The drum crescendo continues while the main character runs away on the stage. The beating of the drum slows down to 72 per min as Jones lives the normal emperor life but the beating gets faster and louder as he escapes and as his fear intensifies. The sound dies out when he dies.

The other sound effect that impacts the audience is the sound of a gunshot (pistol). As Jones shoots, his fear maximizes. The gunshot is used effectively at the end of each scene to heighten the tension of the play.

Except the first scene, all the scenes from 2nd to 7th take place in the forest. 2nd, 3rd and 4th scenes express the guilty conscience of the main character for the past sin he had committed that lie deep inside his personal unconscious.⁵ 5th, 6th and 7th scenes represent the past history of the ethnic group. In other words, the scenes express the collective unconscious⁶. The remarkable is the setting used in Scene 2~Scene 8. Forest is the location where the scenes take place. He escapes deep into the forest, running away from the hunt. However, at the final Scene 8, Jones without knowing returns to where he started which signifies that there is no exit in this world and that it is a closed society or the world is a circle structure. The stage effects used is quite effective to emphasize that Jones is a man living in outside world and it is not the place for him.

The Emperor Jones is the expressionistic play the author used the stage effects including color, sound, the use of hallucinatory image in addition to monologue and pantomime, all of these are the experiments O'Neill did on the stage which had never been used in the history of drama. The play is performed with these props and effects as if they were a part of the play. *The Emperor Jones* is different from other plays and it is his first expressionistic play.

Stage effects are used as a part of the drama in *Desire under the Elms* written during his middle experimental period. In analyzing this play, the following stage instruction is the key to dig deep.

The action of the entire play takes place in, and immediately outside of, the Cabot farmhouse in New England, in the year 1850. The south end of the house faces front to a stone wall with a wooden gate at center opening on a country road. The house is in good condition but in need of paint. Its walls are a sickly grayish, the green of the shutters faded. Two enormous elms are on each side of the house. They bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue.⁷

At the front of the stage, stone wall is set and elms are on the roof. Stone wall signifies the brigade to block the children to go out of the house. The stone wall was Cabot himself. It symbolizes that the children captivated by their father who did not want them to step outside of the house. Carl Jung's great father archetype is used in this drama. Refer to the following lines of Eben:

Eben

An' makin' walls – stone atop o' stone –makin' walls till yer heart's a stone ye heft up out o' the way o' growth onto a stone wall t' wall in yer heart!

Desire Under the elms Part One Scene Two

The opposite of the paternal archetype is the maternal archetype represented by the tree of elms. O'Neill describes the tress in the title that elms appear to protect and at the same time subdue, that there is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption. The trees are on the house and symbolize "Great Mother"⁸ and "Dark Mother." Eben is the only character who recognizes the significance of the elms. He experiences the Freudian rebellion and repression.⁹ He thinks of her late mother who is the representation of Great Mother and Dark Mother. He hates his father who forced his mother to work until she died. His hatred turns into vengeance.

The main theme of *Desire Under the Elms* is the two dimensions of the

mother archetype represented by “Under the Elms”.¹⁰ (“Great Mother” and “Dark Mother”) At times he shows warm-hearted and cheerful attitude but at other times, he behaves in a negative way showing his dark side. Eben shows kindness and warm-hearted behavior but his positive attitude is the projection of his late mother who represents the Great Mother and his dark side wanting to revenge her father on behalf of his mother represents the “Dark Mother” and elms represent the two-faces of the mother archetype.

Next lines of Eben shows his complex feelings against his father. He was his enemy and rival. Eben’s deep love towards his mother increased his hatred towards his father. He, at all times, wanted to make his father pay for what he had done to his mother, vengeance. Oedipus Complex against Anima complex:

Eben

No, I’m fightin’ him – fightin’ yew – fightin’ fur Maw’s rights t’her hum!

(This breaks her spell for him. He glowers at her)

An’ I’m onto ye. Ye hain’t foolin’ me a mite. Ye’re aimin’t’ swaller up everythin’ an’ make it your’n.

Waal, you’ll find I’m a heap sight bigger hunk nor yew kin chew!

(he turns from her with a sneer)

Desire Under the elms Part Two Scene One

The author used the stone wall and elms on the stage to represent the father and mother archetype. Man and woman, parents and children conflicts and fusion (harmony) are expressed with the effective use of these props and stage settings. In the final scene, Eben overcomes the problem with his father. The play does not just end happily. Cabot himself abandons the stone wall, symbol of the great father archetype, burns down the farm and house, releases the cows into the forest and reach a state of spiritual abstraction. Man-woman and parent-child conflicts are resolved in harmony which signifies the Jungian world of balance.

O’Neill’s use of stage effects is not just the framework of the stage. They are the keys to reveal the internal conflicts on the stage. He experimented the plays to express the complex human mind with the use of the Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis. These props and settings are used to symbolize the

deep inner psychology of human mind.

(Continue to the 2nd part due to the restrictions of no of words)

Notes

- 1 C.G. Jung, *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Vol. XI, Psychology and Religion* ed. Herbert Read et al. (New York: Princeton University Press, 1958), p.345
- 2 Eugene O'Neill, *O'Neill: Complete plays 1913-1920* (The Library of America, 1988) *The Emperor Jones*, p.1031
- 3 Eugene O'Neill, *O'Neill: Complete plays 1920-1931* (The Library of America, 1988) *Mourning Becomes Electra*, p.893
- 4 Eugene O'Neill, *O'Neill: Complete plays 1920-1931* (The Library of America, 1988) *All Gods Chillum Got Wings*, p.279
- 5 Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol XVIII*, p.255
- 6 C.G. Jung, *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Vol. XI, Psychology and Religion* ed. Herbert Read et al. (New York: Princeton University Press, 1958), p.345
- 7 Eugene O'Neill, *O'Neill: Complete plays 1920-1931* (The Library of America, 1988), *Desire Under the Elms*, p.318
- 8 河合準雄、無意識の構造 中公新書 1977 p.69
- 9 Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol XVIII*, p.20
- 10 河合準雄、*op.cit.*, p.75

