

Allusions in Eugene O'Neill's Plays

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In Part II of *Allusions in Eugene O'Neill's Plays*, I have studied the use of symbols in the great plays of Eugene O'Neill to analyze the underlying significance, how these are used to express the inner emotions of the characters by comparing one-act and full-length plays, his masterpieces.

His works are known as a psychological play based on the great psychologists (e.g. Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung), although his earlier plays vaguely touched on the subject. However, the effective use of symbols has attracted the audience. Gradually, he indulged himself in expressing the inner deep feelings and tried to reveal the conflicts hidden inside the human mind. I have shed the light on the use of "fog" and "sea" as they are often used by O'Neill in many of his plays. I have analyzed the use of these symbols and dissected his plays into sections to reveal the true intent of the author by studying and comparing the parts these symbols are used in some of his plays in order to understand the true meaning hidden in the symbols and expose the genius of the great playwright in the history of humankind.

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(This is the second part (Part Two) of my previously issued thesis (Part One))

II Representations of the Fog and Sea

Following quote by Eugene O’Neill are often cited as the words that best describe the objective of the great playwright:

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 Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression.¹¹

In his early works, the fog and the sea are used to represent the “Force Behind” mentioned in the above quote. The characters in these plays wander in the ocean of dream unattainable and desire unfulfilled.

One of his early works, *Bound East for Cardiff*, is a one-act play connected Eugene O’Neill and Provincetown Players, a theatre (began in 1915) that first produced Eugene’s play. In this perspective, the play had a deep significance to both the author and the theatre. Although *Bound East for Cardiff* is a 30min play, the high-quality realism caught the eyes of critics. It is said that the roots of the great plays by the playwright of the century lie in this play. His masterly technique of writing the sea play shines more brightly in his later works and the sea became a prominent theme in many of his plays. In a very short and condensed play, the author had compressed the life of a seaman.

In the play, the seaman, Yank, the main character has been seriously injured in a fall and lies in his bunk. The ship navigating in the fog resembles his voyage to death. The ship-siren sound effect throughout the play makes the audience aware that the play is set on board a ship, giving a claustrophobic atmosphere. What does "fog" symbolize? What is the real meaning of a "fog"? The play depicts the misery of a seaman's life, the unstable life of a floating weed, alone dreaming for a life with the family of his own.

Beyond the Horizon (1920) is the first full-length play of Eugene O'Neill, his first Pulitzer award-winning play. Andrew is a practical, down-to-earth type of character who wishes to spend his life farming. On the contrary, Robert is a dreamer who believes in the secret beyond the horizon and his desire comes true when he decides to go with his uncle, Scott who is a captain of a ship. On the night just before Robert plans to set out to sea, he confesses his love to Ruth who happens to love him. They decide to get married and Robert forfeits his dream. Andrew, who loves Ruth, ironically decides to go out on sea instead. The life of a woman changes their destiny and the wheels of tragedy start to run. Life on the farm, a life of restrictions and limitations, results in Rob's sickness and poverty. Over the years of stress and depression, Rob's suffering reaches the limit and when his brother returns and calls a doctor, it is too late. He dies dreaming the secret beyond the horizon. Eugene O'Neill ingeniously had illustrated the entanglement of the characters' destiny which no man can control. The whole story implies the Force behind.

Yank, the main character of *Bound East for Cardiff*, and Robert of *Beyond the Horizon*, both confront death, but they have different significance. Yank just waits as death approaches; however, Robert dies to liberate himself from the restrictions of farming life. To Robert, life on the land is like a prison without any freedom and death is the only way. He recognizes that to die means to free him from the world of seclusion. Also, the complexity of human conflicts and emotional confrontations develop as the play progresses.

Robert, as the title of the play suggests, sees the secret beyond the horizon, which signifies that he perceives security and freedom over the ocean. The distant sea represents his desire to seek maternal love which can be defined as the maternal regression.

O'Neill's efforts in search of the complexity of inner conflicts of a man can be seen especially in the latter plays and *Beyond the Horizon* is the

starting point of his quest. In analyzing the author's play, this is one of the most important keys to dig deeply.

In his early plays, the force behind is represented as “fog” and “sea”, however, O'Neill focused on subconscious deeply hidden in the human mind in his full length plays written in his midlife years. Symbols and representations were used to express the deep psychology of the characters, represented by *Anna Christie* (1920). The play inherits the German expressionism or social expressionism¹². He adopted the technique to express the deep inner minds of the characters. In other words, he had embodied the inner minds using the German expressionism, or psycho-expressionism¹³. The influence of Freudian psychoanalysis and the archetypal psychology of Jung can be seen in *Anna Christie*. Sea, land and fog are the symbols used to express the inner conflicts caused by the Oedipus complex of the characters: Chris, Anna and Burke.

The main character of this play, Anna was working on her relatives' farm but she escaped after being abused by one of her cousins and has fallen on hard times. Although she worked briefly as a nurse's aide, she did not like caring for children and became a prostitute instead. She has come to stay with her father to get some rest.

Following lines of Anna shows her desire to smudge and purify her filthy, maddened body with a gift of the sea and fog. To Anna, the sea that creates fog is the source of a life that represents a mother nature.

Chris

You don't like live on farm, Anna?

Anna

I've told you a hundred times I hated it. [*decidedly.*] I'd rather have one drop of ocean than all the farms in the world! Honest!

Anna [*persistently.*]

But why d'you s'pose I feel so—so—like I'd found something I'd missed and been looking for—'s if this was the right place for me to fit in? And I seem to have forgot—everything that's happened—like it didn't matter no more. And I feel clean, somehow—like you feel just after you've took a bath. And I feel happy for once—yes,

honest!—happier than I ever been anywhere before!

Anna Christie Act Two

Mourning Becomes Electra (1931) is one of the masterpieces of Eugene O'Neill that uses the sea as the symbol of Mother Nature. The great playwright had adopted the framework of *Oresteia*, a Greek tragedy, and created his own world by webbing the complexity of psychological fate into the plot. Lavinia obsessively loves her father and competes with her mother (Electra Complex) and Orin, her brother, on the contrary, loves his mother (Oedipus Complex). The following lines of Orin, who uses a metaphor of an island on the South sea, reveals his love towards his mother.

Orin

... I only felt you all around me. The breaking of the waves was your voice. The sky was the same color as your eyes. The warm sand was like your skin. The whole island was you.

Mourning Becomes Electra The Hunted Act Two

And he continues to express his love:

Orin

And I'll never leave you again now. I don't want Hazel or anyone.
(with a tender grin)
You're my only girl!

Mourning Becomes Electra The Hunted Act Two

The above lines of Orin show his complex inner mind which is one of the characteristics of the Freudian psychoanalysis. In other words, ascetic restrictions of sexual desire forced him to express his sexual desire in the form of the imaginary island of the Southern sea where death, future, hatred and sins exist, a paradise of peace. Sky, sand and water, the whole island represents the body of his mother.

To Anna in *Anna Christie*, the fog has a supernatural power that cocoons the entire world in solemnity and purifies the past sins. The past is now purged which signifies the beginning of a new life, the shining future starts. The attitude of Anna who positively views fog as the empowerment is

shown in the following lines¹⁴ and this means that the fog and the sea which represented her subconscious are now surfaced, although her father, Chris clearly mentions the sea as ‘dat ole davil, sea’ as he perceives the ocean as a fate, something evil.

Chris

[*shortly.*] Yes. Damn fools! All men in our village on coast, Sveden, go to sea. Ain't nutting else for dem to do. My fa'der die on board ship in Indian Ocean. He's buried at sea. Ay don't never know him only little bit. Den my tree bro'der, older'n me, dey go on ships. Den Ay go, too. Den my mo'der she's left all 'lone. She die pooty quick after dat—all 'lone. Ve vas all away on voyage when she die. [*He pauses sadly.*] Two my bro'der dey gat lost on fishing boat same like your bro'ders vas drowned. My oder bro'der, he save money, give up sea, den he die home in bed. He's only one dat ole davil don't kill.

[*defiantly.*] But me, Ay bet you Ay die ashore in bed, too!

Anna Christie Act Two

The above lines show the fear against the sea and the fog deep inside Chris, a fear that exists in his subconscious and he views land (conscious) as a safe and secure place.

Anna is gradually attracted to Mat Burke who is a survivor of a shipwreck and his appearance complicates the story of a father, daughter and her lover, the love between each of the characters, their emotional shifts and their inner conflicts, all leading to the complex behavioral dialogues. First, Anna who shows her Oedipus-Complex-type of feeling against her father is slowly attracted to Mat which means that her object of love has now changed from her father to a seaman she rescued. Her sexual libido is now directed towards Burke. The consequence entangles the relationship between the three characters. Chris tries to run away from these realities and escape to the ocean which represents his collective subconscious deep inside him as apparent in the next lines:

Anna

[*mockingly.*] And I s'pose you want me to beat it, don't you? You

don't want me here disgracing you, I s'pose?

Chris

No, you stay here! [*goes over and pats her on the shoulder, the tears running down his face.*] Ain't your fault, Anna, Ay know dat. [*she looks up at him, softened. He bursts into rage.*] It's dat ole daviil, sea, do this to me! [*he shakes his fist at the door.*]

It's her dirty tricks! It vas all right on barge with yust you and me. Den she bring dat Irish fallar in fog, she make you like him, she make you fight with me all time! If dat Irish fallar don't never come, you don't never tal me dem tangs, Ay don't never know, and everytang's all right. [*he shakes his fist again*] Dirty ole daviil!

Anna Christie Act Three

In this play, the author uses symbols and images to express the Jungian collective subconscious of the characters. He uses anthropomorphic form (anima/animus).¹⁵ In the next lines, the fog and the sea are used to represent his collective subconscious.

Chris

[*looking out into the night—lost in his somber preoccupation—shakes his head and mutters.*] Fog, fog, fog, all bloody time. You can't see where you vas going, no. Only dat ole daviil, sea—she knows!

Anna Christie Act Four

Here, the fog and the sea are emphasized on the stage to represent the collective subconscious of the character. These are the negative image Chris has. To Chris, they are cursed. The fear and other feelings are tangled with his other emotions deep inside his personal subconscious and this is repeatedly expressed throughout the play with the use of stage effects.

O'Neill did not just use these symbols as the image. He, intelligently, meshed the personal subconscious and collective subconscious into the complex structure of double helix and webbed it into the story. In other words, it appears sometimes in a positive way and negative at other times. He used Jung's concept of the both-sided value of archetypal psychology

and added value to both positive and negative views. This concept cannot be found in Freudian psychology. Freud tried to emerge the inner conflicts that lie deep inside the human personal unconscious on the layer of his/her conscious. However, Jung saw the value of the collective subconscious. O'Neill used the concept and applied to the characters in the play. The emotional transitions, conflicts and inner complexities which represent the collective conscious are expressed with the use of the symbols (e.g. fog and the sea). In the play, his efforts and dedications of playwriting lead him to resolve the contradictions in himself.

Jung had used the same method as Freud to analyze the personal subconscious. However, he further dug deeply into the problem of the human mind. He expanded extensively to point out the existence of the Great Mother and Great Father that lie beyond the Oedipus Complex hidden in the minds of the people. This is shown in the next lines of Anna.

Anna

Why not? [*with a trace of strange exultation.*] I love this fog! Honest! It's so—[*she hesitates, groping for a word.*]—Funny and still. I feel as if I was—out of things altogether.

.....

Anna

[*the exultation again in her voice.*] I love it! I don't give a rap if it never lifts! [*CHRIS fidgets from one foot to the other worriedly.* ANNA continues slowly, after a pause.] It makes me feel clean—out here—'s if I'd taken a bath.

Anna Christie Act Two

The Emperor Jones, *The Hairy Ape* and *Anna Christie* were all written in the same period. Interesting is the fact that O'Neill used the same technique to write *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*. In both plays, the main characters are trapped in a situation where they cannot find the way out. They both die struggling to escape. In *The Emperor Jones*, the forest represents the maze-like situation but in *The Hairy Ape*, the cage is used. These are visually presented on the stage to express the status of the characters. However, in *Anna Christie*, the author used the fog and the sea to reveal the inner minds of the characters. O'Neill further used his skill to adopt the theories of

Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung in order to reveal the inner conflicts of the characters and was successfully able to express on the stage.

O'Neill continued to explore his original method of using the symbols and representations. He further dug into the deep psychology of the inner human mind in his later plays such as the use of masks, monologue and soliloquy. His quest to develop the technique of revealing the heart of a man resulted in his experimental plays. The adventure to explore the innovations never ceased until his death and his unswerving efforts changed the scene of American Drama with his masterpieces.

Conclusion

Eugene O'Neill, the father of the modern American drama, introduced the new and innovative plays and created the history of the new theatre. His contribution is still valued and appreciated by the writers and authors of today. His works, though, can be classified into two categories. On one hand, he had used the expressionism to reveal the complex inner minds of the characters who are unable to escape from the wrath of fate. We can say that the author used a naturalistic approach. On the other hand, he had experimented various techniques and methods to reveal the deep psychology of a man.

When O'Neill started to write one-act sea play, how did he see the "ocean"? How did he perceive the "sea"? He had spent several years at sea when he was 20-23 years old, the events immediately prior to going to a sanatorium to recover from tuberculosis. The gravity of these experiences of 4 years is quite significant considering his age during which he suffered from depression and alcoholism.

The sea plays written in his younger days had a deep impact on later plays. The symbols of the sea and fog used in his early works implicitly and vaguely represented the force behind. O'Neill used the sea as the symbols but in an obscure way. However, the plays written in his mid-ages such as *Anna Christie*, "sea", "land" and "fog" are used on the stage effectively to represent the inner conflicts of the characters explicitly and not in an ambiguous way as they were in his early plays. His original and unique use of symbolism had been developed through his commitment and experimentation.

As a playwright, his genius can be seen in his later plays: love into hatred and hatred into love, sexual desires and passion, all lead to the struggle

and conflicts and complexity of inner human emotions that are webbed in the family relationships. His extensive use of symbols enabled him to successfully reveal the deep minds of the characters whose complex emotions are affected by the entangled relationships.

O'Neill had used his talent as a playwright to skillfully interlace the complex inner struggle and conflicts into the story and developed the original, dynamic psychological plays which shine even today.

Notes

- 11 Doris V. Falk, *Eugene O'Neill, and The Tragic Tension* (Rugers University Press, 1958)p.25
- 12 John Willet, *Expressionism* (London:Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), World University Library, p.100
- 13 *Ibid.*, p146
- 14 Eugene O'Neill, *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill Vol.X, Anna Christie* (Wilderness Edition Rinsen Book Co., 1976) PP.179-180
- 15 C.G. Jung, *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Vol. V, Symbols of Transformation*, ed. by Herbert Read et al. (New York: Princeton University Press, 1956), p. 391