

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF EUGENE O'NEILL'S PLAYS

Abstract

This present research paper throws light on thematic analysis of Eugene O' Neill's plays. O' Neill is considered as one of the most controversial figures in modern drama. Eugene O' Neill is known as one of the greatest American playwrights in the history. His themes have made his plays highly recognized work and it is only because of strong themes of his plays just like dysfunctional family life, hiding behind a mask and Greek Mythology. His plays also throw light on social themes, religious themes, psychological themes, pessimism, family life and Greek mythology. His use of melodramatic elements in his early dramas may be the subject of study. In his plays, there is a touch of free play of realism and melodrama. Sometimes the characters of O' Neill become like puppets without having their own life. His plays have been written by focusing on personal point of view having effect of his family's tragic relationship. Hence, Eugene O' Neill has become popular in American Literature because of themes of his plays.

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I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most important features of the dramatic activity of Europe in the twentieth century is the great revival of interest in Greek Drama and Greek Theology. The 'ancient rule and best example' that Milton praised in his Samson agonists has exercised a profound influence on the imagination of modern writers, T. S. Eliot, for instance has been greatly indebted to Greek drama both for form and theme. O'Neill, the greatest dramatist that America produced has also been powerfully influenced by Greek drama. O'Neill spent six months in a sanatorium made him an avid reader and it was during this period that he came under the spell of the Greek tragic poets.

II. THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF EUGENE O'NEILL'S PLAYS

O'Neill searched for more satisfying modes of dramatic expression. He turned to Greek drama, incorporating into his dramatic expression. He turned to Greek drama, incorporating into his dramatic experiments as many features of Greek drama as possible. His concept of tragedy was essentially related to the Greek dramatists. In an interview in 1922, O'Neill explains his philosophy of tragic drama. People consider tragedy in commonly used words of a tragic nature as sordid, pessimistic and depressing. According to O'Neill, tragedy roused people deeper spiritual understandings and makes them free from greed of everyday existence. People get experience of their own hopeless hopes on the stage through tragedy.

O'Neill's vision of life was essentially tragic, like Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. O'Neill recognized his forte to be tragedy for like these Greek dramatists, he had a preoccupation with man's unending conflict with adverse destiny. Doris V. Falk in her penetrating study of O'Neill's plays writes about this involvement of O'Neill.

The Aristotelian definition of character provides another link between classical tragedy and O'Neill's plays. Aristotle has said that the tragic hero brings about his own destruction through some flaw, some error or frailty in his character or in the self. The tragic hero brings about his own destruction through some flaw, and through he is free to choose his course of action, it is only within the limitations of the structure of the self with its flaw.

The ethos or moral purpose of an O'Neill's tragic protagonists is to keep up on illusion about themselves that is deep-rooted in them. This moral purpose exists side by side with something that is directly its opposite namely a desire to discover themselves. Often the protagonist of O'Neill unconsciously hates and rejects his real self and in its place substitutes a false self-image. This self-hatred and the consequent pursuit of illusion constitute the tragic flaw that destroys him.

Aristotle does not specify the nature of the flaw in poetics but the Greek Dramatists pictured it as hubris or pride, a sort of self-reliance or self-sufficiency that angered the Gods and brought about destruction through Nemesis. Aristotle considered the pride of the tragic hero neither pure virtue nor vice or depravity, but a flaw an 'error or frailty' in the character of man. The pursuit of the unreal and the compulsion to attain the impossible, it finds in O'Neill's tragic heroes cause the destruction of the self. Psychologically speaking, we can call the protagonists of O'Neill as 'neurotic' and their pride neurotic pride. But this neurotic pride follows the blinding destructive pattern of hubris.

The idea of pride bringing about man's fall was one that O'Neill ardently believed in, and he believed also that every man must find his way between pride and humility. The idea of pride leaning to catastrophe is not found merely in Greek tragedies but also in many other masterpieces of literature. Prometheus and Oedipus have their descendants in English drama in the characters of Tamburlaine, Faustus, Macbeth and Samson Agonistes. The idea is not confined to drama alone for we have Satan of Paradise Lost embodying pride. O'Neill's task was for quarter than to imitate this old and traditional idea as treated in Greek and Elizabethan drama but to incorporate this into twentieth century life. His task is to interpret this ancient idea in twentieth century symbols and terms. He had also a modern equivalent for the Greek concept of fate or gods.

O'Neill views on tragedy as a symbolic celebration of life. The death of the hero, he felt must reveal the dignity, nobility and universality of his struggle even though from the beginning the struggle has been a futile one. In fact in this futility is its magnificence and its implied hope for the rest of mankind. For the hero has willfully or through ignorance violated the inexorable order of the universe or of his own destiny. At his downfall this order is restored. Both the hero and the audience understand the order is restored. Both the hero and the audience understand the order and know that salvation lies in accepting it. In Greek tragedies, the order is symbolized in fate or the Gods. In the plays of O'Neill the violated order is that of the mind and when order is restored, it is restored in the mind.

O'Neill relied very much on the ideas of Freud and Jung. He shared the belief of Jung that human actions and motives and the problems connected with them proceed not merely from man's personal unconscious mind but from what Jung has termed the "collective unconscious" shared by an entire race. In the opinion of Jung pride is responsible for human tragedy as pride makes man rely too much on his own powers. The advice that man must follow a middle way that arrives at a compromise between the unconscious urges and the conscious ego.

O'Neill gives a psychological interpretation to the question of Fate that looms large in Greek tragedies. Fate is interpreted by O'Neill as something neither entirely within man, nor altogether outside him. It is within man and outside of him also. It works relentlessly towards his destruction. It paralyzes his will and his emotions betray him.

Materialistic values prevail, life has become too mechanical and impersonal and this has further shaken man's sense of security. Man is lonely even in a crowd and he cannot derive solace or strength from his faith in any supernatural power. The result is he feels insecure. This feeling of insecurity causes unbearable spiritual anguish, fear and torture. This suffering may arise, this tragic tension may result from the "romantic illusions" which some may harbour, lost in which they forget the reality of life and which ultimately leads them to their doom. O'Neill has made himself as the dramatist of ironic Fate and psychological tensions. Freud has interpreted it in his books and lectures. He has also considered that the social environment as an important factor in man's tragic agony.

O'Neill explains view of human nature and his exclusive preoccupation with the seamy side of life. But despite such weaknesses, O'Neill remains a great tragic artist. He is a sincere and conscious writer having a fine sense of dramatic values and a penetrating insight into emotion. His imagination has a fiery touch which uplifts and ennobles everything it touches. His tragedies are tragedies with a difference. They are tragedies of modern life in the

true sense of the word. They are so many diagnoses of the sickness of to-day. He has done old things in new ways, he has democratized tragedy and thus has considerably enlarged its range and scope.

Euripides in Greek drama and O'Neill in modern drama are the great representatives of the two great moments in human history. There are many common things in both of them. They fight against the diction as well as the conventions of the theatre. They have checked theories but found shelter in none. Their spiritual touch found a new expression in deep traditional form. Both of them have created a new taste for ideas, and these ideas are combined with morbid aberrations and real passions.

O'Neill's tragic vision involves a kind of quest the tragic hero's search for identity. The tragic character embarks on voyage of self-discovery, and on the way to this spiritual pilgrimage he encounters pain, evil and suffering. Though he may die an ignorant man, his tragic struggle has brought sufficient illumination to his soul. Death may bring the final release, but not before the tragic hero has experienced and understood the meaning of suffering.

III. CONCLUSION

O'Neill is a dramatist of an idea, one theme unites all his plays, from his earliest experiments to his last mature plays. The theme is rooted in O'Neill's own personal needs. The recurrent theme of O'Neill's work is man's frustration in his search for happiness in a modern world where religion and modern values have failed to provide him with insight into the meaning of the intellect, but in man's struggle to live both emotionally and physically. O'Neill is not only a dramatist but artist also who uses the theatre as a medium for the expression of his attitude towards life with reference to human character.

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