

MAJOR TECHNICAL ACHIEVEMENTS  
IN THE DRAMATIC WORKS  
OF EUGENE O'NEILL

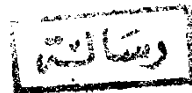
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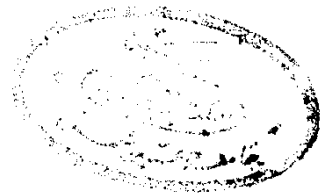
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## CONTENTS

|                                                       | Page |
|-------------------------------------------------------|------|
| PREFACE                                               | I    |
| CHAPTER I                                             |      |
| THE ADVENT OF EUGENE O'NEILL ON THE<br>AMERICAN STAGE | 1    |
| CHAPTER II                                            |      |
| O'NEILL'S MAJOR REALISTIC PLAYS                       | 44   |
| CHAPTER III                                           |      |
| O'NEILL'S EXPRESSIONISTIC EXPERIMENTS                 | 96   |
| CHAPTER IV                                            |      |
| TWO MARATHON DRAMAS                                   | 161  |
| CHAPTER V                                             |      |
| O'NEILL'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PLAYS                      | 211  |
| CONCLUSION                                            | 264  |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY                                          | 276  |

## PREFACE

The purpose of this thesis is to point out O'Neill's major experimentations with dramatic technique. His achievements in this field have earned him the title of America's most outstanding dramatist. O'Neill is in many ways a pioneer, who brought freshness and seriousness to a drama that had been decadent and stale. This great contribution together with the diversity of his experiments have attracted me to embark on this research, and to select representative plays by way of illustration, from O'Neill's total output of about 46 plays.

Chapter I entitled THE ADVENT OF O'NEILL ON THE AMERICAN STAGE, traces briefly the history of American drama from the Civil War till the emergence of O'Neill. It points out the attempts of previous dramatists, at producing a more serious type of drama. This chapter mainly reviews O'Neill's apprenticeship period, and his fortunate meeting with the Provincetown Players. Their union produced plays which brought fresh life to a drama that had mainly consisted of melodramas and farces. O'Neill's early one-act plays though they are not outstanding achievements yet they contain the germs of themes, settings, characters and stage devices which O'Neill later developed in his major plays.

Chapter II MAJOR REALISTIC PLAYS touches: Beyond the Horizon, Anna Christie, Desire Under the Elms and The Iceman Cometh. These plays are all landmarks in O'Neill's career, and so they have been chosen for study, while other realistic plays of less importance such as The Straw (1919), Diff'rent (1920), The First Man (1921) and Welded (1922), have been excluded.

In these major realistic plays O'Neill dealt with authentic settings drawn out of his own experiences. The characters in the plays are often modelled after real people he had known. The themes he treats are universal themes that raise his plays above their narrow locale. In these plays there are symbolic overtones that add deeper layers of meaning to the realistic themes.

Chapter III O'NEILL'S EXPRESSIONISTIC EXPERIMENTS, refers to four plays: The Emperor Jones, The Hairy Ape, All God's Chillun Got Wings, and The Great God Brown. In these plays O'Neill does not attempt to follow the purely expressionistic devices of the German expressionist movement. His plays also contain realistic elements. O'Neill was not just running after novelty in stage devices, but was merely looking for the correct medium to express his vision of life.

O'Neill wrote other plays that contained highly symbolical elements: The Fountain (1921), Marco Millions (1925), Lazarus Laughed (1926), Dynamo (1928), and Days Without End (1933). These plays were more or less failures in the theatre and so I have not counted them among O'Neill's achievements.

Chapter IV TWO MARATHON DRAMAS, deals with two plays that constitute a climax in O'Neill's dramatic achievement. Strange Interlude, is O'Neill's novel-play, in which he used his remarkable device of the "thought asides". In his trilogy Mourning Becomes Electra, O'Neill attempted to modernise Aeschylus' The Oresteia, substituting a modern psychological fate for the Classical Greek fate. It was acclaimed as O'Neill's greatest masterpiece, because of his success in depicting the strong emotions of his characters and the skill of his construction.

The last chapter is mainly concerned with O'Neill's autobiographical play per se, Long Day's Journey Into Night. In this play he dramatises his home life and family relations in the year 1912. O'Neill's only comedy, Ah Wilderness! also contains autobiographical elements. so does A Moon for the Misbegotten, which is a sequel to Long Day's Journey Into Night.

The conclusion is an assessment of O'Neill's achievements in dramatic technique. Indeed the richness of his dramatic output raised the American drama from a mere vehicle of entertainment to a serious art form. It won him his position as America's foremost dramatist, and as one of the greatest dramatists of the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER I

### THE ADVENT OF O'NEILL ON THE AMERICAN STAGE

It is not an exaggeration to state that with the Broadway production in 1920, of Eugene O'Neill's first full-length play Beyond the Horizon, the American theatre came of age. 'That the American commercial theatre of the second decade of the twentieth century, would produce what O'Neill himself called "a Simon Pure uncomprising American tragedy",<sup>(1)</sup> and that it would achieve such great success, was indeed a sign that American drama was finally reaching maturity.

Up till then, the American theatre had been lagging far behind the continental theatres, being still tied to the conventions of the past. The theatre was also late in development when compared to the maturing of the American novel and poetry.

In the years after the Civil War and before World War I, there was a great social and economic development

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1. Arthur and Barbara Gelb O'Neill. New York, Harper and Row, 1962, p. 413.

in America which led to a greater demand for entertainment. The function of the theatre of that period was to provide this entertainment which was defined as escapism. It was a theatre that was dominated by commercialism, where the producer and actor were more important, for a play's production, than the playwright, or the play itself. The big names in the theatre were those of men like; Edwin Booth, Edwin Forrest, Boucicault, the Barrymores and the actor-manager-playwright David Belasco. The public demanded melodrama lavishly staged, and the playwrights and producers with an eye on the box-office gave it what it wanted.

The absence before 1891, of an international copyright permitted playwrights and producers to borrow, or rather to steal from European drama, preferring imported plays to native ones. The monopoly of the theatrical Syndicate, controlled play production and made it difficult for a young dramatist to gain a hearing.

By the beginning of the century New York City had become the centre of American theatrical production. The success of a play was measured in terms of the New York box office; plays were manufactured according to the tastes of New York audiences. Plays were also written

to suit the individual talents of the leading actors. A number of actors became famous for certain title roles. One of them was O'Neill's own father, James O'Neill who was very popular in the role of The Count of Monte Christo.

The late nineteenth century theatre in America witnessed a trend towards realism in the settings of the plays, and in the style of acting of the actors. But it was a surface realism that did not touch the core of the drama itself.

Melodramas flooded the American theatre and flourished because of the public demand for sensationalism.

--- Melodrama must thrill rather than comment on life. Limited by one dimensional development, characters, must provide excitement or comedy. "For every smile a tear, for every tear a smile", announced the posters. Because the objective was vivid sensation and violent or sentimental emotions, there was no logic and little plot in a melodrama but an abundance of situations - usually well tried situations made novel by the skill of the actor or the stage carpenter. (1)

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1. Walter Meserve, An Outline History of American Drama, New Jersey, Littlefields, Adams & Co., 1970, p. 174.

Several types of melodramas were popular at the turn of the century in America. Walter Meserve gives examples of several types of melodramas that had achieved success on the American stage.

William Young's Ben Hur (1899) is a historical melodrama which created much excitement, mainly because of the realistic chariot race that was effectively produced on stage with eight real horses.

John Luther King's and David Belasco's Madame Butterfly (1900) provides an example of romantic melodrama. David Belasco (1853-1931) was known as the wizard of the stage. His productions are characterised by his delight with stage mechanism, he was always after the realistic representation of the minutest details in settings. We have an example of Belasco's technique in the device by which the passing of the time is portrayed. Madame Butterfly's long vigil through the night is portrayed very realistically on stage. For fourteen minutes the audience watch a dark stage with only the floor lamps lighted, then the stars come out, and the dawn breaks the floor lights flicker out one by one, the birds begin to sing etc.---

Madame Butterfly is an example of complete theatricalism, creating emotional pleasure for its audience out of an unreal situation with stereotyped characters and a setting exotic in the sense that it has been made to look, superficially unfamiliar. Its effect is instantaneous and temporary. There is nothing in it to trouble the spectator with serious questions about human nature, ethics, or morality, or even the more obvious problems of prostitution and race relations. (1)

It was this type of surface realism that the theatre producers were concerned with, they cared only to give an illusion of reality, what O'Neill was to call "the banality of surfaces" and were not concerned with the reality of idea.

Another type of melodrama that flourished at that time was the melodrama of crime and detection, the most famous was William Gillette's Sherlock Holmes (1898) whose most effective scene is that when Holmes is being pursued on a dark stage his lighted cigar butt is the only light seen moving on the stage. His pursuers follow this light and believe they have him cornered. When the

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1. Alan Downer. Fifty Years of American Drama, Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1960, pp. 7-8.

lights come on, they discover with the audience, that Holmes has left his cigar on the window sill while he himself has escaped through the window. It was this type of sensation that appealed to the audience.

The social melodrama is another kind which comments on social problems without treating them intelligently. Elmer Rice's The Trial (1914) is an example in which the dramatist used a number of stage devices like flashbacks. The novelty in the play was that it was entirely written out of the record of a murder trial.

The audiences of late nineteenth century theatre in America demanded the excitement of melodrama and the laughter of farce. Farce was very popular at the turn of the century.

Focusing on an improbable situation, the playwright creates confusion and embarrassment purely for their own sake. Characterisation is avoided --- characters do not determine or influence events, the play progresses not by what the characters do, but by what happens to them. Farces then are compounds of absurdity improbability and contrivance. (1)

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1. Walter Meserve, An Outline History of American Drama, op. cit., p. 187.

The most successful type of farce was the situation farce, Augustin Daly's A Night Off (1885), and William Gillette's Why Smith Left Home (1898), were very successful. Most playwrights of the period wrote farce. Clyde Fitch adapted from the German The Blue Mouse (1908) and Augustus Thomas' On the Quiet (1901) are examples. But the most talented writers of farce were Charles Hoyt (1859-1900) and George Ade (1866-1944).

The American theatre at the turn of the century was trying to liberate itself from the conventions of the English stage. Some playwrights tried to present, local colour drama with a native tradition by presenting some aspects of life in different sections of America: like Bronson Howard's Shenandoah (1889) and Augustus Thomas' Alabama (1891).

Serious attempts were made by James A. Herne (1839-1901) to create a drama of ideas; he attempted in his plays a development of realistic themes and characters in his most famous plays Margaret Fleming (1890) and Shore Acres (1892).

Clyde Fitch (1865-1909) attempted a serious social drama. His contribution to American drama is "in the