

# Study of Racial Conflicts as Envisaged in Eugene O'neill's Plays

## Abstract

The Function of a dramatist is not merely to entertain and to obtain commercial gains but to serve as a piece of art. Dramatist who present all that is best in our desire consideration. We may agree to differ from those who are outstanding dramatists but even if they are not outstanding they enjoy a place of honour as artists. Whatever their faults they are stimulating and provocative they faster invigorate the sense and appeal to our emotional and intellect.

**Keywords:** Materialistic, Migration, Diversity, Imperialism, Federalism, Industrialisation, Complexity, Privileged

## Introduction

Artists, particularly, dramatic artists view life as a conflict of forces. All the dramatists endeavoured to present life as they saw it, in it's political, social, cultural, religious and other forms. The dramatists of the later part of the nineteenth century, and the twentieth century paid their utmost attention to the problems of contemporary life. Both Ibsen and Shaw made a great contribution to presenting the contemporary problems. Our dramatist's epitomise their national temperament even when dealing with themes of universal application.

As a matter of fact dramatist is not confined to any one class; it is meant for the public which is comprised of contradictory whims and emotions. Through communion between audience and stage, the drama is in a better position than the arts make men experience the poignancy of life, the heights of human achievements. It can produce in him a state of enlightenment and ecstasy or despair and disappointment.

## Aim of the Study

A Study of outstanding forces brings out their conflict of relationship. A dramatist, in order to be true to himself and faithful to life, ought invariably to give vent to the seeing of the light which can be called exclusively his own. The period after the First Great World War witnessed the appearance of a number of great dramatists, in a number of countries like the U.S.A. Great Britain, France and Spain etc. In the United States the most striking names are Arthur Miller and Willsam Tenasse. Arthur Miller wrote social tragedy, the tragedy of the individual against the society or the family or the human life as a whole.

One of the most important plays written by Arthur Miller is All My Sons which presents a very poignant view of life. Joe Keller a true representative of the time is deeply drowned into materialistic quest. He says that he is already sixty one years of age, yet he has done nothing to better the financial condition of his sons. He believes, probably that the happiness or the prestige of a person or family depends upon his financial prosperity.

On the top of all, however, appears Eugene O'Neill whose plays are on the one hand, an expression of the pulse of the society, and on the other hand, of the Universal human destiny and anguish. He was known as the "most irreconcilable social rebel." But he had the ability to translate his anger into the beauty of artistic creation. He revolted against the urban class sophistication, and class disparities against economic hardships of a section of American society and against social repression and injustice from which the major part of the American population suffered. His plays offer a study of the social ethos of modern American life. He portrays the socio-economic condition of America with the zeal of a great humanitarian and social reformer. He did all this with the penetrating vision objectivity of an artist. He succeeded in beautifully balancing and harmonising his art and ideas to an astonishing degree.

He responded adequately to the specific conditions of life. He was, however, so rigid that he would not compromise his convictions. He is



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humanist who believes in the necessity of faith, and yet rejects any rigid ideology. O'Neill devoted his whole life to showing that the innocent are the victims of the society. Despite his social themes, O'Neill is not a propagandist, he is basically an artist. He is, of course, a revolutionary ideologist; he presents an imaginative reconstruction of life. There are critics who call him a propagandist, and consider his plays to be the work of a journalist, and not of an artist. They are, however, mistaken. He did not regard art as a vehicle of propaganda. He says, "I am never an advocate of anything in any play, except humanity towards humanity."

O'Neill carefully examined the complexity of the American atmosphere. He found that it was the migration of the European people that laid the foundations of a separate state known as the United States of America. "The people of all the well defined countries of Europe like England, France, Spain, Germany, Netherlands, and Portugal migrated to America and settled there in colonies. In due course of time, these colonies grew into full-fledged states, and ultimately got merged to build a new nation-called the United States of America. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the young American Nation had obtained a distinctive character. The ideas and agencies of thought and opinion in the newly sprung Republic were no more republican of those colonies. The unique nature of the young nation resulted from the fact that people with different ideas, languages, and outlook on life began living, thinking and working together. The Colonial agency of the United States was the contribution of many peoples influencing one another."<sup>1</sup>

It may be noted here that Great Britain made the greatest contribution to the new nation because the English speaking nations constituted the dominating element in the Colonial Society. The English Speaking Nations constituted all the important means for the communication knowledge and ideas and attitudes modified though it was by accretion from other cultural groups. "The English language was yet the most dominating feature in the new nation. It was through England and Scotland that the Graeco – Roman classics, and the literature of Renaissance were transmitted to the American people. The British newspapers, pamphlets and broad side also provided the colonial Americans with useful models. The Atlantic Sea – Board was the base on which the butter of the entire protest and Reformation and catholic Counter Reformation were enacted. The dominating religious patterns, however, came from Great Britain by Quakers, and certain puritan groups and the Cambridge Platonists provided the necessary seeds for the growth, on American soil, of ideas which proved to be even more fertile than the social and economic ideas of the motherland – The Irish and the Scotch,"<sup>2</sup> Irish contributed the ideas of loyalty and opposition to landlordism. The mercantile ideal of the integrated central of the empire's economic life ran counter to many colonial interests, but a mercantile philosophy modified to promote the interests of American merchants found favour with them. Above all, the growing idea of free economic enterprise

figured in the legacy received from the Great Britain. England provided American with legal and political ideas. English-speaking Americans had the same respect for law as the British Local Self-Government written constitution and judicial supremacy. They also gave to the Americans the idea of the struggle between the English puritans and the King.

"The conflict appeared in America between the colonists and the mother country, and the tussle between the more or less privileged groups in the colonies themselves. These ideas also induced in conviction that the relationship between the ruler and the ruled is a contractual one, the doctrine of supremacy of the higher law over human authority, the right of revolution and the idea of civil liberties."<sup>3</sup>

The migration of people across the Atlantic the Dutch, the Germans, the Swedes, the French and the Welsh scattered along the Atlantic coast. From New England to Georgia reassembled the herd of the British culture, in that they possessed many common values and a similarity in nature, man and society. This similarity was related to the fact that the non – English speaking groups, as well as English & speaking ones like Scotch, and the Scotch-Irish were affected by certain great processes that profoundly altered civilization of all Western Europe, the process of expansion and colonisation. On the other hand, the religious conflicts of the Reformation and the counter-Reformation, on the.

On the account of these changes, particularly social and economic changes, artisans and traders of Europe left their homes for America with a view to sharing new life with the Americans. Thus, in spite of diversity of language, religion and culture it was natural for them to think alike, on a majority of problems. At the same time, the Dutch, Swedes, Huguenoits, Germans and others from one another and their English speaking neighbours in many respects. It was in the religious field that the German intellectual leaders contributed to the foundation of the American thought. The most marked feature of German pietism to Colonial Evangelicalism was an indirect one. Dr. Woulfield, the English evangelist who had been simulated by the Hall movement was the chief agent of the great awakening in America. As a matter of fact, the non-English speaking exercised a great influence on the intellectual life of the colonial Era. The non-English speaking groups did not subscribe to the American form of religion. Their opposition to the payment of taxation the growing movement for the Church and state. Their contribution to the development of the idea of American nationality was pointed out by a brilliant French writer. He wrote in his letters to the American farmer that his grandfather was an English man whose wife was Dutch, one of his sons had married a French lady, and his four other sons had their wives of different nations. In America individuals of all nations merged into a new race of man. Because of that strange mixture of blood which was found in no other country. With such ideas and interests the Sea Board Colonists entered the wars waged by Great Britain against the Spanish and the French, and made a plan for an Inter Colonial Union

to depend on them, or even to conquer their political, economic and religious foes. The discovery of all these traditions and survivals came too late to be a dominating or shaping influence in American intellectual life. Yet, in the South – West the Spanish left a permanent impression on the American thought and feeling.

It may be noted that the American spirit exhibits courage, industry and optimum, qualities that generally inspire people with confidence to face difficult problems. Their success, in spite of sickness of stravation speaks of courage and tenacity. In due course, as stated above, the different colonial states got merged into a nation called the United States of America of which they were legitimately proud. New forces and problems were upsurging – versus free trade, Imperialism versus Home Rule, Tory versus Whig, Federalism versus Republicanism etc. The integral part of American character is belief in the life of the individual for his fullest development within a free society offering justice and equality to all. The American did not regard themselves as inferior to the British because they were making rapid advancement in all spheres of life. It was this spirit that made them to great achievements. Along with the struggle for independence the American literature blossomed into an unprecedented grandeur.

The America of O'Neill's time was an existing spectacle of a country on its march towards industrialisation on a massive scale. As a matter of fact, America had entered a critical period of history when profound social changes resulting from the growth of giant industries, the dislocation caused by rapid urbanisation, the viciation of rural atmosphere, the political bosses of the cities, states and nation, led to the growth of class feeling – all these helped to create a condition of affairs in which they wanted inalienable rights of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness had become the despair of an even larger proportion of average humanity.

"Rapid changes in America had a deep impact on the people of America. Science and technology were advancing with long strides. The mechanised industrialisation brought about economic prosperity. American becomes the slaves of gold; they were also aware of the grim catastrophe that lay ahead. O'Neills, disgust of the present state of affairs is adequately reflected in his plays like *The Great God Brown* and *The Iceman Cometh*."<sup>4</sup> The Americans were the helpless victims in the clutches of evil caused by the technical progress. Yet because of the inner hollowness, they felt painfully frustrated. The social revolution was seen in the fall of moral and spiritual values. "Smoking and drinking became common not only with men but also women. The production of cigarettes in the United States was more than doubled between 1918 and 1928". Alan says, "Hosts who laid in a stock of cigars for their guests often found them untouched; men in the drawing room were smoking the same brands of cigarettes that the ladies consumed in the drawing room."

There occurred a great fall in moral values, people were ready to anything, if they thought that by so doing they could get plenty of money. Lot of money

made them great drunkards. Cocktails before dinners became a kind of social obligation. O'Neill has given vent to the love of drinking in a number of his plays. For example, in *The Hairy Ape* the workers of the Stock Hole drunk up and forgot it. Their very motto life appears to be nothing else but drink.

Shortly after the great depression there occurred the greatest stock – market Catastrophe, causing a loss of some thirty millions in the estimated value. Major Brodees traces three major trends of the depression. Without an attempt to describe or explain the relatively minor ups and down it may be said that there were roughly major trends of equal duration. The first was a fairly steady decline for more than three years, until the low point reached in March 1933 with the index of 63. The second phase covering three years was that of apparent recovery in the middle of August, 1937. The third period lasting more than three years began with the strong recession with irregular improvement. Thus, in terms of topography, the traveller through the depression went through a long, tolerably smooth hill to the bottom of the valley then climbed a slight long and considerably rougher hill, on the other side until he had regained the original height. Here he fell over a precipice dropping to a new valley, floor lower than any he had experienced since 1934, the index being 79-61, from the depth he moved upward through exceedingly broken country.

It is, indeed, surprising to think that the painful Depression which was responsible for unaccountable misery for the common man should contribute to the flowering of American scholarship and the emergence of new styles, trends and modes in music, art and architecture, the blossoming of a full body of American literature, touching new heights in excellence, and securing a well-deserved status in world in literature. American fictional writing after the great Depression reflected the violent cross-currents thoughts that bewildered the American mind. The rebels of the last generation lived on unto the thirties. But they were also badly disintegrated.<sup>4</sup> This disintegration and bewilderment has been powerfully depicted by novelist like Earnest Hemingway, and Sinclair Lewis. Sinclair Lewis was immensely successful in depicting the absurdities of the middle class thoughts and manners. William Faulkner also sought to find a meaning in the life of people caught in the vortex of a society in utter confusion. The 1930s saw the birth of the social novel in America with Jon Des Passes being the bitterest critic of American Capitalism. John Stainbook too, emerged as a social novelist who very powerfully revolted against the tyrannies of an unjust economic system. He was one of those writers who could understand the tragedy of the lower classes.

A very significant achievement marked in the 1920s was the emergence of the American theatre. The climate in which the American dramatists wrote was one of despondence and despair born of the religious and political upheavals. They found in drama an effective weapon to attack the evils of the society. Thus, the American drama of 1920s and 1930s was the creation of social rebels and dissidents who fought against the hypocrisy of some realism, found

expression in drama. The problems relating to love and sex, clash between the moral values and in newly emerging ones and the search for identity with personal and social ethics has baffled the American, particularly the younger generation. They were at a loss to know what beliefs to stick to, and which goals to pursue. "The situation had left them aimlessly groping in the dark."

It was in this complicated atmosphere that Eugene O'Neill began his dramatic workmanship. The atmosphere was one of dismay and despair. He very effectively and artistically gave expression in his plays to this soulless society of 1930s. By this time it seemed that drama had become the chief mode of American literary expression. There were other playwrights such as Maxwell Anderson and Philip Barry who made considerable contribution to the American art of Drama. While Anderson was writing historical tragedies in verse, the other two enlivened the stage with social satire. Marc Connelly depicted the Negro folkways, and their religious beliefs, Thomas Wilder dealt with the theme of man's survival and his search for identity in an industrial society.

#### **Conclusion**

Thus, the stage was used as a sound board for ventilating all kinds of ideologies, and social and political protests. The picture of American society changed dramatically with the accession of Roosevelt to the presidency on March 4, 1933. This was a fateful day in the history of America – one order was dead, and the other ill defined and uncertain though it had been, born. The people of America, who had already born the burden of the crisis for several years, were no longer in a mood to tolerate a do nothing Government. The industrial workers and farmers were increasingly vociferous in their demands for decisive relief measures. The new workers, farmers and urban middle class residents, placed high hopes in the New Deal programme, which to all appearances was designed to meet their aspirations. The improvement in the economic situation was first registered in the

spring of 1933. The economy began to emerge gradually from the crisis. However, it was only during world war II that Americans found a market for the surplus food and machinery, bringing the great depression to an end."

All these changes in the economic life of America had their impact on the thought and art of O'Neill plays which reveal that he was fully aware of these conditions that blighted the nation at that time. He exposes these conditions ruthlessly. O'Neill is of the view that the American society with a rigidity that exercises a paralysing effect on the individual. An individual born in such a rigid society is labelled automatically. The revolutionary fervour that we experience in his plays is the direct outcome of the Great Depression. Eugene O'Neill remained a silent spectator in the beginning. But the events had touched him imperceptibly and touched him deep. Hence, he reacted strongly to the problem. He had an opportunity to see life of the poor white, and the Negroes from the closest possible quarter. The turbulent years of the Great Depression, social restlessness, race relations, political instability around the world-all these made a deep rooted impact on his life and thought pattern.

#### **References**

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