A Cry in the Wilderness—On Eugene O’Neill’s Plays

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Received 25 April 2015; accepted 25 June 2015
Published online July 31 2015

Abstract
Eugene O’Neill is the foremost playwright and the founder of the American theatre, there has not been any dramatist to equal him. Although Eugene O’Neill lived in a world of pragmatism, he made great efforts to search for the meaning of life. O’Neill is very close to those social outcasts and it is pretty sure that O’Neill portrays them from his loving memory with deep sympathy and understanding. All of his plays are “a cry in the wilderness”.

Key words: Eugene O’Neill; Cry; Conscience; Compassion

INTRODUCTION
In the early 20th century, America became the monopoly capitalism country, and entered the period of imperialism. High-developed science-technologies threatened the traditional moral and religious belief. Machine, material and money became the power that dominated mankind. As a result, the advancement of industrialism, science-technologies and commercialism motivated American dream, which referred to the occupation of tremendous wealth and all the possibilities.

O’Neill perceives and records the phenomenon, the drive to attain wealth and the morality distorts. Not only in his plays and poems but also in his public statements, O’Neill viewed America as sick spiritually:

I’m going on the theory that the United States, instead of being the most successful country in the world, is the greatest failure. It’s the greatest failure because it was given everything, more than any other country . . . Its main idea is that everlasting game of tying to possess your own soul by the possession of something outside of it . . . This was really said in the Bible much better. We are the clearest example of ‘For what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?’ (Floyd, 1985, p. 470)

As one of the greatest playwrights in the history of American theater, O’Neill is deeply worried and pessimistic about the corruptions of modern American society, such as the uncontrollable lusts, moral degeneration and the chasing of material prosperity.

O’Neill’s early gold mining experiences, sailing adventures, sickness and poverty life in quite long period of time make a large-scale possibility for him to gain a mutual understanding of the lower stratum of humanity. O’Neill’s Irish gloominess in personal quality and his broad streak of sentimentality were good at his keen perception of human psyche. The physical and moral sufferings in O’Neill’s life enable him to write the sorrows and pains of life in his plays with “blood and tears”. O’Neill thought himself as a “poetic dramatist”. Strong emotion is an essential requirement of being a poetic dramatist. From O’Neill’s early expressionistic experiments to his late realistic masterpieces, emotion is deeply rooted in O’Neill’s plays and works as an attempt at once to express or even to alleviate the suffering of a mind in conflict. O’Neill tries to convey pity, understanding compassion, despair and hope of modern man in his plays.
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O’Neill once stated: “All of my plays even when most materialistic, are for me, in their spiritual implications, a search and a cry in the wilderness.” (Floyd, 1985, p. 306)

1. O’NEILL’S VIEWPOINT OF THE THEATRE

In the early period of the 20th century, American theatre was in pursuit of commercial interests. Entertainment plays were popular on Broadway. O’Neill hated artificiality and pretense of the commercial theatre. He guided people to face the tragic nature of life through his plays.

The dramatists put emphasis on the truthfulness of the subjects of drama, the truthfulness of the design of stage and the truthfulness of the performance of actors. O’Neill believed that the excessive emphasis on the seeming reality by the realist had become a great obstacle for the development of drama because the theatrical limitation of reproducing life would greatly restrict and confine the actors’ performance.

Discontented with the situation of American theatre at that time, O’Neill himself perhaps best expressed his conception of the theatre in this passage from A dramatist’s Notebook, originally published in the January 1933 issue of The American spectator:

What do I mean by an imaginative theater? I mean the one true theatre, a theatre of the Greeks and Elizabethans, a theatre that could dare to boast—without committing a farcical sacrilege—than it is a legitimate descendant of the first theatre that sprang, by virtue of man’s imaginative interpretation of life, out of his worship of Dionysus. I mean a theatre returned to its highest and sole significant function as a Temple where the religion of a poetical interpretation and symbolical celebration of life is communicated to human beings, starved in spirit by their soul-stifling daily struggle to exist as masks among the masks of living! (Floyd, 1985, p. 610)

In O’Neill’s eyes, what the superficial American theatre lacked is “a powerful emotional ecstasy, approaching a kind of frenzy”. (Floyd, 1985, p. 509) This, he said, was what he wanted to confide to his audience.

2. A CRY OF CONSCIENCE IN THE WILDERNESS

After human race enters the modern society, God as the center of the world is constantly challenged with the development of natural sciences and social sciences. People have more confidence in themselves, and show more interest in the world around. They question the authority of the Bible, and have the willingness to search for and discover truth by themselves. In 1883, along with the German philosopher Nietzsche’s enlightening declaration “God is dead”, the Bible as the center of the Western traditional values collapsed. Darwin’s theory of evolution and the rapid development of science and technology further shook people’s faith on God.

However, there are no necessary values or morality if there is no God. The loss of faith means the loss of the soul and the fall of the spirit, and life is inevitably full of darkness, nothingness, anxiety and restlessness.

As a playwright with a strong sense of responsibility, O’Neill deeply concerns about the belonging of the human spirit and soul. In his late realistic masterpiece, The Iceman Cometh, O’Neill profoundly demonstrates the modern state of loneliness and sadness of life without the faith, as well as the confusion and hesitation of people.

The Iceman Cometh tells a story that takes place in cloistered Harry Hope’s saloon at New York’s West End. The people gathered at Harry Hope’s saloon were a group of losers who were abandoned by life. Without the courage to live or the courage to die, they indulged themselves in alcohol, doing a variety of self-deceiving “day dreams”. Harry Hope’s saloon is an ideal place for them to escape from the painful reality to the fantasy world and the past.

In The Iceman Cometh, O’Neill shows deep sympathy and compassion to modern people who lose the faith and the value of life!

In America, the rapid development of science and technology, the concept of “man will conquer nature” was growing in popularity, the traditional moral values almost collapsed, material and money became the dominant power to govern humanity. The modern people who abandoned the Bible let their own desires get unlimited expansion, and the United States quickly became the society with the supremacy of materialism and pragmatism.

In Desire under the Elms, everyone was a slave of desires—desire for money, desire for material possession, and the lustful desire. These desires shrouded the Cabot’s farm which was under the elms in New England. In Desire under the Elms, O’Neill profoundly reveals the greedy desire, the distorted humanity as well as the ruined spiritual values. O’Neill analyses the black desires of greed and immorality in human nature, which can only lead to devastating outcome. It is exactly what the Bible prophesies “what good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew, pp. 16-26)

The pattern of sin-punishment-repentance-salvation implied in the Bible produced a profound influence on O’Neill’s creation. It is clearly reflected in his expressionistic masterpiece The Emperor Jones. Jones was a black slave who suffered severe oppression and exploitation under white people. Being whipped by a jail guard, Jones was angry and killed the white guard and then fled to an island in the West Indies where he put the white man’s greed and fraud values into practice. Jones became an emperor from the fugitive in less than two years. He was so insatiable that the taxes he added on the indigenous blacks almost bled them white. As a result, the indigenous blacks were forced by his cruelty and tyranny to rise up. Jones was scared and fled into a forest. Jones was once a Baptist Christian, but the greed drove him to put Jesus aside temporarily and sold his soul to the devil.
As he was running in the forest, those ghosts with whom Jones had a grudge, such as black Jeff he killed, jail guard who oppressed him, etc. continued to appear in front of him. Indigenous blacks were chasing Jones and the drum-roll was getting more and more urgent. Jones felt frightened and began to recall the faith that he had abandoned.

The process of Jones’ escaping in the jungle is that of confession and atonement, as well as that of his returning to religion and finding his lost soul. Eventually, Jones atoned his sins through his physical death.

When Days Without End premiered, the public notice of the premiere claimed that it was a modern miracle play, and it portrayed the conflict between atheism and religion, but religion ultimately won. John Loving’s journey of mentality confirmed what Jesus says: “I am the way and the truth and the life.” (John, 14:6) The glory of the Lord, which is perfect truth, goodness and beauty, can not be shaded by anyone. The Bible credo is the light in front of the people. Abandoning the doctrine of God, the human beings can only have a disorderly and cruel world and go to degenerating and evil.

3. A CRY OF COMPASSION IN THE WILDERNESS

O’Neill, himself, championed the importance of emotions, and, like Nietzsche, found it superior to rational thinking. In an early interview in American Magazine, he stressed the value of emotions in the theatre: “Our emotions are instinctive . . . They are the deep undercurrent, whereas our thoughts are often only the small individual surface reactions. Truth usually goes deep. So it reaches you through your emotions.” (O’Neill, 1988)

In the year 1940, O’Neil wrote the play he had to write—Long Days Journey into Night—his most autobiographical play, in which he faces himself and his brother and father and mother most directly but still by the way of his dramatic art. In Long Days Journey into Night, O’Neill imposed a repetitive rhythmic pattern on his story by describing the emotions of the four Tyrones.

The play’s plot is about two family events—Mary Tyrone has retreated to her dope addiction, and Edmund Tyrone learns that he has tuberculosis. O’Neill rivets our attention to what the characters are saying and what they are feeling. The rhythm of accusation-regret, harshness-pity, hate-love, beats throughout the play. The repetition of the rhythmic pattern and the familial picking on the same sore of who is to blame perfectly reflect the play’s main theme—the past is the present. Now, obviously, this kind of repetitive rhythmic pattern of emotion makes Long Days Journey into Night to be a moving poetic play.

Each Tyrone, during the confession, receives our sympathetic attention, O’Neill always manipulates our emotional responses, keeping us a little off balance, allowing us to side with one of the Tyrones, then with the next—resulting in our inability to say with assurance which of the four Tyrones should be blamed.

O’Neill went through two world wars. The calamity-ridden First World War not only mercilessly smashed the prosperous, peaceful and progressive western world, but also completely disintegrated the value system of the ascendant period of the capitalism and afflicted great delusion on human psyche. In 1940 the Second World War intensified in Europe. All people felt that a strange shadow hung broad and heavy over their lives. The atrocity of Hitler made O’Neill desperate and lonely as never before in his life.

The Iceman Cometh was written in 1939, the period when O’Neill had been depressed and pessimistic owing to the dreadful and monstrous evil of World War II. The gloomy mood of 1939 closest to that of 1911 and 1912 in O’Neill’s life. In 1912, life of impoverishment at Jimmy the Priest’s and the uncertain future and the longing for death had driven O’Neill to attempt suicide.

Although O’Neill completed The Iceman Cometh in 1940, he did not approve of putting it on the stage until 1946. O’Neill cited his illness and the gruesome political situation as the reason for the delay of its production. He deemed The Iceman Cometh “the best” play he had ever done.

Iceman is such a work that ennobles the “hopeless hopes”, and shows O’Neill’s deeper concerns with man’s condition, frustration and disillusionment.

The Iceman Cometh is O’Neill’s loving tribute to the close friends he had made at Jimmy the Priest’s in 1911-1912. The people O’Neill met at Jimmy the Priest’s, lived at the bottom rung of society: thugs, pickpockets, writers, artists, red-faced coachmen, prostitutes, gamblers . . . — O’Neill’s “blood brothers”. it is pretty sure that O’Neill presents his old pals with intense sympathy and deep understanding and strong passion.

The Iceman Cometh is a play in four acts and sets in a hotel on the down West Side of New York, selling the cheap five-cent whiskey. The action covers two days and nights in early summer of 1912.

O’Neill draws our attention to the seventeen social outcasts who imprison themselves in Harry Hope’s bar. Harry Hope’s bar, the setting of the play, located on the west side of New York—its two windows were so spotted with grime that one cannot see through them. The bar is the refuge for them to keep away from the painful reality, to hide themselves in the past or in an illusionary world.

As the scene begins, a picture of drunkards lingering in Hope’s barroom is clearly present to the readers. Their dialogues mix with alcohols and are concerned with alcohols.

Besides drinking, immersing themselves in pipe dreams is another important activity of the seventeen male characters’ life. If drinking makes them apathetic, pipe dream is their spiritual support, a line of sunshine in their meaningless life.

These innocent creatures are unfortunate outcasts of society as well as of one-time heroes. These people indulge in their brilliant past and the prostitutes boast of their tricks with their customers. It is at once terrible and absurd.
The coming of Hickey will break their monotonous living. To everyone’s surprise, Hickey announces that he has given up drink. He has decided that his aim now is to help all his old pals to turn their individual pipe dreams into action.

After a lot of persuasion, Harry Hope, who has not left his house since the death of his wife, Bessie, twenty years ago, decides to wander around the town tomorrow. Hope sets forth but does not walk across the street. They all make the attempt and they all fail and come back by night.

Facing the real society, they find they can only be kept alive by alcohol and pipe dreams. Instead of despair, they keep their lives with illusions again. Only in the world of illusion can they find the meaning of life and survive in the cracks.

Life in Harry Hope’s mingles with yelling, wrangling, jittering and ridiculing, the loud laugh and joking. We fail to see any solution to the madness. Caught in the deadlock, he can neither act nor escape and he will either to live or to die.

O’Neill displays the state of man from one to another, from superiority to inferiority, from hope to despair, from illusion to reality, from torment to teasing. The Iceman Cometh is such a work that eulogizes the “hopeless hopes”; and shows O’Neill’s deep solicitudes for man’s living situation, impasse and disillusionment. The important role of emotion is also typically embodied in The Iceman Cometh.

The Harry Hope’s bar is the miniature of the American society. By depicting the life of the social outcasts, O’Neill reveals the so much misery and vice of the lower stratum of humanity, the weakness and the greatness of human psyche and the living dilemma of the western world after World War I. He prefers life rather than death in The Iceman Cometh. What O’Neill celebrates in The Iceman Cometh is the tragic, comic, resplendent reality of life. O’Neill aims to probe the meaning of life and focuses on the spiritual origin of man’s tragic fate.

There are moments in the play, he remarks:

. . . that suddenly strip the secret soul of a man stark naked, not in cruelty or moral superiority, but with an understanding compassion which sees him as a victim of the ironies of life and of himself. Those moments are for me the depth of tragedy. (Manheim, 1996)

The Iceman Cometh awakens our empathy, compassion and understanding. Instead of the tragic emotion of commiseration and fear, our response is a mixture of pity and lament.

The Iceman Cometh is the heart-broken cry of a soul that has lost faith in man who appears to have taken a devastating path, in which despair becomes hope and hope despair. The yelling, altercating and scoffing, the drunken state, dirty words and funny joke—all are so important to the merciless life. We can only view these people with compassion and understanding.

By expressing one of the prominent traits of his work: an “understanding compassion”, O’Neill enables The Iceman Cometh to be a moving play.

CONCLUSION

That O’Neill was the greatest of all his contemporaries, and that he revolutionized the American dramatic scene, is undeniable. When he appeared on the scene, America had practically nothing notable in its dramatic tradition; when he died, owing mainly to him; it had already come to enjoy a pride of place in world theatre. No wonder Jordan Y Miller felt that, consequent upon his taking to drama seriously, American drama came to be taken seriously. As a serious dramatist, O’Neill has a very clear idea about drama: O’Neill considered modern drama to be “a drama of souls”.

The works of O’Neill are not characterless pieces of entertainment. Rather, touching one’s private, social, religious, philosophical, or aesthetic concerns, they either evoke immoderate enthusiasm or cause inordinate anger. He is the poet of the individual soul, of its agony, of its evil will, of its pride, and its lusts, of its rare moments of illumination, of its stumbling and groping in surrounding darkness, and of its superbly romantic quest for deliverance through loving surrender. His plays are a cry of conscience and compassion in the wilderness.

REFERENCES