

The tragic vision of O'Neill protagonist in the drama of O'Neill

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O'Neill begins his dramatic apprenticeship with the composition of short, simple and highly effective plays, which are "like simple ballads in our world."¹ His artistic sincerity lends to these early experiments a vitality. In these early one-act plays O'Neill has chosen the background of the sea to paint images of the stark realities of life. He relentlessly faces the facts of life as he sees them without any sentimental glossing over. He does not sacrifice the truth of life to the demands of the box-office. On the other hand, he exhibits a constant awareness of life's ironies and an increasing sense of the mystery of human life and human relations. He is baffled not only with the inscrutable mysterious forces of the universe, but also with what man has made of man. Throughout his dramatic career he was to engage himself in an all-embracing quest for human values which alone could be hoped to give order, design, and purpose to an otherwise insecure and chaotic existence.

Thirst and other One-Act Plays (1914) was the first collection of O'Neill's earliest dramatic

experiments. It consisted of five one-act plays: *The Web*, *Thirst*, *Fog*, *Warnings* and *Recklessness*. These plays are linked together by their common concern with the fate of man in this tragic universe. Both in theme and technique, they seem to be the unfed creations of a single, searching mind. In these plays, the greed and selfishness of an acquisitive society are counterpoised against the humanistic vision of a few idealists who prefer to perish rather than submit to the stale and sterile values of a mercantile society. In almost all these plays the protagonist suffers from some serious malady: madness or consumption, poverty or deafness, possessiveness or greed. These maladies suggest a flaw in the quality of living, which breaks the protagonist under its severe strain, and he is left with no choice but to immerse himself into the "destructive element" in order to find his real, creative self.

All these plays have realistic setting but they are all suffused with symbolic overtones. Symbolism in these plays inheres not only in the situations but in their very structure and

design. The characters as well as titles radiate a symbolic glow which invests them with a larger significance. Besides this, O'Neill makes a rich use of multivalent and multidimensional irony, and creates a rhythm of contrast which builds the required dramatic tension to hold the play together in a vital balance. Some intelligent stage-directions help to bring to focus the intangible meaning of these plays.

These plays, thus, form a kind of thematic and structural unit, providing O'Neill a springboard for his big leap into the mysteries of dramatic creation. Once he had taken the plunge, there was no stopping him. Gradually, but surely, his genius unfolded itself, till it blossomed forth in dazzling splendour flooding the stages of the world with plays of great power, vitality and charm.

In the first Volume, *The Web* comes first in the order of composition. The play is set in "a squalid bedroom on the top floor of a rooming house on the Lower East side New York,"² and the action takes place on a rainy summer night, during which the heroine is destined to experience the polarities of love and hate, and life and death. The stage-directions and setting of the play, in pointing to the "cracked mirror", "rickety table" and the heroine's shoes with holes, signify not only the poverty of the dump, but also the insecure foothold that the heroine has on life. The three principal characters are suggestive of the wider, antagonistic forces operating in the

society. Rose Thomas, the consumptive heroine, is the stricken conscience of humanity which has to live like a prostitute because the guardians of society would not allow her to take the part of virtue. Steve, the pimp symbolizes the commercialization of human relations and the tyrannical hold of corruption over the simple, suffering conscience of humanity. Tim Moran, the gangster, represents the well-meaning idealists and humanists of the society who would stake their lives to liberate the conscience of humanity from the burden of suffering and evil. But the pimps of society would not let these idealists live. They must kill them and get away scot-free.

The title of the play has double significance. The "Web", in the first place, symbolizes the intricate texture of life, the very fabric of circumstances that guide and control man's destiny. As S.K. Winther interprets it: "Man is involved in a web is not of his own weaving. Yet when the meshes of the web entangle him and bring him to disaster society which unconsciously set this trap, holds him responsible."³ In the second place the "Web" symbolizes the inevitable crushing down of man by Fate, the "hopeless hope" through which man, striving for the unattainable will his own defeat. This losing battle, however, confers on him a tragic dignity.

O'Neill understood very early the dramatic and theatrical use to which various kinds of sounds could be put

to enhance the meaning of the play. The Web is also filled with various kinds of sounds "the monotonous" sound of the rain falling on the flags of the court below,"⁴ Rose's Hollow Cough echoing in the dark hallway, and the fitful cries of the child. These sounds create an atmosphere of futility with monotony and suggest the inescapable agony of human situation.

In O'Neill's plays, the struggle of the tragic protagonist acquires a deep poignancy when he has to wage powerful enemies-the man-made institutions of vice and depravity, and the cosmic trap of. In *The Web* we discover the ruthless working of the former, when Rose says: "Reform? Take it from me it can it be done They won't let you do it, and that's Gawd's truth."⁵ And the latter force is expressed in O'Neill's stage direction when Nose is arrested for she never committed and she realizes the futility of all protest: "She seems to be aware of something in the room which none of the others can see perhaps the personification of the ironic life force that has crushed her."⁶

Having shown the intricacy of the web of life, O'Neill decided to depict life's unquenchable thirst in his next one-act play, *Thirst*. The action of this play takes place on a "steamer's life raft rising and falling slowly on the long ground swell of a glassy tropic sea."⁷ O'Neill's shift of the scene from a "squalid bedroom" in the former play had revealed the perversion of human

values in a corrupt society. Now he intends to depict a more elemental struggle between man and the universe, between the values of modern civilization and those of man's barbaric primitive past cut off from the moorings of a corrupt society and adrift in a world of circumstance. Man is still left with some traces of humanity if he is not totally reduced to the status of a "poor bare, forked animal."

The play's realistic setting has symbolic overtones. The "raft" signifies life at the mercy of the forces of vast external world. The "fins of the sharks" symbolize the flashes of cruelty around the three sorry remnants of humanity. Water is symbolic of the life-sustaining values while the sea symbolizes the eternal mystery of the unknown. Situation that of a shipwreck stands for the demolition of the superstructure and artifacts of society and its reduction to a group of individuals without any binding force.

REFERENCES

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5. *Ten Lost Plays*, p. 36.
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7. *Ibid.*, p. 530.