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SEA AS THE DEATH TRAP IN EUGENE O'NEILL'S *THIRST*

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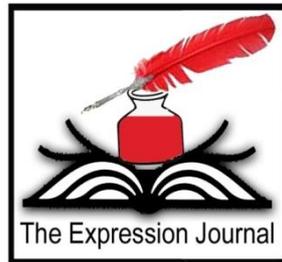
Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the concept of death as it appears in Eugene O'Neill's one-act play *Thirst* and how the characters are unable to escape the sea's death trap. They are attempting to survive on a life raft in the middle of the ocean following a shipwreck. As a result of the hot weather, they are suffering from dehydration, while at the same time they are attempting to find ways and means of escaping the water. A West Indian mulatto sailor, a dancer, and a nobleman are the three primary characters. They're literally dying of thirst. The whole play is made up of dialogue between the Gentleman and the Dancer. The characters The Gentleman and the Dancer symbolise the higher class, whereas the character The Sailor represents the poor class.

Keywords

Death Trap, Sea, Thirst, Shipwreck, Dialogue, Upper and Lower Class.

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Introduction:

Sea literature aids readers in comprehending the writers' perspectives and experiences at sea. *Further it makes the readers to empathize with the sailors and seamen (Shah 997)*. *Thirst*, *Warnings*, and *Fog* are three of O'Neill's early sea dramas, all of which take place during or after a shipwreck on the high seas. The emotional success of these plays is achieved by the use of dominant conditions or important occurrences in the sea. All of these plays have a tragic end.

Literature Review:

Abilash Dey, in his article entitled, O'Neill's *Driftaway*, Characters' thirst for water, love, companionship and communication: Reading *Thirst* as a study in tragic irony, examined how the author evoked a sense of tragic irony in the play (30). Abdullah Shah, in his article entitled, A Humanistic Study of Eugene O'Neill's *Thirst*, focussed on how humanism fails in the extreme life or death situations in human life (133).

Sea as the Death Trap:

Thirst is a tragedy that revolves around three characters who are trying to survive on a life raft in the middle of the sea. The three main characters are a West Indian mulatto sailor, a dancer, and a gentleman. They're actually dying of thirst at this point. The entire play is comprised of conversations between the Gentleman and the Dancer. The upper class is represented by the characters The Gentleman and the Dancer, while the lower class is represented by the character The Sailor. The Gentleman, a middle-aged white man, is gentle in speech and manner. But there is a drastic change in his gentleness due to thirst, sunlight, and fear of death. His gallant dress has become blemished and wrinkled. He simply observes the vast sea with his uncombed hair, swollen lips, and burnt face. The Gentleman is also waiting for death, along with the other two characters. The images of the vast sea, the indifferent Sun, sharks, and the quest for water reduce their hope for life. The Gentleman politely lies to the

Dancer that the sharks will not harm people. When the repetitive song of the Sailor increases the fear of the Dancer further, the Gentleman convinces her that the song gives temporary relief from the calamity.

The gentleman laments that he is on his first vacation after twenty years of laborious efforts. He knows very well that the menu card in his packet is of no use. He is even ready to sell his soul to quench his thirst. The undisturbed nature of the Mulatto Sailor makes the other two doubt that he must have kept the water for himself. The Gentleman does not have the strength to stand, and he is thinking of murdering the Negro for water. He convinces the Dancer to charm the Negro Sailor with a dance. Finally, the Dancer dies on the raft. When the sailor approaches the dead body to cannibalize, he shoves the dead body into the sea, and in the fight, both of them fall into the sea. All the characters die in the shark-infested sea, and death is shown as the final result at the end of the play.

According to Travis Bogard, "The play is neither realism nor symbolism but a somewhat dismaying mixture of both. It is story of the efforts of its three characters to survive in a hopeless situation is one more tragedy of "ironic fate", in which all perish.... The sea somehow controls the destinies of the castaways". (30) The silence of the sea drives her to madness, and so she wants to speak to someone to break the silence of the deadly sea. The fear of death and the severity of sunlight make her visualise the sea water as blood everywhere. The Gentleman thinks that it is the blood of people who died yesterday that changed the colour of the sea. Both the Dancer and the Gentleman do not want to say anything about death or the incident that happened yesterday night. The Sailor is singing a song in a less romantic voice and watching the sharks which circle around their raft. The silence of the sea makes the Dancer think of death, and so she repeatedly requests the Gentleman to speak something other than death. Then the Gentleman talks about water to drink, "Oh, if we only had some water!" (O'Neill 11). Even though they are floating on water, they do not have drinkable water. On hearing the word 'water', the Dancer again requests the Gentleman by saying, "Please do not speak of water" (O'Neill 11). As there is no water, they are losing their strength under the scorching sun. A drink of water may help them retain their strength and shout for help if they happen to see a ship going across.

When the Sailor asks for water, the Dancer and the Gentleman suspect him of having water. As the Sailor stops singing, the deep silence of the sea makes the Dancer seize the arm of the Gentleman. Both of them want to know the meaning of the song sung by the sailor. Then the Sailor says that it is a song of their people to charm the sharks. Now only the Dancer realises that what she sees moving through the water are sharks. To console her, the Gentleman says that a shark attacking a human is a childhood tale and sharks are afraid to touch a person. Then the Negro sailor starts singing the song again to pacify the sharks. But the song makes the Dancer dream of horrible things.

When the Dancer suspects the Sailor, the Gentleman advises her that they should not grow suspicious of one another because they are all in the same plight. According to the Dancer, waiting for a ship is similar to waiting for something that never comes. From the conversation between the Dancer and the Gentleman, we learn about the character sketch of the ship's Captain. The reason behind the crash is the captain's decision to follow a course that was little used. Without telling anyone, the Captain took the quicker passage with the good intention of reaching the destination on time. Instead of escaping in a boat, he did the duty of a

captain perfectly by giving orders to the crewmen. As no one paid any attention to him, he shot himself and died. His guilt made him do so.

Then the Gentleman opens a card case and looks at it, bewildered. He shows the card to the Dancer and says, "Oh, the damned irony of it!" (O'Neill 18). It is a menu card given by United States Club of Buenos Aires. With a mocking laugh, he reads the menu, which consists of Martine Cocktails, soup, sherry, fish, Burgundy, chicken, Champagne. According to him, God is playing a joke on them with the menu card when they are dying without a piece of bread and a drop of water. The Dancer asks him to throw the card into the sea and says, what have they done wrong to suffer in this manner.

We come across another character – a fat, bald-headed, little man whom the Dancer remembers clearly. At the time of the crash, when people were fighting to get into the boats, he kept on repeating the following words: "I shall be late. I must cable! I can never make it!" (O'Neill 20) and he would probably have died in the crash. Even at the time of his death, he was worried about his worldly commitments. One can visualise the exact scene of the ship crash from the narration of the Gentleman's story. When the crash came, people were thrown forward on the floor of the saloon. There were screams, oaths and some women were found fainting. He went to his room, picked up his wallet, and was fighting in the midst of the crowd. He managed to get into a boat. As the boat was overloaded, he moved to catch another boat. But he was not allowed; instead he was beaten with the oars. He could hear the gurgling sound of the sea water and the cries of the drowning crowd. When a woman with a life-belt gave a cry and disappeared into the water, he realised that there were sharks.

In order to escape from the horror of sharks, he swam very fast and climbed the raft that was occupied by the Dancer and the Sailor. He describes his escape as a nightmare. On realising the truth about man-eating sharks, the Dancer shouts at the Gentleman that he has lied to her. To spare the Dancer, he lied to her. They are safe as long as they stay on the raft. But he gives a vexed remark that they are going to die in the sea even if they escape sharks.

The Gentleman who supported the Sailor in the beginning now uses the word 'nigger' to refer to him. Both the Dancer and the Gentleman want to direct their frustration towards the Sailor by finding fault with him. They don't want to think because they don't want to die. The stillness of the sea is tragic for the Gentleman because it reminds him of death. Even at the fag-end of death, the Dancer is worried that she has forgotten the person who kissed her during the crash. She guesses that it is the Second Officer – the young Englishman who could have kissed her. The Gentleman adds that the Second Officer must have sent the raft. He asks the Sailor if the Second Officer ordered him to take the Dancer away from the ship. But the Sailor simply answers that he doesn't know.

The Dancer is returning home after years of struggling to attain fame and money. She cries why should I die like a dog on a raft. The Gentleman is also going home after twenty years of relentless work. Throughout the play, both of them utter the words 'God! Oh God!'. But the Sailor never uses the word 'God'. It seems that the Dancer and the Gentleman are not the real believers of God. They are worried because they are going to die, leaving their worldly possessions behind. According to them, God's sea is cruel, and the Gentleman quotes that neither the sky nor the sea will answer our prayers. The Gentleman has little hope that the other survivors may send steamers to rescue him or that they can reach any nearby island. When the Dancer asks him to look for an island where there will be water, he can see only the

sea and the sky. The sun rays falling on him continuously give his vision a reddish colour, whatever the object he sees. Also, the fear of death makes his eyes reddish.

Both the Gentleman and the Dancer curse God because they are unable to get rid of the sea. They even have separate dreams about being near water streams. Then they suspect the Sailor, for having hidden the water. Unable to bear the thirst, the Dancer is ready to offer her diamond necklace and even dances before the Sailor for a sip of water. Finally, she is ready to offer herself to the Sailor. Then she dies of thirst on the raft itself. When the Sailor gets ready with his knife to eat and drink from the Dancer's dead body, the Gentleman pushes the body into the sea with his full strength. In the fight between the Gentleman and the Sailor, both of them stumble into the sea. After a splash, one can see the waiting fins rushing in. Though the sea occupies an important place in the American psyche, it is quoted in Sheaffer's *O'Neill: Son and Artist* that "Nothing strikes deeper in the American character than its fear of death" (552).

Conclusion:

The sea has devoured all three, except the diamond necklace, which glitters on the raft in the blazing sunshine. Because of the surrounding sea, the three main characters could not escape their fate. The sea stands for stillness and silence, and the circling sharks stand for terror and death. They would have got a life if their raft had reached the shore. They could not get the drinking water as there was no way to escape from the sea. The characters don't appear to believe in God. That is why they are terrified of dying. Because of their fear of death, they begin to doubt one another. As a result, the loss of the old religion cannot be considered a success (Shah 135). The dramatist has depicted the dangers of working on a ship. Every minute, the lives of sailors are jeopardised. Shipwrecks can occur at any moment owing to poor weather and icebergs.

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