

ISSN: 2395-4132

# THE EXPRESSION

An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal

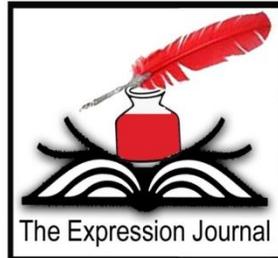


**Vol.1 Issue 5 Oct. 2015**

*Editor-in-Chief : Bijender Singh*

**Email : [editor@expressionjournal.com](mailto:editor@expressionjournal.com)**

**[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com)**



**O'NEILL'S DRIFTAWAY, CHARACTERS THIRST  
FOR WATER, LOVE, COMPANIONSHIP AND COMMUNICATION: READING *THIRST*  
AS A STUDY IN TRAGIC IRONY**

**Abhilash Dey**

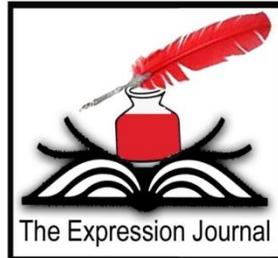
**Guest Lecturer, KaziNazrul University  
Burdwan, West Bengal  
obhilaash@gmail.com**

.....  
**Abstract**

The article probes how O'Neill makes his tragic play *Thirst*, one of his telling early efforts, a study in irony. The three characters make an all-out effort to assert their survival, resisting the approach of imminent death. It is their vigour of resistance that endows them with the rare glow of being a tragic protagonist. Manifestly, the play concerns itself with multiple kinds of thirst. The thirst for water apart, the characters long for remaining alive as long as possible. They have the deep-rooted thirst for life. They are neither ambitious, nor greedy, nor even selfish. Nevertheless, they undergo untold suffering leading to their undesirable end. Their fall from happiness to misery is quite unmerited. My paper examines how the play evokes a sense of waste. To observe the spectacle of the thirsty, solitary, driftaway, passengers creeping steadily towards death is evocative as much of pity as of fear, and at the fag end there is a process of Catharsis—tranquillity following a tempest, the tempest being the sharks celebrating their sumptuous banquet and the water of the sea turning red in blood—incarnadining the play. *Thirst* is a heart-rending play, a bona fide tragedy, and the treatise investigates it as a story of grim and glorious suffering.

**Key-Words**

O'Neill, Thirst, Tragic Irony, Communication, One-Act Play, Companionship.



**O'NEILL'S DRIFTAWAY, CHARACTERS' THIRST  
FOR WATER, LOVE, COMPANIONSHIP AND COMMUNICATION: READING *THIRST*  
AS A STUDY IN TRAGIC IRONY**

**Abhilash Dey**

**Guest Lecturer, KaziNazrul University  
Burdwan, West Bengal  
obhilaash@gmail.com**



The contradiction between the statement and the suggestion, between anticipation and achievement, between the apparent and the essential, between the mask and the face makes for irony with which O'Neill's *Thirst* happens to abound in. The three characters on a raft make a frantic effort to get rid of the hungry sea, and what adds to their misery most is the non-availability of drinking water. Their sad situation recalls the harrowing situation of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* and his fellow crews. They were also amidst immeasurable unfathomable flow of water, though not a drop of drinking water was available. To borrow Coleridge, it was a state of: "Water, water, everywhere, / And all the boards did shrink; / Water, water, everywhere, / Nor any drop to drink" (Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner")

Phillip Barnhart in his perceptive essay, "'God Stiffen Us": Queering O'Neill's *Sea Plays*", says that it was *A Wife for a Life* that showcased the edge of the Arizona desert as the setting, and Barnhart makes it a point because following *A Wife for a Wife*, O'Neill makes it a habit of featuring the sea as his absurd arena for his characters freefalling into the abyss of an unwelcome end:

This is the only time that O'Neill will focus on the desert as a setting for a play—for shortly thereafter he sets his drama in the geological opposite of the desert: the

sea. In mid- 1913, after writing *A Wife for a Life*, O'Neill wrote a play titled *Thirst*, which takes place on a life raft adrift at sea. Later that year he writes *Warnings*, which takes place, in part, aboard a steamer much like the *SS Glencairn* of his sea plays; early the next year he writes *Fog*, which depicts the action taking place aboard a life boat about to be picked up by a steamer. That same year he also writes *Bound East for Cardiff*, revisiting the themes of death and loss and the sea he had developed in his earlier attempts. It is with this play that O'Neill established himself as a maturing playwright, and as mentioned, it is within this play that we are given clues to the foundational drives of his later work.(83)

The Dancer can hardly put up with her thirst, and the Gentleman is equally thirsty. The Mulatto Sailor, though sealed in silence, seems to be also terribly in want of drinking water. The situation is tragic as well as ironical. There is abundance of water in the sea, and yet they have no water to slake their thirst. Each of them seems to be a Tantalus. The salt water of the sea can hardly serve as drinking water.

Robert M. Dowling in his book, *Eugene O'Neill: A Life in Four Acts*, drives home the allusion of Titanic in his discussion:

[T]hirst, *Warnings*, and *Fog* all take place either during or just after a shipwreck, and O'Neill's readership, small as it was, couldn't have helped recalling the horrific doom of the thousand-foot transatlantic liner Titanic in 1912. One of the many tragic ironies of the Titanic catastrophe was that the steamer Californian was within twenty miles of the foundering vessel before it sank; but the Californian didn't hear the other ship's call for help because no wireless operator had been on duty. After the sinking, in which 1,503 souls had drowned, legislation was passed requiring that large ships post a radio operator on duty at all times. (103)

Dowling writes more: "*Fog* is set on a lifeboat adrift off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, where the Titanic hit the iceberg and where the playwright himself had kept watch while returning to New York on the Philadelphia (104)." Scraps of information like these make O'Neill's early plays closer to his life and times, his own lived experience enriching the texture of the early plays like *Thirst* and *Fog*. "*Thirst's* sales were paltry", writes Dowling, and he comments on the only mentionable review enjoyed by the play:

[C]layton Hamilton published the only important review the book received (the others include one in the *Baltimore Sun* and a few glorifying notices in the New London papers). His critique reads much like thousands of reviews of O' Neill's later work: "This writer's favorite mood is that of horror. He deals with grim and

ghastly situations that would become intolerable if they were protracted beyond the limits of a single sudden act. . . . He shows a keen sense of the reactions of character under stress of violent emotion; and his dialogue is almost brutal in its power.” (106)

It is interesting to note that O’Neill himself deemed it quite ironical how with his soaring celebrity, early efforts like *Thirst* came to be regarded as quite valuable:

[a]nd O’Neill pointed out the irony that *Thirst*, “the A-1 collector’s item of all my stuff . . . has sold [for] as much as \$150 a copy . . . the publisher at one time offered me all the remainder of the edition (and that was practically all the edition, for few copies were sold) at 30 cents a copy! With the usual financial acumen of an author, I scorned his offer as a waste of good money on my lousy drama!”

O’Neill’s gratitude for Hamilton’s review was effusive, long-lasting, and sincere: “Do you know that your review was the only one that poor volume ever received? And, if brief, it was favorable! You can’t imagine what it meant, coming from you. It held out a hope at a very hopeless time. It did send me to the hatters. It made me believe I was arriving with a bang; and at that period I very much needed someone whose authority I respected to admit I was getting somewhere.” (Dowling 107)

Now to the body of the play. The precious necklace that the Dancer got in appreciation of her dancing performance is of great value to her. She can hardly part with it. But at the climactic hour, when she is terribly in need of some drinking water, she approaches the West Indian Mulatto Sailor and gets ready to give away the necklace to him in exchange for some water. But the necklace, however precious, appears to be most useless, and it lies on the floor of the raft, nobody caring to pick it up. The irony inherent in the necklace-episode hardly escapes the notice of the reader.

When the Dancer lies dead, the Negro Sailor feels elated. He thinks that the blood of the dead Dancer may quench his thirst. Hence he breaks silence and leaps into emotion: “We will live now”; he adds, “We shall eat. We shall drink” (O’Neill 119). But soon the Gentleman stands in the way. He resists tearing the body of the Dancer. The two men in the raft are involved in jostling, and finally, along with the body of the Dancer, they roll into the water. Now, instead of eating and drinking, they are eaten up by sharks, the water of the sea turning red ironically. Margaret Loftus Ranald in her article “From Trial to Triumph (1913 –

1924): The Early Plays" writes in this connection:

With the exception of *A Wife for a Life* (1912), all O'Neill's plays up to and including the "Thirst" volume conclude with sometimes savage and shocking violence. In the title play the two survivors drown after a struggle. *Recklessness* ends with a constructive murder by automobile, *Warnings* with suicide, *The Web* with murder and wrongful accusation. *Fog*, though ending with rescue, includes proposed suicide and near cannibalism. (86)

To say one thing and to suggest something else—this is, in plain English, the art of symbolism that O'Neill exploits across the body of *Thirst* in a masterly way. The title of the play is symbolic. Three characters: the Gentleman, the Mulatto Sailor and the Dancer—are in a precarious condition, with boundless water all around them. They are on a raft, thirsting for water. They do not know how to overcome the crisis. Ranald sums up the outline of the play brilliantly in a succinct way:

*Thirst* (1913), portrays a raft as a microcosm, with its three unnamed shipwreck survivors of Dancer, Gentleman, and West Indian Mulatto Sailor. While introducing the theme of woman as whore, along with interracial and class conflict, it also portrays the behavior of individuals pushed to their emotional and physical limits, even to proposed cannibalism, after the Dancer dances herself to death. The stage directions demonstrate O'Neill's visual and aural sense as he instructs both stage designer and actors to evoke suitable audience reactions. (85)

Needless to say, the thirst that takes hold of the three individuals—symbolizes yearning for life, their urge for survival, their instinctive eagerness to remain alive. The vast sea—unfathomable and terribly hot—stands for the world where men live jostling with countless hazards. The world which happens to be the abode of man is not at all a bed of roses. It is full of tension and toil. To live here is to remain involved in a ceaseless struggle. The characters' inability to escape the tragic end in his early plays must have been O'Neill's forte. Thierry Dubost in his article "The Movie Man: The Failure of Aesthetics?" says:

In O'Neill's early plays, especially his one-acters, one notes that the coherence of his works often results from the characters' inability to escape their tragic fate and avoid the consequences of a lethal environment (see for instance *Thirst*, *The Web*, or *Fog*). The restricted length of these early attempts helped the young playwright focus on a single issue, making it easier for the audience to understand the play. (67)

The title of O'Neill's play, *Thirst*, is multi-shaded. Of course, the cardinal connotation of the term 'thirst'—'an urge for drinking water'—acquires the major focus in the play. The only female character of the play is a dancer and she is so fatigued that she cannot even stand on

# The Expression: An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com)

ISSN: 2395-4132

her feet. She lies prostrate on the floor of the raft, and what she eagerly looks for is a glass of water. Her throat gets parched, the tropical sun contributing to the dry condition of her throat. The two male characters—a gentleman and a sailor are equally thirsty. They do not know how to procure drinking water and slake their thirst.

The scorching heat that makes the sea a bed of torment represents the thorns of existence, the fire of anxiety. One may also refer to the recurrent projection of the shark image. Pretty frequently the light is thrown on the shark moving about the raft. The sight of the sharks frightens the Dancer and towards the end it is the sharks that make a feast of the body of the Dancer, while neither the Gentleman nor the Sailor is spared. The sharks symbolize the danger that no man on earth can avoid. In a deeper sense, if the three human figures in the play jointly reflect the image of life, the sharks personify death. In a word, the play unfolds a poignant drama of life and death, and the sharks searching for blood aptly reveal the essence of ineluctable death and levelling destruction.

Silence is still another phenomenon, which assumes the proportion of a symbol. The very opening speech of the Dancer in the play refers to 'silence': "My God! My God! This silence is driving me mad!" (O'Neill 93-94). A little later, the Dancer reiterates her reaction to silence: "Do you notice how deep the silence is? The world seems emptier than ever" (95). Furthermore, she prefers the crooning of the West Indian Mulatto Sailor to the pervading reticence that blankets the light of life: "Yes, anything is better than silence, even a song like that" (98). She seeks to get rid of the cold grip of reticence. Silence stands for the negation of life, the gloom of inertness. It seems to challenge man's endeavour to assert his existence. The Dancer cannot endure it. She represents the flame of life, the undaunted zest for life. She incarnates hope, and the silence she encounters is a pall of despair, an objectification of hopelessness. The sea is silent and it suggests that the world, where people live, tends to be a vast tract of frustration. To be silent is, for the dancer, to be crowded with the memory of the terrible past that saw a ghastly shipwreck of which she was a victim.

The Dancer is conversant with the essentials of music. She had occasion to move from place to place exhibiting her dance, and she often danced to the accompaniment of melodious music of captivating songs. So, when she hears the song of the Mulatto Sailor her reaction is one of dissatisfaction. She says that the song is not at all a song proper but a chaotic jumble. Something tuneless and ununderstandable, unintelligible. She further points out that the song crooned by the West Indian Mulatto sounds like a dirge, a noisy

Vol. 1 Issue 5 (October 2015)

Editor-in-Chief: Bijender Singh

# The Expression: An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com)

ISSN: 2395-4132

assemblage of vocal notes marking a funeral occasion. In a word, the folk song of the Sailor had a strain of dull monotony which irritates the Dancer. Significantly, while refusing to the Sailor's song the Dancer characterizes it as a requiem, and this is prophetic. She does not know that in a short time she will die and a dirge will be sung observing her watery burial. An imminent event—as in a proleptic irony—casts its shadow beforehand. The Dancer acts as an unconscious soothsayer, proclaiming what is on the cards. Silence pricks her, and the tuneless crooning of the Sailor irritates her. She is between two fires.

*Thirst* is, needless to mention, a grim tragedy which finally proclaims the triumph of life over death. The Dancer hopes against hope, and even when death is round the corner, she keeps on dancing—making a desperate attempt to survive. Her dancing stands for the perpetual rhythm of life. The Dancer collapses, but her dancing still leaves an aura on the minds of the audience. All the three characters in the play struggle for existence, and it is their struggle, their thirst for life, that knows no termination. Death is too weak to eclipse the rays of life.

Tragedy, loosely speaking, is a story that ends on a sad note. Technically speaking, tragedy is a drama exhibiting the fall of the protagonist from happiness to misery, evoking pity and fear, the catharsis of which marks the desired end, leaving an impression of undesirable waste. Normally, the focus in tragedy is on an individual character, a person belonging to a category of royal descent. Hence in Greek tragedy the protagonist is—to name a few—Agamemnon, Oedipus, Antigone. Shakespeare also follows the tradition; which is why, his Macbeth comes of a royal family, while Othello is a moor, an African prince. Hamlet, also a prince, stands side by side with Lear, an old man of waning kingship.

But modern tragedy deviates from the tradition and so Galsworthy makes an ordinary office clerk, Falder, the central character of his tragic play, *Justice*. However, the play that particularly concerns us is O'Neill's *Thirst* which has focus not on a single character but on three individuals, a woman and two men. The woman is in the prime of her life; at least she still retains the charm of her youth and she is reported to be a professional dancer. The other two characters belonging to the male sex are called/shown as the Gentleman and the West Indian Mulatto Sailor. These three characters stand distinct from one another in different respect, and yet they have one poignant point in common: literally and figuratively speaking, they are on the same boat. Following a terrible and traumatic shipwreck they have somehow managed to find a floating shelter in a driftaway raft which floats over the glassy sea with no destination whatsoever. To put it more correctly, the raft seems to have one destination—destruction or watery grave.

Vol. 1 Issue 5 (October 2015)

Editor-in-Chief: Bijender Singh

The sun shines brutally, and the ocean seems to be cruelly infinite. As mentioned and discussed before, the atmosphere is patently adverse. The three passengers have been without food and drink for days. Particularly, they feel the scarcity of drinking water. No rescue ship is visible anywhere, and there is hardly any island where the passengers may steer their raft. To worsen the situation, countless sharks surround the raft, and any moment they may demonstrate their innate hostility. While the sun and the sea jointly conspire to increase the suffering of the passengers, a sort of madness tends to creep into their heated minds. The Dancer, on the threshold of derangement, is under the impression that there is some drinking water under the custody of the Sailor. The Gentleman, who has also slightly lost the balance of his mind, corroborates the insane idea that some drinking water maybe snatched from the Mulatto Sailor.

The Dancer, though miserably weak, somehow stands on her feet, arranges/smoothens her hair and dress, rather vainly, and finally plays the role of a temptress, exhibiting her dance to please the Mulatto. But in a short time she is exhausted and faints, only to die silently. The Sailor thinks that there is nothing wrong with eating up the human flesh of the dead Dancer. But the Gentleman stands in the way; dead or alive, the body of the Dancer should not be exposed to cannibalism. So, the Gentleman, like a true gentleman, tries to foil the savage attempt of the Sailor to desecrate and devour the flesh of the woman. There follows a heavy jostling, and the lifeless body of the Dancer rolls into the sea-water which also eventually swallows the remaining two persons—the Gentleman and the Mulatto Sailor. Sharks celebrate their sumptuous feast, and the water of the sea turns red in blood—incarnadining the play.

O'Neill makes his tragic play a study in irony. The three persons make an all-out effort to assert their survival, resisting the approach of death. It is their vigour of resistance that endows them with the rare glow of being a tragic protagonist. The three passengers are quite innocent, and they appear to be absolutely flawless. They are neither ambitious, nor greedy, nor even selfish. Nevertheless, they undergo untold suffering leading to their undesirable end. Their fall from happiness to misery (before the shipwreck they were all fairly established and happy, it is supposed) is quite unmerited. It evokes a sense of waste. To observe the spectacle of the thirsty passengers creeping steadily towards death is evocative as much of pity as of fear, and at the fag end there is a process of Catharsis—tranquillity following a tempest. In a word, what we find in *Thirst* is a heart-rending play, a bona fide tragedy, a story of grim and glorious suffering.

But the question is why do the characters show a great urge for drinking water? The

# The Expression: An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com)

ISSN: 2395-4132

plain answer is: they call for water because they are thirsty but the deeper reason for their frantic search for water is their urge to keep their body and soul together. On the verge of death, they make an all-out effort to survive. This is known as a zest for life. They abhor death—they want to live. They are in love with life. It is to save their lives that they seek water. Again, when they are in the midst of the infinite sea, they seem dissociated from their fellow people. A sort of aloneness eats into their vitals. They intend to overcome their sense of isolation. They long for companionship. This is the reason why the Dancer constantly talks exchanging words with the Gentleman. She clings to the Gentleman from whom she cannot separate herself. The Gentleman too thinks that he requires somebody's company. Hence he speaks to the Dancer, dwelling on different topics. The Mulatto is not a good mixer. Nevertheless, it is to set aside his isolation that he constantly croons a folk song.

It is interesting to note that when the Dancer is at the end of her tether, she cannot forget the young Second Officer of the ill-fated ship. The face of the handsome second officer is deeply imprinted on her mind. The fact is that she fell in love with the officer, and the second officer too admired her beauty. It was the officer who managed to find a raft for her. Moreover, at the parting hour, he kissed her lovingly—the warmth of the kiss the Dancer still feels. Though the Dancer repents her thirst for love, how she feels an urge to be reunited with the second officer—her lover!

Zander Brietzke in his article, "Condensed Comedy: The Neo- Futurists Perform O'Neill's Stage Directions", talks very highly of the closing stage direction which is the staple of O'Neill's irony. Although almost impossible to be enacted on the theatre, the tragic irony imposed/confirmed by the circling fins of the sharks, with its literary/figurative aura, indeed comes full circle with the consummate stage direction of the play:

The final lines of the play, stage directions, are absolutely beautiful, but no audience sitting in a theater could actually see what the playwright describes: "The black stain on the water widens. The fins circle no longer. The raft floats in the midst of a vast silence. The sun glares down like a great angry eye of God. The eerie heat waves float upward in the still air like the souls of the drowned. On the raft a diamond necklace lies glittering in the blazing sunshine." The literary narrative of this passage simply does not translate to a theatrical space. (197)

Before we conclude, another instance of irony maybe cited. The Gentleman, while on board the ship, was going to be honoured by the members of the United States Club: Buenos Aires. It was decided to mark the occasion with a banquet. The 'Menu' was prepared: Martini

**Vol. 1 Issue 5 (October 2015)**

**Editor-in-Chief: Bijender Singh**

cocktails, soup, Sherry, fish, Burgundy, chicken, Champagne; but with the terrible destruction of the ship the banquet could not occur and now in the pocket of the gentleman lies a scrap of paper—the Menu: “Listen! M-e-n-u—Menu. That is the joke. This is the souvenir menu of a banquet given in my honor by this club” (O’Neill 102). The joke implied in the ‘Menu’ provides a masterstroke of irony.

Manifestly, the play concerns itself with multiple kinds of thirst. The thirst for water apart, the characters long for remaining alive as long as possible. They have the deep-rooted thirst for life. They crave for sound, and so they—even when greatly exhausted—converse and keep the ball of communication rolling. After all, man is a gregarious creature. Isolation he can hardly endure. Even Robinson Crusoe, after twenty eight years of exile in a remote island, feels an urge to return home and gets reunited with his parents, other relations and friends. Understandably, the three characters in the play demonstrate various kinds of thirst, and this is how the title of the play gains in depth and range. To be more precise, man has his biological thirst, he has his spiritual thirst too. Even when the three characters are on the brink of death they respond to their zest for life that accounts for their thirst for survival, thirst for companionship, thirst for love, thirst for communication.

## Works Cited

- Barnhart, Phillip. ““God Stiffen Us”: Queering O’Neill’s Sea Plays.” Ed(s). Michael Y. Bennett and Benjamin D. Carson. *Eugene O’Neill’s One-Act Plays: New Critical Perspectives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 81-96. Print.
- Brietzke, Zander. “Condensed Comedy: The Neo- Futurists Perform O’Neill’s Stage Directions.” Ed(s). Michael Y. Bennett and Benjamin D. Carson. *Eugene O’Neill’s One-Act Plays: New Critical Perspectives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 193-202. Print.
- Coleridge, S.T. “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (text of 1834).” *Poetry Foundation*. Web. 15 Nov. 2015.
- Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*. London: Macmillan and Company, 1868. *Google Books*. Web. 15 Nov. 2015.
- Dowling, Robert M. *Eugene O’Neill: A Life in Four Acts*. London: Yale UP, 2014. Print.
- Dubost, Thierry. “The Movie Man: The Failure of Aesthetics?” Ed(s). Michael Y. Bennett and Benjamin D. Carson. *Eugene O’Neill’s One-Act Plays: New Critical Perspectives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 67-80. Print.
- O’Neill, Eugene. *Thirst*. Ed. Board of Editors. *An Anthology: Poems, Plays and Prose. B.A. Part I (Hons.) English*. Burdwan: The University of Burdwan Press, 2005. 92-120. Print.

Ranald, Margaret Loftus. "From Trial to Triumph (1913–1924): The Early Plays." Ed. Harold Bloom. *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Eugene O'Neill*. New York: InfobasePublishing, 2007. 83-100. Print.

Wikipedia contributors. "Tantalus." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 11 Nov. 2015. Web. 15 Nov. 2015.

### **About the Author**

Abhilash Dey graduated from the royal campus of Burdwan Raj College with honours in 2010 and was awarded the university gold medal for topping his post-graduation class from the University of Burdwan in 2012. He joined Raj College as guest faculty in July, 2014 and received the State Funded JRF from the university in December, 2014. Following the completion of his M.Phil. on the interface of urban sexuality in select graphic novels of Sarnath Banerjee, Dey has been a part of KaziNazrul University, Asansol, as guest lecturer from March, 2015. Dey is about to embark on his doctoral archival research on *Sandesh Magazine*. Dey has enjoyed national scholarship on drama puppetry from CCRT, Ministry of Culture, for five years when he was in high school. He shares a budding interest in Bengali children's and young adult literature, art history, non-fiction, media, spatial theory and comic book studies.