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## THE HAVOCS OF TRAGEDIES: AN ANALYSIS OF EUGENE O'NEILL'S SELECT PLAYS

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### Abstract

Eugene O' Neil is a wonderful name in the history of American Drama. He can be called the American Shakespeare just because his contribution in American Literature is immense. He was the first American playwright who won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Not only this, he has also won the four Pulitzer Prizes. He has depicted few social issues in his plays. He has realistic touch in his writings and he was always in the favour of the vernacular languages in his plays so that he may remain close to his audiences. His plays have immense impact of his personal life. His life remains a chain of tragedies and that's why there are many tragic scenes in his plays. Eugene O'Neil's plays depict the personal accounts of his life through his characters. Eugene was a simple actor and writer. He had never thought in his life that he may become a successful playwright one day. He has written his plays on the basis of his own experiences in his family. He was much attached with his mother. His family members were one or another drug addicted and it was very difficult for them to quit their bad habits. The present paper attempts to showcase the tragic elements in his select plays and the impact of tragedies on his characters. *The Hairy Ape*, *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night* have been taken for the present analysis and there is a scope for further analysis on the same theme in his other plays.

### Key-Words

Eugene O' Neil, American Theatre, Tragic Elements, Social Realism, Spiritual Fulfillment, Sea Experience, Intellectual Freedom.

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Eugene O' Neil was a well-established American theatre actor. He was born in 16 October, 1888 in New York in a hotel room. He was the son of a touring actor James O'Neill. Her mother Ella would always help her husband and she would accompany her husband whenever he went.

Eugene spent his childhood in hotels, trains and backstages. Eugene O'Neil would recall his childhood and he would blame his parents for such kind of life. His mother became drug addicted. He was admitted in some boarding schools such as Mt. St. Vincent in the Bronx and Betts Academy in Stamford, Connecticut. He would spend his summers at his permanent home at Connecticut where he would visit the Thames River in New London. He joined Princeton University in 1906 but he stayed there only for one year.

In this age, he fell into a bad company and the six years of his life were the worst years of his life. He would go to ships to see waterfronts, started drinking alcohol and even attempted to commit suicide. At the age of 24, he took a job and became a reporter for some time. He started contributing poetry for the *New London Telegraph* but he got infection and became a tuberculosis patient. He remained confined in the Gaylord Farm Sanitarium, Wallingford for six months in 1912. This time he realized that he is ending his life himself and this realization was like a new birth to him. After that he started writing plays.

Eugene started melodramas which had deep impact of his life. His plays were about some characters, events, sailors, derelicts etc. He took the themes of tragedies and injustice done by god to human beings. His plays were not considered fit to present on the stage. One critic told his father that Eugene should be sent to Harvard to study at Harvard for playwriting course with George Pierce Baker. Though he did not pay much attention to Baker's advice still he kept working for his goal which made him a successful playwright.

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His first play was staged in the summer of 1916 in a fishing village where some young painter and writers have built an experimental theater. In this ramshackle and small theatre, they produced his one-Act sea play entitled *Bound East for Cardiff*. His other sea plays were also staged between 1916 and 1920. His first full-length play *Beyond the Horizon* was staged in 1920 and the young playwright started getting recognition due to the element of tragic realism and this time he won the first Pulitzer Prize for his play. He won three more Pulitzer prizes for his plays *Strange Interlude*, *Anna Christie*, and *Long Day's Journey into Night*. He had never imagined that a person like him may become such a successful dramatist that people will compare him with Shakespeare. Raymond Williams writes about O'Neill in his book *Modern Tragedy*, "The tragedy of man is perhaps the only significant thing about him....The individual life is made significant just by the struggle" (116).

Eugene became dedicated to play writing and he produced twenty plays from 1920 to 1943. He kept rewriting his plays. He would revise the manuscript half a dozen times until he was not satisfied. His shelves were always filled with the outlines of the plays, ideas, incidents and research notes. His plays were autobiographical and there was the touch of tragic elements because his parents could not live a satisfactory life. His elder brother died of alcoholism in his middle-age.

He suffered from multiple health hazards. In the last ten years, he had Parkinson's like tumour in his hands due to which he could not write. After this condition also, he has written three autobiographical plays *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *The Iceman Cometh*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. He dies in Sheraton Hotel in 2000 in Boston at the age of 65. At the time of his death, his last words were: "I knew it. I knew it. Born in a hotel room and died in a hotel room". Later it was discovered that he died of cerebellar cortical atrophy.

His tragic life can be seen from his personal life also. He married three women and he divorced two women. He had three children. Unfortunately, his elder son who was born from his first wife committed suicide when she was forty years old and his younger son also came into emotional instability. His daughter Oona married Charlie Chaplin against her father's wish. She was merely eighteen-year-old while Chaplin's age was 54 at that time. Thus, his life remains a tragedy.

So far as Eugene O'Neill's plays are concerned, his play *The Iceman Cometh* was written in 1939 and it was published in 1946. The play is a tragedy in four Acts and it is set in 1912 in a Greenwich Village saloon and roofing house in New York. The plays open with a birthday party. The patrons, three prostitutes and twelve men are dead drunkards. They have no purpose of their life and at the occasion of birthday party, they think the Hickey will arrive on time on Harry's birthday. Harry Hope was in tension because his wife Bess died 20 years ago and after that he did not leave the bar. When Hickey comes finally, he shows a strange behaviour which puts other characters into turmoil. Hickey wants that his friends may leave their delusions otherwise they will not be able to fulfill their hopes if they keep on drinking like this.

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There are some tragic secrets which are revealed in the play. Hickey now tells that his wife did not die a natural death, she was murdered and then he says that he himself had murdered her out of love. He was working as a salesman and he was feeling guilty of his wife's forgiveness for her drinking habits and infidelities. He wanted that she may get rid of her drinking habit. He became insane and murdered her. He knew it well that there were chances of his execution for this murder.

*Mourning Becomes Electra* is based on the human psychology. The play is based on the Oedipus complex in which Oedipus murdered his father and had relationships with his mother. When he came to know all about it, he committed suicide. The first part of the play is "The Homecoming". The play opens in the Mannon House in spring afternoon. The owner of this house Brigadier-General Ezra Mannon was soon to be returned from war. Ezra daughter Lavinia has returned from a trip from New York. The gardener Seth does not pay any attention to her and he warns her that she should stay away from Captain Brant. Lavinia tells Christine that she has seen her kissing Brant. Lavinia gets embarrassed. "The Hunted" is the second part of the play in which Orin grimly comments that that Lavinia has stolen Christine's soul. The plays talks about the ghost related story.

Eugene O'Neill is a tragic playwright who has penetrating themes to make people emotional. Masood Ali Khan observes, "O'Neill's sense of the dramatic in life and its realization in the theatre is ever present, and certainly nothing can cancel out his innate ability to tell a story" (Khan 124). Neill's plays have the social themes and the modern American society has been criticized in his plays. He would consider that the theater is not for the entertainment of the people, it is for inculcating human values in people. As his plays have tragic stances, that's why he wrote mostly tragedies which focus on the sicknesses and problems of day-to-day life. O' Neill writes in a letter to George Jean Nathan:

The playwright must dig at the roots of sickness of today as he feels it the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in ... (Neill xvii).

We see that in his play *Beyond the Horizon* the mental degradation of a human being has been depicted. There is a strange thing to note that each main character in his plays is obsessed with some desire. He has used expressionistic technique also in his plays *The Emperor Jone* and *The Hairy Ape*. *The Hairy Ape* describes how the modern man feels tragic and alienated. In this play Yank's struggle in an industrial society has been depicted.

Neill's tragic characters, much different from Shakespeare, are not the powerful king, queens or prices or military generals, his tragic characters are simple human beings of the society. Eugene O'Neill has not followed the concept of Aristotle in which Aristotle describes that a tragic hero must be a well-established powerful person so that his fall may raise tragic emotions of pity and fear. Neill was much influenced from great psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung who have always emphasized on the importance of sub-consciousness for our motivational purpose.

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*The Hairy Ape* also can be called a tragic play which deals with the class struggle in it. The central character of the play is Robert Yank Smith who works in a ship as a fireman. There are two main workers Paddy, an old man and Long who also assist yank in the ship. Mildred Douglas is a rude rich woman who insults Yank. In the forecastle, all the workers were together and they were drinking beer and were enjoying. Yank was noticing them and he went close to them and asked beer. Yank was a very strong man and he was the leader of the group. When they were singing a song, a man starts singing a song about the family but Yank stops him.

Then they start working about the degrading life. Paddy tells them that he had few skills and he has experience of life. Mildred wants to help the poor. Her aunt tells them that though she helps the poor yet she makes them realize about their condition. Mildred and her aunts are waiting for the second engineer who may take them to the stock hall where the laborers are working. The engineer tells Mildred that she can change her white dress because there is coal in the stock hall and coal can spoil her clothes. Yank was encouraging his fellows to work more enthusiastically. All the workers stop working and when Yank looks there he saw Mildred there in white dress. Yank calls him a wild beast and became fainted to see Yank. Paddy later tells Yank that Mildred was considering him a hairy ape. Long takes Yank to the Fifth Avenue where all the upper class people live. All the people ignore him and Yank starts making awkward activities and a man sends him in jail. Another jailor tells him that he should join Mildred's place at Industrial Workers of the World. But he is not given any work because they consider him a detective and throw him aside. In the final scene of the play, he goes in the zoo where he saw a hairy ape and compares his life with him. He opens the gate of the cage and the ape catches him. He takes him into his cage and kills him. Thus, the play remains a big tragedy.

His play *Long Day's Journey into Night* was published in 1956 in four Acts. Neill got Pulitzer Prize for it in 1957. This play resembles with his life and that's why it can be called an autobiographical play. They play is takes place on a single day in August 1912. The main protagonist of the play is James Tyrone who is sixty-five years old. Mary Carvan Tyrone is his wife. Jamie and Edmund are his sons. They have made Cathleen. James Tyrone is a dead alcoholic and his mother is morphine addicted. Her mother is in this addiction since last twenty years. Jamie is also alcoholic and womanizer. Edmund wants to become a poet.

Mary and James have just come after breakfast. Mary has come from sanatorium for her morphine addiction. All the family mummers are together. Jamie and James keep fighting. Jamie blames his father for the misery. He tells that if he had taken his mother to a good doctor she would not have been drug addicted while his father blames him for being a womanizer. Edmund is much concerned about her mother's health. Edmund tells her mother that she should take care of herself. Edmund was talking with Cathleen. Edmund and Jamie were talking about the habit of morphine and they come to know that they were right. Mary blames James that he could not give them a good house and they had to live in a second rated hotel. Mary again goes upstairs. Edmund convinces her mother not to take morphine. Jamie blames his father that his father would send Edmund also in a cheap sanatorium. Her mother reveals that her mother becomes drug addicted only after the birth of Edmund.

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Mary was waiting with Cathleen for the family members. Mary tells about her family that she belonged to a well-to-do family and she would go to a convent school and she would play a good piano and she wanted to become a nun. When she went to James's show and met him in the dressing room after show. They fell in love. She considers that it was her wrong decision. Mary tells Edmund that Jamie is not a good boy and you should stay away from him. She thinks about her weeding and her wedding dress. Edmund tries to convince her mother but she does not listen to her. The midnight scene is in Act 4 and James and Edmund are playing cards. Edmund tells his father that he would become a writer soon. Mary is in her wedding gown in the end of the play and is murmuring about her wrong decisions of her life. Her family members take pity on her. Thus, this play has tragic snapshots of a family.

Conclusively, Eugene O' Neill's plays are based on his personal accounts and his relationships with the other members of the family. His plays have been written in expressionistic technique. There are many chances that his plays can be taken as tragedies. He is the master of the American theatre and his plays brought remarkable success to him.

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