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The Silence of Nature in Eugene O'Neill's *Thirst*

A B S T R A C T

As a father of modern American drama, Eugene O'Neill is distinguished by his interweaving of autobiographical experiences with his plays. He is aware of the effect of the natural environment on man's inner problems. O'Neil's tough life at sea for several years is reflected in some of his plays, which show his ecological awareness. These plays depict the presence as well as the power of nature in the lives of the characters. This paper examines the elements of nature that distinguish O'Neill's *Thirst* in a way that forms his tragedy in the modern era. Like *The Ancient Mariner*, the play depicts the powerful sea as a source of punishment, terror, and death. All the characters' suffering is confronted by the horrible silence of nature, from which those characters cannot escape. In the play he embodies man's inevitability to challenge his destiny in the form of nature. The study presents how this challenge demonstrates the ecological and psychological dimensions of the play.

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صمت الطبيعة في مسرحية "العطش" للكاتب يوجين أونويل

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الخلاصة:

يعد الكاتب المسرحي يوجين أونويل أبا للمسرح الأمريكي الحديث، كما يتميز بأسلوبه في حياكة التجارب الشخصية مع أحداث المسرحيات التي يكتبها. ان هذا الكاتب يعي تأثير البيئة الطبيعية على مشاكل الانسان الداخلية. ان الحياة الصعبة التي عاشها أونويل في البحر لعدة سنوات قد عكسها في كتاباته

المسرحية مما يوضح وعيه البيئي النقدي. تدرس هذه الورقة البحثية عناصر الطبيعة التي ميزت مسرحية "العطش" كواحدة من المسرحيات التراجيدية في العصر الحديث. حيث ان هذه المسرحيات تقدم قوة و دور الطبيعة في حيوات شخصياته. كما في قصيدة " البحار العجوز", تتناول المسرحية قوة البحر كمصدر للعقاب و الخوف و الموت. حيث تواجه جميع الشخصيات في المسرحية صمت الطبيعة المخيف الذي لا مفر منه امام معاناتهم في مواجهة العطش و الموت. تجسد المسرحية تحدي الانسان اللامحال في صراعه مع القدر المتمثل, في الطبيعة. تقدم هذه الدراسة كيف ان هذا التحدي يوضح الى الابعاد النفسية و البيئية النقدية للمسرحية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

القدر, النقد البيئي, الطبيعة, العقاب, الصمت, "العطش".

Introduction

As a common notion, nature refers to the natural world, physical world, or material world. The urgent need to protect nature in the 1970s raised the interest in defining the word "nature" and following its historical development. In Greek times, nature referred to growth, principle, power, and substance. After Christianity in Europe, nature became associated with God, as He is the only One who creates the world. During the Renaissance, nature was used in the writing of intellectuals as a landscape. The word "nature" has undergone many meaningful dimensions from the Romantic till the 1970s (Ducarme & Couvet, 2020). Accordingly, the interest in studying nature in literature increased in the 1970s. By the mid-1980s, there was a development in the environmental literary studies. In 1993 a recognizable critical school about nature emerged which is ecological literary study, known as ecocriticism. Thus, ecocriticism is a theory which examines the relationship between literature and nature. It studies the relations between writers, texts, and the world. Ecocriticism is an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty, 1996)

Eugene O'Neill, one of the most prominent American playwrights, used nature with various dramatic functions as one of the bases for his tragedies. O'Neill is known for creating his tragedy in the modern era. He is affected by the Greek tragedy in the presentation of the hero in conflict with his fate as he ultimately falls because of a certain flaw. At the same time, O'Neill was affected

by the views of Nietzsche on Greek tragedy, which the latter expressed in *The Birth of Tragedy*. O'Neill's perception of man and nature was inspired by Nietzsche's examination of the self-forgetfulness at one with nature (Williams, 2018, p.5). In one of his letters, O'Neill (1988) expressed his views on tragedy:

I'm far from being pessimist. I see life as a gorgeously-ironical, beautifully-indifferent, splendidly-suffering bit of chaos the tragedy of which gives Man a tremendous significance, while his losing fight with fate he would be a tepid silly animal. (p.18)

O'Neill believes in the significance of struggle in man's life because this struggle gives meaning to man's life by making him a hero even if he does not succeed. It is the idea of existence in meaningful way. (Sharma, 1985)

This paper examines O'Neill's attempt in his play, *Thirst*, of presenting a tragedy in the 20th century that reflects his ecological views of man's relation and conflict with nature.

Silence of Nature in *Thirst*

The hero in O'Neill's tragedy is a common man in the modern age who suffers because of unknown forces. His suffering and his resistance to stop these forces give meaning to his existence. In some of his plays, like *Thirst*, nature is used to play the role of the unknown forces.

Thirst was one of the early O'Neill's Sea plays, first published in 1914 and first performed in 1916. The play has two sources of inspiration: the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 and Clayton Hamilton's advice to O'Neill to be the first American dramatist to write about the sea (Sheaffer, 2002, p.271). It is a tragedy in one act, that tells the story of three castaways on a life raft. They are the Gentleman, the Dancer, and a West Indian Sailor who is called 'negro' by the other two characters. The whole play depicts the ordeal of these three castaways, ending with their tragic death.

The natural world is strongly present in O'Neill's works as the characters are involved with it. Nature has always functioned in O'Neill's plays (Baker-White, 2015, p.5). The opening scene shows the pitiless and angry nature as the "sun glares down from straight overhead like a great angry eye of God" (*Thirst*, p.7).

Hunger and thirst have transformed the beautiful dancer into “a mocking spectre of a dancer” (*Thirst*, p.9) as she sobs a lot, hopelessly. The Gentleman has also transformed as he looks miserable in rags of what had been a blue suit. The silence of nature, which surrounds them increases their suffering. The Dancer says, “This silence is driving me mad! Why do you not speak to me? Is there no ship in sight yet?” (*Thirst*, p.9). A horrible silence makes them feel that “the world seems emptier” (p.11). The Gentleman and the Dancer belong to the upper-class white world while the Sailor belongs to the lower-class non-white world, because of his ethnicity. The Sailor is less physically affected than the Dancer and the Gentleman. Thus, the Sailor sings a ritual song most of the time, believing that his singing would prevent the sharks from eating them. His song causes the Gentleman to “feel the silence more keenly” (p.23). However, the Sailor’s energy and power make the Gentleman, and the Dancer think that he hides some water. Thus, the Dancer, motivated by the Gentleman, offers her valuable necklace to the Sailor for a few drops of water. Later, she offers her body, but he assures her he does not have any water.

The sun and the sea seem join their forces against the three castaways to increase their suffering. The Dancer describes the sky as if it “were raining drops of blood” (*Thirst*, p.9). The Gentleman describes the atmosphere; “How still the sea is! How still the sky is! One would say the world was dead.” (p.23). The Dancer wonders: “what have we done that we should suffer so? It is as if one misfortune after another happened to make our agony more terrible” (*Thirst*, p.12). O’Neill’s aim in his play is not only to present the pain of man’s suffering, but the playwright’s goal is to look at man’s whole life with its tragedy (Larik et al, 2013, p.75). The Dancer continues her prayers to God to save her from this doom: “God! Oh! My God! Must this be the end of all? I was coming home, home after years of struggling, home to success and fame and money. And I must die out here on a raft like a mad dog!” (*Thirst*, p.18). However, the Gentleman assures her that “the blind sky will not answer your appeals or mine” and “the cruel sea will not grow merciful for any prayer of ours” (*Thirst*, p.25). O’Neill’s choice of the sea as a powerful force greater than a human being’s power reveals religious and spiritual association. The sea, which is part of nature, is within the divine control of God (Ratliff, 1975, p.20). The play begins and ends with a reference to the “angry eye of God”. Their real tragedy is God’s silence on their prayers and suffering. Modern

man's separateness from God is depicted by O'Neill to demonstrate modern man's dilemma in the troubled sea of life (Ratliff, 1975, p.60). The Gentleman also pleads to God:

Oh God, God! After twenty years of incessant grind, day after weary day, I started on my first vacation. I was going home. And here I sit dying by slow degree, desolate and forsaken. Is this the meaning of all my years of labour? Is this the end, oh God? (*Thirst*, p.18).

It is not only the silence, hunger, and thirst that cause their suffering; their memories of the past happy days and their hopes also increase their pain. The Gentleman, before the shipwreck, was supposed to be honoured by the members of the United States Club: Bueno Aires, in a party on the ship; everything was prepared, even the menu to be served. The irony of fate is that he is left with the menu to remind him of those moments of happiness. The same thing for the Dancer, who is left with her very valuable necklace and a happy memory of a kiss by the handsome officer who brought her the raft to be saved on. O'Neill's portrayal of suffering in *Thirst* as a tragedy exceeds the aesthetic aim of the Greek tragedy, as his goal is to produce an existential drama. The playwright believes that a man's suffering is what confirms his existence in life (Dubost, 2019, p.20).

Robert Baker-White, in *The Ecological Eugene: O'Neill, Nature's Veiled Purpose in Plays* (2015), associates nature with humanity as "nature houses the human, so humanity is natural" (p.17). Humanity is depicted in *Thirst* after the tragic death of the Dancer. When the Sailor rejects her offers, she starts dancing madly "like some ghastly marionette jerked by invisible wires" (*Thirst*, p.41). Then she falls dead; the Sailor, in a moment, turns to his savage or animalistic instinct by carrying a knife, saying: "We shall eat. We shall drink" (p.42). He is ready to tear the Dancer's body to eat her flesh and drink her blood. The Sailor's intention questions the sense of humanity. However, another reverse-bright image of humanity is presented by the Gentleman saying: "No! No! No! Good God, not that" (*Thirst*, p.42). He collects his energy to save the dead body of the Dancer by pushing it into the water to prevent the Sailor from fulfilling his intention. The Gentleman's action shows a transformation in his character as he welcomes death, sacrificing his own body by having a fight with the Sailor, which ends in their death, drowned in the sea, to be torn immediately by sharks surrounding the raft. A

brilliant depiction of humanity is revealed by the Gentleman's last action against the gloomy questioned humanity by the Sailor's intention of cannibalism (Dubost, 2019, p.20), as he proves to be called a gentleman. O'Neill uses nature as a means of revealing human manners in his contracting images. The play ends with the same silence of nature that begins with the same sentence, "the angry eyes of God" (*Thirst*, p. 43).

Thirst as a title shadows O'Neill's aim by displaying the punishment of nature represented by the three castaways' thirst, and the pain they have in the suffering from thirst, which is highly increased by being surrounded by water and unable to have one drop of it. Moreover, it is the modern era's thirst for morality and humanity that is being missed.

Conclusion

O'Neill's *Thirst* presents him as a moralist and a modern tragic playwright affected by the Greek dramatists' concept of tragedy and the hero's punishment. The play begins and ends with nature silently watching the castaways' suffering as "the angry eye of God". Nature functions as God, and fate is responsible for modern man's suffering who lives in a godless world. This suffering is what assures man's existence in life. Moreover, O'Neill presents the human beings' oneness with nature as another face of humanity.

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