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THE ELEMENTS OF TRAGEDY IN O'NEILL'S PLAYS

The problem of what tragedy is, though discussed before by American critics, became a centre of critical discussions in the United States in the nineteen-fifties. The related question was whether any contemporary dramas can be considered tragedies. The subject became of special interest in 1929 when Joseph Wood Krutch, an influential American theatre critic, discussed it in his "Modern Temper".

Krutch believed that our age is unable to produce a tragedy. Old tragedies, he said, were permeated by the "idea of nobility". In face of a disaster the protagonist of a classical tragedy proved himself to be inherently noble. The characters of the modern plays are, on the other hand, commonplace and their sufferings merely depress the audience. Krutch himself seemed to qualify this opinion when he acclaimed O'Neill as a tragic playwright in his preface to O'Neill's *Nine Plays* and described the characters in those plays as "great and terrible creatures".

Krutch's main point seems to be in agreement with the present day American critics and theoretists of tragedy: H. A. Myers, R. S. Sewall, Cleanth Brooks, W. G. McCollom and Murray Krieger¹. They all agree that tragedy is primarily concerned with human suffering and death (if it exalts life it is only by contrast with death) and that the tragic protagonist acquires a certain self-knowledge by his misfortunes. (The most classic example is *Oedipus the King*; cf. Brook's analysis of the play in *Understanding Drama*).

Moreover, the tragic protagonist must have a certain measure of freedom in his choices. If he is too determined by environment or

¹ H. A. Myers, *Tragedy: A View of Life*, Ithaca, N. Y., 1956; R. S. Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy*, New Haven 1960; Cl. Brooks, R. B. Heilman, *Understanding Drama*, New York 1961; W. G. McCollom, *Tragedy*, New York 1957; M. Krieger, *The Tragic Vision*, New York 1960.

psychological complexes he ceases to be tragic and becomes a mere victim or, as Krutch put it, he loses his "nobility". McCollom adds that a tragic character should be above average and strongly individual but, at the same time, a representative of mankind (e. g. he cannot simply be a psychological case).

Another point considered by the critics is whether tragedy should affirm some order in the universe which the tragic protagonist comes to recognize at the end of the play. In this respect H. A. Myers in his *Tragedy: A View of Life* is more outspoken than the others when he states that ancient and Shakespearian tragedies are "tragedies of equivalence", i. e. they recognize a certain balance of good and evil in the world. The modern tragedy, however, is a "tragedy of ambivalence". Its protagonists are unable to reach any balanced view of the world though they see their situation quite clearly. Prof. Myers gives O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* as an example of this kind of tragedy.

R. S. Sewall, on the other hand, argues that all tragic characters achieve only a momentary and very precarious sense of balance between good and evil, the essential thing for a tragic protagonist being not the discovery of a certain order but of a truth about himself and his place in the world. This critic therefore considers in his analysis also such non-dramatic works as *The Book of Job*, *Moby Dick* and *The Brothers Karamazov*².

This attitude seems to be exemplified by all those characters in O'Neill's plays who can be described as "searchers" and spend their lives trying to discover where they "belong". Most of them arrive at a certain degree of self-knowledge, even if it is different from that granted to Oedipus or King Lear. They are always much nearer to it than Arthur Miller's *Salesman* (the play was considered a candidate for a modern tragedy) who does not realize what is happening to him. Thus they acquire a certain measure of the tragic stature which Willy Loman lacks. A strong objection to ascribe tragic qualities to O'Neill's plays, however, was held by those critics (Winther, Cowley, Cargill, Sewall³) who considered his characters as too determined by circumstances or by psychological complexes to be tragic in any sense.

² Krieger goes even further (*The Tragic Vision* and the first chapter of *A Window to Criticism*, Princeton 1964) in his opinion that the questions concerning human fate as posed by tragedy always remain unanswered; the only order which the tragedy affirms is aesthetic, i.e., the order of a work of art.

³ S. K. Winther, *Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study*, New York 1961; M. Cowley, *Not Men: A Natural History of American Naturalism*, "American Literature", ed. by C. A. Brown and J. T. Flanagan; O. Cargill, *Intellectual America: Ideas on the March*, New York 1959; Sewall, *op. cit.*

Indeed, the playwright often stresses the factors of environment, family heritage, and psychological complexes as determining the actions of his characters to a considerable extent. Many of them, especially in the early plays, are victims of external and psychological forces beyond their control.

The sailors of his four *Glencairn* plays may serve as an example of protagonists determined to a certain extent by circumstances, i.e. violence and accident. Thus in *Bound East for Cardiff* (1916) the main character, Yank, is dying because he has had an accident, and in *The Long Voyage Home* (1917) a Swedish sailor is robbed of the money he had saved in order to return to his country, and shanghaied. *In the Zone* (1917) presents the cruelty of a crew who are unable to control their panic upon reaching the war zone and suspect one of their fellow sailors of being a German spy.

There is, however, one among the *Glencairn Plays* which already marks O'Neill's early psychological interest. It is *The Moon of the Caribees* (1917), which begins with the following stage directions:

A forward section of the main deck of the British tramp steamer "Glencairn", at anchor off an island in the West Indies. The full moon, half-way up the sky, throws a clear light on the deck. The sea is calm and the ship motionless.

On the left two of the derrick booms of the foremast jut out at an angle of forty-five degrees black against the sky. In the rear the dark outline of the port bulwark is sharply defined against a distant strip of coral beach, white in the moonlight, fringed with coco-palms whose tops rise clear of the horizon [...], a melancholy negro chant, faint and far off, drifts crooning over the water.

Against this background a scene of violence is enacted: drinking, a fight, a wounded seaman, negro women chased away unpaid for the alcohol which they had smuggled aboard. Contrast is provided by the character of an English sailor Smitty, who sits passive in the midst of the rowdy group, and tries to drown the memories of an unhappy love affair in drink.

It is this character which expresses O'Neill's interest in psychology. There is a certain complexity in his case: He says that he drinks because the girl he loved left him, but the old donkey-man suspects that she left him because he was drinking. Smitty himself does not answer the question. The play ends with

silence [...] broken only by the haunted, saddened voice of that brooding music, faint and far off, like the mood of moonlight made audible⁴.

⁴ *The Moon of the Caribees*, [in:] O'Neill's, *Plays*, vol. 1, Random House 1954, pp. 455, 474.

O'Neill wrote about the play in his letter to Barrett Clark:

The spirit of the sea — a big thing — is in this latter play the hero [...]. Smitty in the stuffy, grease-paint atmosphere of *In the Zone* is magnified into a hero who attracts our sentimental sympathy. In *The Moon*, posed against a background of that beauty, sad because it is eternal, which is one of the revealing moods of the sea's truth, his silhouetted gestures of self-pity are reduced to their proper insignificance, his thin whine of weakness is lost in the silence which it was mean enough to disturb, we get the perspective to judge him — and the others — and we find his sentimental posing much more out of harmony with truth, much less in tune with beauty, than the honest vulgarity of his mates. To me *The Moon* works with truth, and *Beyond the Horizon* also while *In the Zone* substitutes theatrical sentimentalism⁵.

Whatever we think about O'Neill's statement considering "the honest vulgarity of his mates" as more in keeping with the sea's mood than Smitty's melancholy, it seems significant that *The Moon* was O'Neill's favourite among his sea plays (he mentions the fact in the letter just quoted). It is the first one which suggests some psychological complexity in the main character and the only one among the one-acters where the background of nature's beauty is stressed — the others take place in a forecastle or a port bar.

It seems equally characteristic of O'Neill's way of writing that the beauty of nature and the character of a dreamer exist in the play together with the element of violence which made some critics describe the early plays as "naturalistic" in the sense of following a Zolaesque tradition⁶. These elements will appear side by side in O'Neill's later plays — the element of violence connected with social environment, heritage and psychological complexes, and the element represented by a poet or a dreamer, sensitive to the beauty of nature which helps him to transcend the deterministic elements in human life. This method works "with truth" for the playwright who includes *The Moon* and *Beyond the Horizon* (1918) in the same category. A letter written to an American critic, Arthur Hobson Quinn, shows that the method had been consciously chosen:

But where I feel myself most neglected is just where I set most store by myself — as a bit of a poet who has labored with the spoken word to evolve original rhythms of beauty where beauty apparently isn't — *Jones*, *Ape*, *God's Chillun*, *Desire*, etc. — and to see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy, in as near the Greek sense as one can grasp it, in seemingly the most ignoble, debased lives. And just here is where I am a most confirmed mystic, too, for I'm always, always trying to interpret Life in terms of lives, never

⁵ Quoted by B. H. Clark (*Eugene O'Neill*, pp. 58—59).

⁶ Cowley, *op. cit.*

just lives in terms of character. I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind — (Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it — Mystery, certainly) — and of the one eternal tragedy for Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. And my profound conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about and that it is possible — or can be — to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values and symbols in the theatre which may to some degree bring home to members of a modern audience their ennobling identity with the tragic figures on the stage. Of course, this is very much of a dream, but where the theatre is concerned, one must have a dream, and the Greek dream in tragedy is the noblest ever!⁷

Though some of O'Neill's plays present a purely deterministic view of human life, more of them join the two elements presenting man as determined in many ways and yet able to transcend his circumstances.

In *Beyond the Horizon*, O'Neill's first full-length play, Robert Mayo is the author of his own misfortune. He ruins his life because he does not follow his dream and stays on his father's farm. For a moment he becomes fascinated by love and gives up what was a way of living natural to him. The decision is his own, and results out of his weakness or his lack of understanding, but is not caused by any external determining factors.

Towards the end of his life he comes to a conclusion which he tries to communicate in broken phrases to his brother and to his wife: "Remember, Andy, only through sacrifice [...]"⁸. This conclusion does not seem to bring the play to a convincing end — Robert's passiveness throughout the play does not seem to be the same as sacrifice, nor is it quite clear what his final words mean as applied to his life, though the kind of conclusion at which he arrives proves him to be a free agent independent of the circumstances in which he lives.

Some of the plays which follow *Beyond the Horizon* are grimly deterministic. Three of them: *Diff'rent* (1920), *The Straw* (1919) and *Anna Christie* (1920) present women who are victims of family traditions, illness or a difficult social position.

Emma Crosby in *Diff'rent* is the victim of her Puritan notions and her pride, which do not allow her to accept her fiancé, Captain Caleb, on account of his love affair with a native girl in the South Seas. There is nothing in the play to mitigate her frustration thirty years later when she begins to dote on her ex-fiancé's nephew and

⁷ Quoted by A. H. Quinn (*Eugene O'Neill: Poet and Mystic*, [in:] *Playwright's Progress: O'Neill and the Critics*, Chicago 1965).

⁸ *Beyond the Horizon*, [in:] *O'Neill's Plays*, vol. 3, p. 168.

discovers that all he wants is her money. The play ends with the double suicide of Emma and Caleb.

The heroine of the next play, *The Straw*, Eileen Carmody, falls ill with tuberculosis, is sent to a sanatorium and virtually forgotten by her fiancé who is afraid to marry a consumptive girl, by her father who, in her absence, marries his housekeeper, and by her brothers and sisters. Her worst experience, however, is her unhappy love for Stephen Murray, a journalist whom she meets in the sanatorium. Her health fails markedly when he leaves, so much so in fact that when he comes back for checking he is persuaded by a nurse to lie to Eileen about his love. He confesses his love to the girl and realizes that he has loved her all the time. His next realization is that it is a hopeless situation for both of them now, for she will almost certainly die. But he tells the nurse:

"You'll see! I'll make Eileen get well, I tell you! Happiness will cure! Love is stronger than — (He suddenly breaks down before the pitying negation she cannot keep from her eyes. He sinks on a chair, shoulders bowed, face hidden in his hands, with a groan of despair) Oh, why did you give me a hopeless hope?" Miss Gilpin: "[...] Ins't all life just that — when you think of it? (Her face lighting up with a consoling revelation) But there must be something back of it — some promise of fulfillment — somehow — somewhere — in the spirit of hope itself"⁹.

"A hopeless hope" is an attempt to transcend the determining power of circumstances and part of what O'Neill called man's "glorious self-destructive struggle" with the unknown forces in life when he tries to make them "express himself instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression".

To Anna Christie the power of regeneration which helps her to transcend her past comes from nature. Daughter of a skipper, Anna was sent inland to Minnesota as a small child, for her father attributed all his failures to the sea and deceived himself that his wife and child would be safer inland than in a seafaring port. After her mother's death Anna was seduced by her cousin and escaped from the farm to the nearest town. As she had no means of supporting herself she became a prostitute. At the beginning of the play she comes to visit her father, and everybody present in the bar where they meet, realizes that she belongs "to the world's oldest profession", except Chris, who takes her "cheap finery" for an elegant lady's clothes.

Anna stays on her father's barge and becomes a different woman. Stage directions at the beginning of Act 2 describe her as: "healthy,

⁹ *The Straw*, *ibidem*, p. 415.

transformed, the natural color has come back to her face". She feels she belongs to the sea:

I love this fog! Honest! It's so [...] funny and still. I feel as I was — out of things altogether [...]. Everything's been so different from anything I ever come across before. And now — this fog — Gee, I wouldn't have missed it for nothing [...], I'd yust love to work on it, honest I would, if I was a man.

She tells her father she feels old:

Anna (after a pause — deamily): "Funny! I do feel sort of — nutty, tonight. I feel old".

Chris (mystified): "Ole?"

Anna: "Sure — like I'd been leving a long, long time — out here in the fog. (Frowning perplexedly) I don't know how to tell you yust what I mean. It's like I'd come home after a long visit away some place. It all seems like I'd been here before lots of times — on boats — in this same fog [...]. But why d'you s'pose I feel so — so — like I'd found something I'd missed and been looking for — 's if this was the right place for me to fit in? And I seem to have forgot — everything that's happened — like it didn't matter no more. And I feel clean somehow — like you feel yust after you've took a bath. And I feel happy for once — yes, honest! — happier than I ever been anywhere before!"¹⁰

Together with the feeling of "belonging" to the sea there seems to be in her words a suggestion of some pre-natal past which makes the reader think of the Jungian collective subconscious. She comes from a family in which the men have been sailors for generations and the women have always married sailors. Her belonging to the sea is the cause of her moral regeneration and makes her less determined by the circumstances of her past.

The motif of a collective past reappears in two other plays in which the main characters are negroes: *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1923). The protagonists of both plays are determined by the past of their race, which acts as a destructive force. At the moment of crisis Jones's own past and that of his race return to him, increase his fear, and virtually kill what is left of his power of self-preservation. Still Jones is no ordinary criminal and has a certain stature, as the stage directions tell us:

His features are typically negroid, yet there is something decidedly distinctive about his face — an underlying strenght of will, a hardy, self-reliant confidence in himself that inspires respect.

The description of his gaudy uniform ends with the statement: yet there is something not altogether ridiculous about his grandeur. He has a way of carrying it off¹¹.

¹⁰ *Anna Christie*, *ibidem*, pp. 25—26, 28—29.

¹¹ *The Emperor Jones*, *ibidem*, p. 175.

In *All God's Chillun* Jim Harris's sense of racial inferiority is as destructive to his career as Jones's memories were. Still his abnegation has also another aspect — his love for Ella is a genuine human value in his life, in spite of the fact that it destroys his professional career.

Yank in *The Hairy Ape* (1921) presents still another attempt and failure to defy the world in which he lives. But this search for something to belong to proves his humanity and so does the fact that he changes from a self-satisfied stoker thinking that he is the moving force in the world of steel to a figure who resembles Rodin's *Thinker*¹². Though he has been called "a hairy ape" he is a thinking human being and dies, because as a thinking human being he cannot be accepted by the animal world.

In the plays concerned with family life the human values saved from the determining and destructive forces in the world are compassion and acceptance of the difficult situation.

In *Welded* (1923) Michael and Eleanor Cape are biased by their past. She is an actress and he is a playwright. Eleanor's past love affairs make Michael suspicious, while she fights against his suspicions and accuses him of too much possessiveness. After one of their many quarrels they decide "to kill their love". He goes to a prostitute and she goes to a friend of hers with the intention of becoming his lover. They both fail in their attempts and return home. The woman whom Michael visits realizes that he is in love with someone and, talking about life, suggests that the only way of living it is acceptance: "you've got to loin to like it"¹³. When Michael and Eleanor meet again, they decide to accept their life together, alternating between love and strife.

Eben Cabot in *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) is motivated in his actions by his mother complex and by his sexual impulse. Abbie is also sexually attracted to him, but at the same time she desires to possess the farm. This desire gradually disappears when she begins to concentrate on Eben. Finally she commits murder in order to keep his love. When Eben learns of this he at first rejects her with horror and runs to report the crime to the sheriff. At that moment Abbie seems to mature and becomes ready to take her responsibility for the crime. Eben returns and asks Abbie's forgiveness. He has told the sheriff:

I woke him up. I told him. He says, "Wait'till I git dressed". I was waiting. I got to thinkin'o'yew. I got to thinkin'how I'd loved ye. It hurt like

¹² *The Hairy Ape*, *ibidem*, p. 239.

¹³ *Welded*, *ibidem*, vol. 2, p. 478.

somethin'was bustin'in my chest an'head. I got t'cryin'. I knowed sudden I loved ye yet, an'allus would love ye!

After this confession Abbie says she now can bear what is going to happen to her. Eben suggests escape but she says she must take her punishment, and Eben decides to share it:

I got t'pay for my part o'the sin! An'I'd suffer wuss leavin' ye, goin'West, thinkin'o'ye day an'night [...]. I want t'share with ye, Abbie — prison'r death'r hell'anythin'!¹⁴

Both *Strange Interlude* (1927) and *Dynamo* (1928) present characters much more determined by the circumstances in which they live. They are not granted the kind of self-knowledge which might be called "tragic vision", not even what R. B. Sewall calls "glimpses beyond their bondage"¹⁵ in characters otherwise determined by external and psychological forces.

After years of a desperate struggle for happiness Nina Leeds in *Strange Interlude* sees life as a conflict dispassionately observed (and arranged) by some alien force: "Our lives are merely strange dark interludes in the electrical display of God the Father!"¹⁶ She has not arrived at any more positive conclusion.

At this stage of O'Neill's playwriting career only Lavinia Mannon in *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) shows a certain tragic stature or becomes what Sewall describes as "schooled in suffering" when she consciously stops her hunt for happiness and secludes herself in the empty Mannon house in order to punish herself. She follows an ethic based on family pride to an extreme when, after the murder of Captain Brant and the suicide of her mother, she sends her brother to kill himself rather than betray the family secrets. After that she realizes that she cannot share the life of other human beings. The only course left for her is to face nothingness, "living with the dead" in the empty family house. Even if she is determined in her other choices by family heritage, thwarted love and Freudian complexes, her last choice is presented as distinctly her own.

Other characters in O'Neill's later plays seem nearer to Nina Leeds's conclusion. In *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1941), *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1943), and *The Iceman Cometh* (1939) they feel lost like Nina, their lives equally wrecked. Their situation is redeemed to some extent only by love and compassion. Josie in *A Moon* goes

¹⁴ *Desire Under the Elms*, *ibidem*, vol. 1, p. 266, 267.

¹⁵ Sewall, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

¹⁶ *Strange Interlude*, [in:] *O'Neill's Plays*, vol. 1, p. 199.

on loving Jim Tyrone though she realizes death is the only way out for him, and the four Tyrones in *Long Day's Journey* tear at each other but the play ends in their common concern for Mary and for Edmund. In their fighting, their respective egotisms and their love are intermingled.

Similarly, as William Brashear pointed in his article *The Wisdom of Silenus in O'Neill's "Iceman"*¹⁷, Larry Slade's pity for his fellow sufferers in this play represents an affirmation of human values in spite of the apparent nothingness of life. In his inability to act, however, Larry is not unlike Hamlet as described by Nietzsche:

In diesem Sinne hat der dionysische Mensch Ähnlichkeit mit Hamlet: beide haben einmal einen wahren Blick in das Wesen der Dinge getan, sie haben erkannt, und es ekelt sie zu handeln; denn ihre Handlung kann nichts am ewigen Wesen der Dinge ändern, sie empfinden es als lächerlich oder schmachvoll, dass ihnen zugemutet wird, die Welt, die aus den Fugen ist, wieder einzurichten. Die Erkenntnis tötet das Handeln, zum Handeln gehört das Umschleiertsein durch die Illusion [...]¹⁸.

But contrary to Hickey, who in *The Iceman* makes himself believe that he has killed his wife out of love, Larry does not create a new pipe-dream instead of the old ones to evade reality. At the end of the play he faces the despair of nothingness like a protagonist in an existentialist tragedy. This close approach to self-knowledge (and to the tragic attitude) is shared by those O'Neillian protagonists who, though determined by external and psychological factors, possess a measure

¹⁷ W. Brashear, *The Wisdom of Silenus in O'Neill's "Iceman"*, "American Literature", May 1964, p. 186.

¹⁸ F. Nietzsche, *Werke*, Bd. 1, Salzburg 1952, p. 620: "In this sense Dionysiac man might be said to resemble Hamlet: both have looked deeply into the true nature of things, they have understood and are now loath to act. They realize that no action of theirs can work any change in the perennial condition of things, and they regard the implications as ludicrous or debasing that they should set right the time which is out of joint. Understanding kills action, for in order to act we require the veil of illusion" (translated by Cl. P. Sadiman, *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, New York, p. 209. The Modern Library).

O'Neill also seems influenced by Nietzsche's view of tragedy when he speaks about "the Greek dream in tragedy" as "the noblest ever" (cf. his letter to A. H. Quinn). According to Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, Greek tragedy is the product of tension between two forces, the Dionysian and the Apollonian. The Dionysian was for Nietzsche an unrestrained life force, producing ecstatic drunken joy, and at its other extreme, suffering and despair. The other side of the ecstatic joy of life was the *Wisdom of Silenus*, who, according to a Greek legend, told King Midas that the best thing would be "not to be born". The Apollonian is the element which is able to counteract this despair and can restrain it by providing a dream which gives meaning to human life.

of freedom which makes the Hairy Ape feel unattached and seek for something "to belong to", and allows Lavinia Mannon and Larry Slade to face their vision of nothingness.

Besides their attitude to life, which includes self-knowledge, ambivalence and courage, O'Neill's plays share with tragedies the presentation of a character on two levels, the general and the particular or the plot level and the symbolic level of presentation. The former gives a picture of a human being in the particular conditions in which he finds himself, the latter has a more general meaning.

Among the one act plays written between 1913 and 1916 several examples of a double level of character-presentation may be observed. *Bound East for Cardiff* (1914) is the story of the dying hour of an American sailor, Yank. The forecastle, the bunks, the other sailors using various kinds of broken English are all products of O'Neill's memories of his seafaring days. At the same time as we are given these realistic details, we are told that the ship is surrounded by fog and in this way isolated from the rest of humanity, while Yank himself is surrounded by his snoring fellow sailors. The fog, which seems to enter the forecastle, lifts when the man dies. The walls surrounding him have disappeared. He is freed from his suffering and from the limitations of human life. It is in this way, i.e. as a suffering and isolated individual, that Yank becomes a representative of Mankind, not only an American seaman dying on the British tramp steamer "SS. Glencairn".

He shares this general aspect with the characters in another one-acter, *Fog* (1914), where the contrasting attitudes are represented by two men named a Poet and a Businessman, and with the English sailor Smitty in *The Moon of the Caribees* who, not unlike Yank, is presented by the author as a suffering individual, a representative of suffering mankind.

In the other one-acters the general aspect of character presentation is less pronounced.

In *The Web* (1913), *Thirst* (1914), *Recklessness* (1914), *Abortion* (1914), and *The Sniper* (1915) the author seems to concentrate on the action, while the protagonists are to a great extent determined by social and political circumstances and do not take on a timeless quality. In *Before Breakfast* (1916), which surpasses the other one-act plays in technical skill (there is only one character on the stage talking to another who is invisible), the husband and wife are too psychopathological to assume a more general aspect.

In the longer plays, starting with *Beyond the Horizon*, the proportion of the particular and general in character presentation varies

according to the theme of the play. *Beyond the Horizon* seems to be successful in the integration of these two aspects. Robert Mayo is a representative of all those dreamers and searchers who have been diverted from their search, but at the same time he is the owner of a particular farm which he cannot manage, a man ill with tuberculosis, unable to support his family.

Some of O'Neill's characters suffer from what Edmund Racey, in his article on *Desire Under the Elms*, called the "dialectical aspect of the play", meaning a kind of moral to which the action of the play seems to point¹⁹. Both *Diff'rent* and *The First Man* are the cases in question. *Diff'rent* becomes a case history with a moral concerning the catastrophic results of Puritan inhibitions; *The First Man* (probably influenced by Ibsen's *Pillars of Society*) shows the destructive side of bourgeois social conventions.

On the other hand, the protagonist of *The Emperor Jones* written in the same year as *Diff'rent* (1920) regains to a great extent the timeless quality of a tragic protagonist. The play has what might be called a "mythical aspect": a primitive man haunted and finally brought to death by his racial fears. When Jones is gradually stripped of the superficial layers of civilization he becomes a victim of awe which, according to Sewall, is one of the primitive origins of tragedy²⁰. Thus he becomes a representative of mankind, besides being a Negro who has killed two men, exploited many more, and is trying to escape their revenge.

Yank in *The Hairy Ape*, without acquiring the primitive mythical quality of Jones, becomes the symbolic figure of a searcher. This quality seems to dominate the play and is emphasized by the expressionistic scenery. The characters of *Welded* and Jim and Ella in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* acquire at times a timeless quality of two people in love struggling with psychological difficulties which threaten to destroy it. They are, however, primarily human beings conceived on a realistic level.

The mythical quality observed in *The Emperor Jones* reappears in O'Neill's best dramatic achievements: *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. In *Desire* Eben and Abbie become agents of the tragic retribution for the wrongs of Eben's mother. Further, Abbie represents an amoral life force acting in the retributive process as the continuation of the life force symbolized by Eben's mother.

¹⁹ E. Racey, *Myth as Tragic Structure in "Desire Under the Elms"*, "Modern Drama", May 1962, p. 45.

²⁰ Sewall, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

Ephraim, on the other hand, is the representative of stony Puritanism denying life and fertility and originating the curse by the wrong he did to his wife.

At the same time, as individual human beings, they are all motivated by their Freudian complexes, greed for land, or desire for a home. The pattern is to some extent repeated in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Marie Brantôme and Christine represent a life force wronged by Abe Mannon and Ezra. Abe originates the family curse by expelling Marie Brantôme and his brother David, which means acting against the forces of love, life and fertility. The curse brings catastrophe to Ezra and Christine and, at the end of the play, their daughter is left to become an agent of retribution. Orin and Lavinia Mannon are to a great extent deprived of what has been called "a mythical quality" in their parents: as characters they are not sufficiently uniform, for they have inherited the qualities of both parents. On the realistic level however all of these characters remain human beings biased by their traditions and psychological complexes.

It may be concluded that in spite of deterministic elements in several of O'Neill's plays most of their protagonists make their own choices. Many free themselves gradually from the pressures of environment (*Straw, Welded, Beyond the Horizon*), sometimes with the help of nature (*Anna Christie*). The independence which O'Neill's characters achieve wholly or partially makes them resemble the protagonists of tragedies. *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* are the plays which most closely approach the classic models. The protagonists of these plays decide their own fate and take full responsibility for their actions and are at the same time more active than the characters who only have attempted to free themselves from their environment. In both kinds of play they achieve a degree of self-knowledge which allows them to recognize moral obligations (*Desire Under the Elms*), to realize that they have to face nothingness (Lary Slade in *The Iceman Cometh*), or even to decide to go on living as they have done in spite of the difficulties (*Welded, Anna Christie*).

The characters of O'Neill's plays often acquire a mythical quality — they seem to be agents of the opposing forces active in the world (life and death, hatred and love, life-force against stony Puritanism) or are at least representatives of suffering Mankind (*Emperor Jones*, the sailors of the "Glencairn" plays). It may be of interest to note that the most successful of O'Neill's plays are those in which he achieves a close integration between the mythical and the realistic levels of presentation. It is not surprising therefore that the play *Days Without*

End (1934), which presents O'Neill's conscious attempt to generalize and which has been called "a modern morality play", because the two sides of the protagonist's nature are represented on the stage by two characters, was a failure in spite of this stage device, for the two sides of John Loving never become convincingly human. But, in spite of occasional failures like *Days Without End*, the combination of the general and individual in character presentation is one more element which O'Neill's plays have in common with classical tragedy.

ELEMENTY TRAGIZMU W DRAMATACH O'NEILLA

STRESZCZENIE

W latach pięćdziesiątych naszego stulecia zagadnienie, czym jest tragedia, znalazło się w centrum uwagi amerykańskich krytyków literatury. W związku z tym powstało także pytanie, czy jakiegokolwiek z współczesnych dramatów można uważać za tragedię. Pomimo wielu sprzecznych zdań tacy krytycy, jak H. A. Myers, R. S. Sewall, Cleanth Brooks, W. G. McCollom czy Murray Krieger, zgadzają się na ogół w następujących punktach: 1. tragedia zajmuje się przede wszystkim problemami związanymi z cierpieniem i śmiercią człowieka; 2. bohater tragedii dochodzi zwykle do jasnego uświadomienia sobie swej sytuacji lub też do zrozumienia, gdzie jest jego miejsce w otaczającym go świecie; 3. bohater tragiczny nie może być całkowicie zdeterminowany przez okoliczności zewnętrzne czy psychiczne — musi mieć pewną przynajmniej możliwość wyboru. Nie może być także krańcowo indywidualnym „przypadkiem”, musi posiadać pewne cechy ogólnoludzkie; 4. tragedia może, ale nie musi afirmować jakiegoś porządku w świecie, w niektórych wypadkach stawia tylko pytanie co do miejsca człowieka w świecie.

Dramatom O'Neilla niejednokrotnie odmawiano cech tragedii, uważając je za zbyt deterministyczne. Rzeczywiście postaci jego dramatów są często ograniczone w swym działaniu przez środowisko, warunki społeczne czy kompleksy psychiczne. W przeważającej jednak części nie są one pozbawione możliwości wyboru i na ogół zdają sobie jasno sprawę ze swej sytuacji. Często stopniowe uwalnianie się od naporu okoliczności stanowi główny problem sztuki i jedyne podobieństwo do tragedii, ale w wypadku *Pożądania w cieniu więzów* i *Żaloba przystoi* Elektrze zbliżenie jest znacznie większe. Bohaterowie tych sztuk decydują wbrew okolicznościom i dobrowolnie przyjmują odpowiedzialność za swoje czyny.

Postaci dramatów O'Neilla, a zwłaszcza *Pożądania* i *Żaloby*, posiadają często cechy, które można by określić jako „mityczne” — wydają się symbolizować pewne siły działające w przyrodzie i w świecie ludzkim (życie i śmierć, miłość i nienawiść, siły żywotne w przeciwieństwie do kamiennej jałowości kojarzącej się z purytaniem). Ta cecha również zbliża postaci dramatów O'Neilla do bohaterów tragicznych, którzy, w mniejszym czy większym stopniu, zawsze posiadają jakieś cechy ogólne oprócz indywidualnych. Wydaje się, że O'Neill osiągnął najlepszy wynik dramatyczny tam, gdzie udało mu się harmonijnie połączyć te dwa aspekty w konstrukcji postaci (*Pożądanie*, *Cesarz Jones*, *Żaloba*).

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