FANTASY AND ILLUSION VERSUS REALITY IN THE PLAYS OF EUGENE O’NEILL

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ABSTRACT

The theme of reality versus illusion, however, has been recognized by playwrights since the classical Greek drama, but the discovery of its relevance to the modern industrial society has been, in my view, a significant contribution to the drama. The Greek theatre, that believed that the knowledge of illusion and the consequent self-discovery of reality by the hero led him to suffering and sense of redemption, visualized illusion as a constituent part of the tragic spirit. Illusion in Shakespearean theatre had the same function as in Greek drama, but true to the man-centric vision of the Renaissance, its focus on the immediate human world had been sharpened.

KEYWORDS: Greek Theatre, Greek Drama, American Drama

INTRODUCTION

In the modern theatre, that of Ibsen, for instance, illusion is used as a constituent part of modern life. “Ibsen’s drama is a stupendous spectacle of the modern man’s efforts towards self-realisation and freedom, although the mighty efforts of his heroes- Ekdal’s, Rosmer’s or Ellida’s- often create nothing more than illusion.” (Choudhuri, 9)

As the life in an industrial society is spent at a remove from reality, the phenomenon of illusion has been acquiring a significant place in American life, and the American playwright has attempted to render an artistic distillation to the multifarious facets of illusion and reality as we see in society. Illusion in American drama has been associated with the illusion of success, and specially the money-success. This is what A.D. Choudhuri means when he says in his book, The Face of Illusion in American Drama, “Illusion of success, wealth, social recognition are reality in American society, more real than the established European society.” (Choudhuri, 5). Most of the playwrights and even novelists made an attempt to understand the contradictory forces of society, the destructive pull between illusion and reality that defines the efforts of their protagonists, the dream of money and power that wrecks their lives. In short they discover for themselves the death of the dream and the blind drives of an illusion ridden community.

Much more than any other modern British or American playwright, O’Neill entire career embodies a dramatization of truth and falsehood, of illusion and reality; an incessant tortured search for truth, for comprehension of the darker forces the Greek called fate, for an understanding of the relevance of human destiny in the context of cosmic forces. In all his plays illusion pertains to the conception of the self, the character’s own identity; and the uphill task of self-recognition describes the curve of action. The conflict between illusion and reality many a time takes the form of that between free will and fate, and more often than not it is fate which comes out stronger of the two. To O’Neill, as well as to Ibsen, illusion is a constituent part of life’s struggle; and, in true tragic spirit, he visualises the struggle against illusion as the criterion of spiritual nobility. (Choudhuri, 12) This spiritual context of his drama gives a kind of grandeur to the illusions themselves – so much so that they are seen as a significant part of the scheme of life, almost a condition of man’s urge towards the realization of the truth and not as an avoidable or ignoble part of a man’s experience.

O’Neill’s plays are among the first to include speeches in American vernacular and involve characters on the
fringes of society, engaging in depraved behaviour, where they struggle to sustain their illusions, maintain their hopes and aspirations, but ultimately slide into disillusionment and despair, thus making the study of the plays of O’Neill a powerful interaction and interplay of illusion and reality. Except one well-known comedy (Ah, Wilderness!), nearly all other plays of O’Neill involve some degree of tragedy and personal pessimism, for the ultimate triumph in the life and career of the protagonist is that of his failure in realizing his dreams and sustaining his illusions in the face of harsh and hard reality outside.

Influenced by the Greek vision of tragedy O’Neill, too, charted “the tragic vision of his characters through the path of self-discovery” (Choudhuri, 11) and, thereby, landing them into the world of death, suffering, redemption, insanity and degeneration. O’Neill’s work is concerned with what Camus called “the division between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints.” (Bigsby, 116) The Iceman Cometh depicts the ‘hopeless hope’ of securing peace and happiness in human life as it is taking shape under the impact of materialism. Failing to secure these values in real life, the characters seek an escape into the world of dreams and drink in order to benumb their faculties so that a complete extinction of the sense of reality is made possible. As Larry says, “The lie of a pipe-dream is what gives life to the whole misbegotten man lot of us, drunk or sober.” (Neill, 15-16) This does not bring a resolution and their first encounter with reality under Hickey’s influence knocks the bottom out of their existence. Disillusioned, they revert to their old day-dreaming, only waiting to be finally rid of life by the Iceman, Death. Larry quotes from Heine:

“Lo, sleep is good, better is death; in sooth. The best of all were never to be born.” (Neill, 33)

A Touch of the Poet dramatizes the same theme as that of The Iceman Cometh- the conflict between illusion and reality- in the life of Cornelius who tries to maintain self-respect by wilfully slipping into the world of day-dreaming which, however, is followed by disillusionment with an exposure to reality which, in turn, is followed by a lapse into drink and degeneration. So O’Neill plays written after 1937 depict his negative vision of life and thus show human beings “escaping out of reality and falling back into it only to rot into death” (Khare, 151). What is responsible for pushing them out is the alien atmosphere of materialistic civilization which has drained love out of them and sends into a dream-world of make-believe which gives them the illusion of happiness till reality, by an final assault, sets them on the way to death. Long Day’s Journey into Night, in the words of O’Neill, “a play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood,” (Falk, 171) is a tragedy of irony in the sense that it combines fated reality with self-willed illusion, self-conscious guilt with the destructive finitude of the self. In this play, there are neither victims nor villains, but only dreamers all, waking to reality in the sublunar moments that glimmer between dreamless sleep and sleepless dreams.

Their proper element is illusion, which is neither completely s negation of truth nor a surrender to falsehood, but rather a composite awareness of two planes of reality. Their tortuous repetitions, which acquire progressive depths in meaning dramatically, are, from the point of self-knowledge, ineffective excursion into the shallows of meaninglessness.

The Emperor Jones, Strange Interlude, Morning Becomes Electra, and The Hairy Ape provide us clear elaborations of what illusion and reality can mean. This is what Frederic I. Carpenter, for whom the fascination of the play The Emperor Jones lies in its combination of daylight reality with moonlight illusion, observes: “Like Hickey of the Iceman Cometh, Jones attempts to live without illusions: his cynical intelligence has rejected all the romantic sentiments of life, and he has attempted to manipulate ‘nigger superstitions’ to his own end. But his great illusion is the belief that he can live without illusions, and his denial of romantic idealism becomes a denial of life itself. Like the self-deluded Hickey, he dies in the tangled jungle of his own mind, destroyed by his imperial self-superiority.” (Carpenter, 92-93)
O’Neill’s protagonists always plunge into the underside of his human consciousness. Illusion and reality seem to dwell in mutual subtraction but yet weigh down on the human soul with a combined pressure, thereby compounding man’s confusions outside. In The Hairy Ape, Yank, trying to find peace and respite from the excruciating metabolism of metal and flesh in the mechanized world, goes back to the animals, but, trapped as his flesh is in steel again, he becomes the prisoner of his own humanity. Nina in Strange Interlude and Lavinia in Morning Becomes Electra are no more than the prisoners of their own illusions- they not only wear masks to deceive themselves but also the world. After the death of Nina’s lover Gordon who was Nina’s only hope of release and symbol of the escape from the prideful mask of the father, she now hopes to find a sort of trinity, that she had sought earlier in Gordon, in three men- Sam, her husband, Ned, her lover, by whom she has her son, and that son, Gordon, the third member of the trinity. Each of these represents an opportunity for Nina to love, but the inexorable power of the father-image turns each love into destructive possessiveness and exploitation. In fleeing from the tragic consequences of one illusion Nina rushes into the fatal grip of another even more fantastic because it is more uncommon. Even the illusion of Professor Leed, Nina’s father, which sheltered him for many years, had failed him at the crucial moment and he dies shortly after Nina’s departure.

Even in his early plays like Servitude and Bound East for Cardiff the theme of illusion and man’s capacity for deceiving himself are explored. Mr. Frazer’s idealized vision of his business life and Yank’s dream to have a farm with a house of your own with cows and pigs and chickens are the illusions that make their life worth living. In Beyond the Horizon, life for Robert, Ruth and Andrew is a series of illusions to be replaced by other illusions. Their quest for identity ends in the futile death if Robert with Andrew and Ruth helplessly resolving to make some sort of new start. Hovering between hope and despair, the entire story presents multiple visions of life. All of them are frantic searchers in a fog of illusion and ignorance- and they only positive feature in their life seems to be their unending struggle to realize some unformulated ideal.

In The Great God’s Brown characters really draw on masks to bring home visually the illusions that dominate them. In All God’s Chillun Got Wings the couple’s illusion about the superiority of the Whites over the coloured has played havoc with their own lives. Nina in Strange Interlude and Lavinia in Morning Becomes Electra are no more than prisoners of their own illusions- they wear masks not only to deceive themselves but also the world. In Long Day’s Journey into Night the four Tyrones torment themselves into stripping away from every protective illusion until at the end they face themselves each others without any hope. A Touch of the Poet dramatizes powerfully, like its more esteemed predecessor The Iceman Cometh, how the sustaining power of illusion is turned into destructive one when illusions are nourished more than necessary. The Iceman Cometh, however, is a comprehensive inquiry into existence of different kinds of illusion, their interaction and interplay with the reality and their impact on personalities. O’Neill’s plays reveals his obsession with the varied facets and nuances of illusion working in modern American society making, thus, his plays a deep and powerful study of the interplay of illusion and reality.

CONCLUSIONS

The theme of illusion versus reality has been dealt with by a number of prominent playwrights, whether it is Shakespeare in Macbeth where the central characters Macbeth and lady Macbeth misinterpret reality as a world that accommodates their malevolent desires, or Arthur Miller in The Crucible and Death of a Salesman portraying the hold of such illusions on individuals and its horrible consequences, or Eugene O’Neill in a majority of his plays from Bound East For Cardiff onward, all these playwrights showed that their characters that lived illusive life ultimately ended up living behind a trial of ignominy, grief and death, making the plays of Eugene O’Neill a powerful study of interplay of illusion and reality.
REFERENCES


