

## **Language in O’Neill’s Plays**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

Modern development in expressionist and psychoanalytic theories has greatly initiated a paradigmatic shift from delineation of objective to the subjective domain of human personality. Role of language in this context assumes meaningful importance as it becomes a greater medium of communicating subjective dimensions of human personality. Drama being subject to stage limitations relies even more on effective and appropriate language to communicate performers experience and thought processes to themselves, to the fellow performers on the stage, and to the readers and audiences. It also plays a substantial role in arousing the requisite level of imaginative and emotive responses of the readers / audience. In O’Neill’s tragic art, it is contended that the language is marred by unprecedented monotony, repetition and even stasis. But this pattern can not be taken as the failure of developing dynamic language. On the contrary, it is realistic as it communicates realistically deep seated malaise affecting the personas conscious, unconscious and thought processes. Thus it points towards the underlying psychopathology of the performers in different conditions and at different levels.

**Keywords:** *O’Neill’ drama, use of dramatic language, language limitations, Long Day’s journey into Night*

### **1. Introduction**

A definitive shift in modern art and literature has been from the Naturalism (Schoenberg and Trudeau 2007, Plantinga 2008 and Lehan 1984) to expressionism (Beard 2005, Gordon 1966) which in fact revolutionized literary cannons for literary activities and literary practices. The new paradigm established was to focus more on the “inner structure” (Pizzato 1998) than on the physical/Naturalist environment and surroundings. Modern development in psychoanalysis (Stone 1976, Erwin 1984, Kerrigan 1980 and Brophy 2001) greatly coordinated with this paradigmatic shift from delineation of external to the inner and subjective domain of individual’s personality. Greater focus is now on what lies at the deeper level of human consciousness and even unconsciousness. Language in this context assumes meaningful role in unearthing the core of the mind and heart to the others.

Drama being subject to stage limitations is greatly dependent on effective language in communicating experiences and thought processes to the characters themselves, fellow characters and the audiences. It also plays a substantial role in arousing the requisite level of imaginative and emotive responses of the readers/audience. It is in fact one strong component of activating readers’ imagination to realize nature of personas conduct and behavior, feel requisite emotions and develop association with the personas struggle/predicament on the stage. Thus it has also an enormous role in the desirable tragic/cathartic effect. Therefore drama must make use of effective language/dialogue to communicate all the developments of action on the stage and keep the readers’ sensibilities and imagination involved in the performers’ predicament or conditions. Chotia (1979) writes, “it [language] must present us with a continually developing action as each speech emphasizes, or modifies, or alters our perception of what has gone before”. The study contends that in O’Neill the language is featured by unprecedented

repetition, monotony and even stasis. But this pattern need not be taken as the failure of developing dynamic dialogic pattern in his theatre, On the contrary, it is realistic as it communicates realistically what lies at the base of the personas conscious, unconscious thought processes. Secondly, the effect of this language on the audience is far from cathartic. On the contrary it creates deep psychic strains, fragmentation and depressiveness.

Shakespeare's tragedies are incomparable examples of use of dynamic language to lay bare his personas' complex, ever changing, developing thought processes and emotions to the readers (Kermode 2000, Asand 2005 and Hirsch 2005). *Macbeth* is an appropriate instance of what goes on in the protagonist mind and his increasing torture and restlessness after his blood-spattered assassination of King Duncan. The fierce, violent and vicious nature of the protagonist's deed provides an opportunity to read his mind as it works in those conditions and how it carves a course for its survival there (Braunmuller 1997 and Jacobi 2004). Language in the use of dialogues, asides and soliloquies effectively captures and communicates the protagonist's pervasive occupation with death, pain and fear. Besides the use of expressive language help the readers experience a consistent development and maturation of the protagonist. He passes from recognized status of "too full of milk of human kindness" to a hardened criminal with implacable and finally to that of a man desperate to save his life and who dies fighting. The overall impact of the use of the language and supporting asides is one on constant engagement of the readers emotive, psychic and intellectual faculties with the development of action on the stage. More than that it helps the readers develop an association with the personas plight and develop a particular tragic empathy for him on his sufferings and develop an insight into their predicament. Similarly *Hamlet*, effectively dramatizes how a character undergoes a progression process from such negative mental states and psychic conditions as grief, pain, or "madness" to achieve positive development in understanding and insight. Jorgensen (1963) analyses the progression in this play in terms of therapeutic effect, which is about his regaining of sanity and moral greatness in the middle of hypocrisy and untruth. Likewise Newell (1965) looks at the use of soliloquies in *Hamlet* as a key to the play's meaning and integral to the protagonist's personality.

## 2. Language in O'Neill's Plays

Language in O'Neill bears close relationship with the structures of mind and thought processes of his personas. At the out set it needs to be emphasized that O'Neill use of language developed throughout his long creative years. Chotia (1979) has treated this development in her classic work on O'Neill's language in his plays. For the purpose of showing O'Neill development as an artist who searched for form and language, she divides his entire career into three distinct periods: The early plays written before 1925 period are analyzed as plays with low colloquial American English "as a kind of poetic diction (Chotia 1979, 60). Here she writes "O'Neill finds in the speech of uneducated man model through which he can show un-accommodated man locked in to himself but unsure, because of the limitations of his communicative faculty, of what that self is"( Chotia 1979, 61) . The plays of the middle period (1924-34) are analyzed as plays where O'Neill "abandoned the low colloquial in favor of Standard American English or, as it is more properly called, General American" (Chotia 1979, 60). This form she writes is used in two ways: rhythmical prose or quasi poetic chant and the idiomatic for. The first form is used in the early plays of this period that include *Fountain*, *Lazarus Laughed*, *Great God Brown*, *Macro millions*, while the idiomatic English is used in *Welded*, *Strange Interlude*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *Days Without End*. The so called idiomatic language is used, writes Chotia to "probe and project individual psyches of the character he has created" (Chotia 1979, 84). The late master pieces are characterized by what she calls variety and appropriateness of speech that contrasts this period with that "monotony of the middle period" (Chotia 1979, 85).

It is contended here that a typical monotony or monotonous pattern unlike the dynamic, fluent monologic or dialogic pattern in Shakespeare dominates and governs O'Neill's plays. It is stressed that in O'Neill, speech or dialogue in plays like *Strange Interlude*, *Desire under Elms*, *Morning Becomes Electra* and

*Long Day's Journey into Night* suffers from monotony, repetition, confinement around certain thoughts that highlight the constrained nature of personas' thought processes and compulsion to repeat them in speeches/dialogues. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* the repetition is so paramount that the readers develop sense of predictability and anticipation about what is going to be said the next moment (Chotia 1979, 113). Then the thought processes exclusively diverge on the unpleasant and ugly life experiences, memories and incidents. Marsden in *Strange Interlude* rightly hints at this particular aspect when he thinks of what he has to remember, "the devil! . . . what beastly incidents our memories insist on cherishing! . . . The ugly and the disgusting . . . the beautiful things, we have to keep diaries to remember! . . . (*Strange Interlude*). *Desire under Elms* dramatizes fierce conflicts deep at psychic and emotive levels. The language has been tuned to communicate the conflict persistently to the audiences. O'Neill description of Eben' outward personality amply reflects the mood and the conflict that are at work in his personality. He is tall with well formed good looking face, "but its expressions are resentful" and "his defiant eyes, dark eyes remind one of a wild animal's captivity. Each day is a cage in which he finds himself cramped but inwardly unsubdued" (*Desire under Elms*: 203). The phrase "each day in a cage" with unsubdued spirit in fact reflects his cramped psychic condition. He is oedipal and the first part of the play dramatizes his oedipal longing for the mother as well as his deep sense of loss for the desired object. Language in such a condition of loss remains confined to remembrance and expression of loss. Cabot becomes the direct object of Eben's condemnation and hatred for his role in Mother's sufferings and death. Importantly the desire and loss is repeated persistently in this part and the audiences are made cognizant of crises in his mind and personality.

In *Long Day's Journey* there are moments when Edmund achieves poetic eloquence (Hinden 1990) but the overall speech pattern reflects characteristic speech constraints. Free from predominant erotic conflict and speeches, the play dramatizes speeches that move around ambivalent moods of love and repulsion characterized by vehemence and repetition. Here words are said and immediately taken back; accusations are hurled, but instantly followed by apology and polite excuses; hateful expressions are immediately contradicted by love, respect and empathy. The speech patterns build up an environment of denial and contradictions and determine the familial bonds and relationship. A forceful instance of these ambivalent exchanges of words and moods is to be found in Act I. Here Tyrone and Jamie are locked in heated debate on Edmund's health and character ruination. Tyrone accuses Jamie of corrupting Edmund's character: . . . the less you say about Edmund's sickness, the better for your conscience! You're more responsible than any one! Jamie responds vehemently, "That's a lie! I won't stand for that papa! But Tyrone goes on accusing him:

It's the truth! You've been the worst influence for him. He grew up admiring you as a hero! A fine example you set him! If you ever gave him advice except in the ways of rottenness, I've never heard of it! You made him old before his time, pumping him full of what you consider worldly wisdom when he was too young to see that your mind wasp poisoned by your own failure in life . . .<sup>1</sup>.

Jamie retorts vehemently, "That's rotten accusation, Papa. You know how much the kids means to me, and how close we've always been" (35). It forces Tyrone to withdraw his accusations politely, "I know you may have thought it was the best Jamie. I didn't say you did it deliberately to harm him" (35). This mode of speech governs the dramatic form and plot structure of the play.

The most astonishing and irritable account of ambivalent discourse is apparent in Act IV when Tyrone undergoes unpremeditated and rapid fluctuation in speech on such trivial issues as switching off an extra bulb in the room. He begins his speech in extreme anger, "Listen to me! I've put up a lot from you because from the mad things you've done at times I've thought you weren't quite right in your head. I've

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene O'Neill. 1955. *Long Day's Journey into Night*. New Haven. P. 35. All subsequent citation in the paper has been made from this text and page numbers included in the parenthesis.

excused you and never lifted my hand to you. But there's a straw that breaks the camel's back. You'll obey me and put out that lights or big as you are, I'll give you a thrashing that'll teach you" (128).

But this anger subsides quickly; *"suddenly he remembers Edmund's illness and instantly becomes guilty and shamefaced*. Forgive me, lad. I forgot\_ you should not goad me into losing my temper" (128). Another instance of this contradictory communication is to be observed later in the same Act when Edmund mad talk of "to hell with sense! We're all crazy. What do we want with sense?" (130) and "Be always drunken. Nothing else matters. . ." (132) with profuse quotations from writers like Dawson and Zola brings out Tyrone's strong condemnation. He categorically rejects Edmund's philosophy as "morbid nonsense" "morbid filth" (filth, and despair and pessimism" (133). Irritability between the two reaches its high water mark when Edmund charges him of "damned stinginess" (133) at the cost of family care (140), "if you'd spent money for a decent doctor when she [Mary] was so sick after I was born, she'd never have known morphine existed! Instead you put her in the hands of a hotel quack who wouldn't admit his ignorance and took the easiest way out . . . All because his fee was cheap! Another one of your bargain" (140). Again "after you found out she'd been made morphine addict, why didn't you send her to a cure then, while she still had a chance" (141). He further charges him of providing no decent home that could have helped her stay away from addiction, "for money! That is, for nothing, or practically nothing" (144). Persistent and sharp accusation brings the equally intense reaction. First Tyrone furiously castigates Jamie for poisoning Edmund's mind, "That drunken loafer! I'll kick him out in the gutter! He's poisoned your mind against me ever since you were old enough to listen!" (144), and "more morbid-ness Your brother put that in your head. The worst he can suspect is the only truth for him"(147). But the mood gives place to sad and depressed account of his own past life and what made him parsimonious in spending money. He dilates upon his miserable past and hardship he had born in his childhood. Pedigree of personal loss and compromises melts Edmund heart and ends in what could be temporary truce between the two. Edmund appreciates Tyrone narrative, I'm glad you've told me this, Papa. I know you a lot better now" (152). But keeping in mind the past track of the nature of familial conflict, repetition and accusation, it can not be taken as the final settlement of conflicts and is possibly a kind of lull before another storm of accusations, conflict, apologies and confrontation. The play in fact has no ending and as Chotia (1979, 173) declares, "we are made painfully aware that the time will never be ripe, that opportunities will always be missed, because O'Neill also juxtaposes some of the cruelest denials with moments of brief sympathy, frustrating the expectations of change which are beginning to be shaped". The verbal rotation of the same pattern highlights the constrictive dimension of the personas' thought processes. It reflects their inability to move out of it or grow to develop any permanent understanding of the familial predicament for possible resolution of the crises. Mary also represents a terrible conflict of language for all the other characters in the play. One particular instance of her rapid and unpremeditated language fluctuation /conflict could be seen in her feelings for sons. As the readers interact with the text, they find persistently complaining of being alone and alienated from social contact. She yearns for social contact and repeatedly vents her feelings in dialogues. It could be seen in one of such moving expressions as, "If there was some place I could go to get away for a day, even an after noon, some woman friend I could talk to\_ not about anything serious, simply laugh and gossip and forget a while\_ some one besides the servants" (46). But the mood is not constant and she grows sick of her sons' company and presence around her. In one of her monologue she expresses her happiness as they leave her at the end of the second Act, "You wanted to get rid of them. Their contempt and disgust aren't pleasant company. You're glad they are gone. In Act III, her initial reaction on their return home is one of irritation. "Why are they coming back? They don't want to. And I'd much rather be alone" (108). But a moment later she is found relieved on their return with expressions that contradicts her earlier irritation and express a mood of deep relaxation, "Oh, I'm so glad they've come! I've been so horribly lonely" (108). O'Neill records the change in his stage direction as, *"suddenly her whole manner changes. She becomes pathetically relieved and eager"*. Similar conflict of expressions determines her psychic state with respect to her attitude towards religion, married life and child bearing (Karim 2010, Karim and Butt 2011). Apart from conflicting speeches, characters mind and thought processes are overwhelmed by the bitter memories and past itself that compels them to repeat it despite its painfulness with unusual frequency and intensity (see

Chapter 4 for further discussion on their state of mind). Their speeches are characterized by use of quotations, and impulsive outbursts to express what lies at their deep inside. Törnqvist (1969) notes, "The very things that should not be mentioned are mentioned, because the characters cannot get away from themselves; even when talking about other things, they keep thinking about their own fate" (130). Then their buried thoughts, sense of guilt, their irresponsible deeds in the past continue to surface in their speeches with teasing avoidance and denial. Therefore they are usually found avoiding discussion on their faults as an attempt to avoid personal guilt. For instance, when Tyrone initiates discussion on Jamie's expulsions from college, Jamie retorts, "Oh, for God's sake, don't drag up that ancient history". Likewise, Tyrone tries to avoid talking about his own scandal in the past: "For God's sake, don't dig up what's long forgotten". Their psychic entrapment and constrictive modes of expression is further revealed in all characters constant admonition to each others. They are regularly seen in admonishing each other to "shut up," "be quiet," etc. Then parents appear suspicious of their children. Tyrone thinks his children are planning and working thing maliciously against him, "I'll bet, they are cooking up some new schemes to touch the old man" (20). Likewise Mary rebukes Jamie for staring at her too much, "Why are you staring, Jamie? (Her hands flutter up to her hair). Is my hair coming down? It's hard for me to do it up properly now. My eyes are getting so bad and I never can find my glasses". Limited as the language is, the readers consistently come across commands to be quiet, and phrases such as "Shut up" are frequently used. Characters express their disgust with repeated phrases and arguments, revealing that their issues are not new. Edmund for instance rebuts Jamie's taunting Tyrone with, "Oh, shut up, will you? I've heard that Gaspard stuff a million times" (93).

#### 4. Conclusion

The above analysis asserts that O'Neill's modern drama highlights artist's psychic conditions with obvious tendency towards regression, loss and despair. And the role of language in this context assumes importance to communicate these moods to the readers. O'Neill's language realistically communicates deep seated malaise affecting the personas conscious, unconscious thought processes. Thus it points towards the underlying psychic regression of the performers in different conditions. The effect on the readers/audience in this context could hardly be cathartic and aesthetically pleasurable. On the contrary it could lead to create psychic strain and ennui and despondency or increase the levels of these in the readers/audience which would be quite un-cathartic and un-therapeutic.

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