**Thematic Analysis of Eugene O’Neill’s Plays**

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**Abstract:**

This paper throws light on thematic analysis of Eugene O’ Neill’s plays. O’ Neill is one of the most controversial figures in modern drama. Eugene O'Neill is known as one of the greatest American playwrights in the history. His themes made his plays highly recognized work and it is only because of their strong themes. His plays throw light on social themes, religious themes, psychological themes, pessimism, family life and Greek mythology. He has also made use of melodramatic elements in his early dramas. and there is a free play of realism and melodrama in them. Sometimes the characters of O’ Neill become like puppets without having their own life.

K**eywords:** themes, plays, pessimism, transformation, literature

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**Introduction:**

One of the most important features of the dramatic activity of Europe in the twentieth century, is the great revival of interest in Greek Drama and Greek Theology. The ‘ancient rule and best example’ that Milton praised in his Samson agonists has exercised a profound influence on the imagination of modern writers, T. S. Eliot, for instance has been greatly indebted to Greek drama both for form and theme. O’Neill, the greatest dramatist that America produced has also been powerfully influenced by Greek drama. O’Neill spent six months in a sanatorium made him an avid reader and it was during this period that he came under the spell of the Greek tragic poets.

**Thematic Analysis of Eugene O’Neill’s Plays:**

O’Neill searched for more satisfying modes of dramatic expression. He turned to Greek drama, incorporating into his dramatic expression. He turned to Greek drama, incorporating into his dramatic experiments as many features of Greek drama as possible. His concept of tragedy was essentially related to the Greek dramatists. In an interview in 1922, O’Neill explain his philosophy of tragic drama, “I suppose it is the idea, I try to put into all my plays. People talk of the ‘tragedy’ in them and call it ‘sordid’, ‘depressing’, ‘pessimistic’, the words usually applied ‘to anything of a tragic nature’. But tragedy, I think has the meaning the Greek gave it. To them, it brought ercaltain, an urge towards life and evermore life. It roused them to deeper spiritual understandings and released them from the petty greed of everyday existence. When they saw a tragedy on the stage they felt their own hopeless hopes enabled into art …. Any victory we may win is never the one we dreamed of winning. The point is that life in itself is nothing. It is the dream that keeps us fighting, willing-living!”4

O’Neill’s vision of life was essentially tragic, life Aeschylus, sophocles and Euripides. O’Neill recognized his forte to be tragedy for life these Greek dramatists, he had a preoccupation with man’s unending conflict with adverse desting. Doris V. Falk in her penetrating study of O’Neill’s plays writes about this involvement of O’Neill. “The sneer became only the protective mask of a face distorted by suffering the ironic words were drowned in cries of anguish. The plays are attempts to explain human suffering and the very need to explain and symbolize it are the fountain head of human action and creativity, and second that fated though he may be, man is ultimately a free and responsible agent who brings most of his grief upon himself through pride.”5

The Aristotelian definition of character provides another link between classical tragedy and O’Neill’s plays. Aristotle has said that the tragic hero brings about his own destruction through some flaw, some error or frailty in his character or in the self. It is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kinds of things a man chooses or avoids. The tragic hero brings about his own destruction through some flaw, and through he is free to choose his course of action, it is only within the limitations of the structure of the self with its flaw.

The ethos or moral purpose an O’Neill’s tragic protagonists is to keep up on illusion about themselves that is deep-rooted in them. This moral purpose exists side by side with something that is directly its opposite namely a desire to discover themselves. Often the protagonist of O’Neill unconsciously hates and rejects his real self and in its place substitutes a false self-image. This self-hatred and the consequent pursuit of illusion constitute the tragic flaw that destroys him.

Aristotle does not specify the nature of the flaw in poetics but the Greek Dramatists pictured it as hubris or pride, a sort of self-reliance or self-sufficiency that angered the Gods and brought about destruction through Nemesis. Aristotle considered the pride of the tragic hero neither pure virtue nor vice or depravity, but a flaw an ‘error or frailty’ in the character of man. The pursuit of the unreal and the compulsion to attain the impossible, which we find in O’Neill’s tragic heroes cause the destruction of the self. Psychologically speaking, we can call the protagonists of O’Neill as ‘neurotic’ and their pride neurotic pride. But this neurotic pride follows the blinding destructive pattern of hubris.

The idea of pride bringing about man’s fall was one that O’Neill ardently believed in, and he believed also that man must find his way somewhere between pride and humility. The idea of pride leaning to catstasraphe is not found merely in Greek tragedies but also in many other masterpieces of literature. Prometheus and Oedipus have their descendents in English drama in the characters of Tamburlaine, Faustus, Macbeth and Samson Agonistes. The idea is not confined to drama alone for we have satan of paradise lest embodying pride. O’Neill task was for quarter than to imitate this old and traditional idea as treated in Greek and Elizabethan drama but to incorporate this into twentieth century life. His task is to interpret this ancient idea in twentieth century symbols and terms. He had also a modern equivalent for the Greek concept of fate or gods.

O’Neill has envisaged his play as a modern counterpart of Greek Tragedy the subject used in the same ancient one that always was and always will be the one subject for drama, and that is man and struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with the gods, but is now with himself, his own past, his attempts to belong. To O’Neill God, fate, mystery are all aspects of the subconscious and of the struggle of each man to make the force express him” – that is, the struggle, of the conscious will to assert itself against an unconscious will. This struggle is tragic as victory either way is doomed to bring death or in sanity.

O’Neill views on tragedy as a symbolic celebration of life. The death of the hero, he felt must reveal the dignity, nobility and universality of his struggle even though from the beginning the struggle has been a futile one. In fact in this futility is its magnificence and its implied hope for the rest of mankind. For the hero has willfully or through ignorance violated the inexorable order of the universe or of his own destiny. At his downfall this order is restored. Both the hero and the audience understand the order is restored. Both the hero and the audience understand the order and know that salvation lies in accepting it. In Greek tragedies, the order is symbolized in fate or the Gods. In the plays of O’Neill the violated order is that of the mind and when order is restored, it is restored in the mind.

O’Neill relied very much on the ideas of freud and jung. He shared the belief of jung that human actions and motives and the problems connected with them proceed not merely from man’s personal unconscious mind but from what jung has termed the “collective unconscious” shared by an entire role. In the opinion of jung pride is responsible for human tragedy as pride makes man rely too much on his plays the advice that man must follow a middle way that arrives at a compromise between the unconscious urges and the conscious ego.

O’Neill conception of tragedy brings him towards a profound exploration of human psyche. He agreed with the greatest writers of the world that tragedy springs from elemental human passions and man’s blind struggle with forces within himself which he cannot control. Modern psychology has given these forces specific names and definitions. The conscious and the unconscious it was possible for O’Neill to give a twentieth century interpretation to the problem of tragic action.

O’Neill gives a psychological interpretation to the question of Fate that looms large in Greek tragedies. Fate is interpreted by O’Neill as something neither entirely within man, nor altogether outside him. It is both in man and outside him, it works relentlessly towards his destruction. It paralyzes his will and his emotions betray him.

The cause of suffering in O’Neill’s plays is neither the hostility of Fate, as in the Greek Tragedy, nor Hamartia or ‘Fatal Flaw’ in the character of the chief protagonist. Man suffers and his life becomes a tale of suffering ending with the cessation of his earthly life, owing to a number of entirely different causes. First of all, man has lost faith in some supernal power of traditional religious, a faith which the Greeks had and which Christianity supplied in the middle ages, but which has been eroded by science and materialism. The old religions have not been replaced by any new ones. Hence man’s soul is sick because of too much materialism and he suffers from inner emptiness on account of his lack of some sustaining faith, man feels orphaned, lonely, defrauded and at bay. He suffers from a feeling of ‘in security’, a feeling of not belonging and is confused and bewildered from within and without.

Materialistic values prevail, life has become too mechanical and impersonal and this has further shaken man’s sense of security. Man is lonely even in a crowd and he cannot derive solace or strength from his faith in any supernal power. The result is he feels insecure. This feeling of insecurity causes unbearable spiritual anguish, fear and torture. This suffering may arise, this tragic tension may result from the “romantic illusions” which some may harbour, lost in which they forget the reality of life and which ultimately leads them to their doom. O’Neill made himself the dramatist of ironic Fate and of the psychological tensions which Freud’s interpreters and misinterpret were communicating in his books and lectures. He also regarded the social environment as an important factor in man’s tragic agony.

O’Neill’s Tragic Heroes are neither kings nor princess, nor great military generous. Aristotle had laid down that the tragic hero must be an exceptional individual so that his fall from his former greatness may arouse the tragic emotions of pity and fear. But O’Neill’s tragic personages are all drawn from the humblest ranks of society. They are all ordinary men and women suffering and down-trodden.

O’Neill explains view of human nature and his exclusive preoccupation with the seamy side of life. But despite such weaknesses, O’Neill remains a great tragic artist. He is a sincere and conscientious writer who has a fine sense of dramatic values and a penetrating insight into emotion. His imagination has a fiery heat which uplifts and ennobles everything it touches, even the sordid and the mean. His tragedies are tragedies with a difference. They are tragedies of modern life in the true sense of the word. They are so many diagnoses of the sickness of to-day. He has done old things in new ways, he has democratized tragedy and thus has considerably enlarged its range and scope.

Euripides in Greek drama and O’Neill in modern drama stand out prominently as the great representatives of the two great moments in human history. They have much in common. They rebelled against the diction and the conventions of the theatre, brought forth a natural sense of melody and revealed a profound forth a natural sense of melody and revealed a profound sense of the dramatic. They tested theories, found shelter in none. Their spiritual yearnings found a new expression in an intensely traditional form. They created a new taste for ideas, and these are combined with morbid aberrations and real but ugly passions.

It recalls the original un-reason, the tenor of the irrational. It sees man as the questioner, naked, unaccomodated, alone, facing mysterious, naked, unaccommodated, alone, facing mysterious, demonic forces in his own nature and outside and the irreducible facts of suffering and death. The tragic view impels the man of action to fight against his destiny, and state his case before God or his fellow humans.

O’Neill used his plays as a vehicle to dig at the roots of the sickness of today. Man, having lost the faith in life and the sense of belonging which were once the concomitants of his primitive oneness with nature, is cast adrift in a storm of conflicting and mutually destructive impulses with no solid faith, no courage of his convictions, no stable set of values to give direction or meaning of them.

O’Neill’s tragic vision involves a kind of quest the tragic hero’s search for identity. The tragic character embarks on voyage of self-discovery, and on the way to this spiritual pilgrimage he encounters pain, evil and suffering. Though he may die an ignorant man, his tragic struggle has brought sufficient illumination to his soul. Death may bring the final release, but not before the tragic hero has experienced and understood the meaning of suffering.

**Conclusion:**

O’Neill is dramatist of an idea, one theme unites all his plays, from his earliest experiments to his last mature plays. The theme is rooted in O’Neill’s own personal needs. The recurrent theme of O’Neill’s work is man’s frustration in his search for happiness in a modern world where religion and modern values have failed to provide him with insight into the meaning of the intellect, but in man’s struggle to live both emotionally and physically. O’Neill is not merely a dramatist but he is at his best an artist also who uses the theatre as a medium for the expression of his attitude towards life in terms of human character.

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