THE MOTIF OF OBSESSION IN EUGENE O'NEILL'S ILE

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This Study is an attempt to examine the motif of obsession in O'Neill's Ile (1917), a one-act play. This study also tries to explain in what way O'Neill's protagonist is an obsessed and haunted man.

Eugene O'Neill started with short slice-of-life dramas dealing with the miseries, delusions and obsessions of men adrift in the world. In the summer of 1916 he became the undisputed master of the one act play form in America. The playlets In the Zone, The Long Voyage Home (1917) and The Moon of the Caribees (1918) along with O'Neill first Provincetown production made up the quartet of plays produced under the collective title S.S. Glencairn. Besides, number of independent pieces such as ILe (1917), The Rope (1918) and Where the Cross is Made (1918) enhanced the young author's reputation by the end of World War I.[1]

ILe is especially representative of his early naturalistic-symbolic style with its mordant treatment of a New England sea captain's obsessive pride to hunt whales for their oil or ile as it is indicated in the play, which drives his lonely wife mad. This little play exemplifies O'Neill's taste for tragic irony—his peculiar concern with dangerous "obsession that resembles the hubris of classic tragedy and his fascination with sea"[2] *as a mystery and seduction, and as a symbol of malignity.*

ILe is the account of a marriage in which one of the partners, namely the husband, destroys his partner. In it, however, the marriage is not viewed as a Strindbergian shackling of hateful opposites but almost with sympathy".[3] *The plot's most concern and interest is based on the story of a wife, Mrs. Annie Keeney, a*

fragile woman who decides to sail with her husband despite his advice and protests that a whaling ship is not a suitable place foe a woman to live in. Thus she loses her mind after enduring a long and hard voyage. She dreams of her husband as a Viking but she soon learns the truth of her romantic illusion when she is locked in an ice-bound sea for an interminable winter, surrounded by mutinous sailors and isolated from her kind and comforts. Captain Keeney's harshness has been bred in him by the requirements and qualities of the ship which he must master. He can do no less than what he comes for, to fill his ship with oil. Her plea that they return moves him, and he is no longer master of the situation. But his acquiescence is momentary, because at this moment the ice to the north breaks, whales appear and thus he goes forward after the oil. Mrs. Keeney escapes into madness.

What is new in this play is the driving action of Mr. Keeney who "superficially resembles a lesser and domesticated captain Ahab.[4] *For the first time, O'Neill draws the character of Mr. Keeney as being a man who commits a decisive act of will. Except for Olson's abortive efforts to leave the sea in The Long Voyage Home, all O'Neill's important characters are bound, will-less, incapable of decision, and acquiescent to their fate. Mr. Keeney is different. He is not presented as the villain of a melodrama. His portrait is sympathetic, and the strongest possible case is made for his pursuit of oil. His pride and manhood are bound up in the drive; without the oil he is nothing. Although his wife becomes an object of pity, she can be blamed for her failure to understand this essential characteristic of her husband. O'Neill identified love as being "the prime component of faith and found it equally elusive and illusory."*[5] *Mrs. Keeney pleads for love, professes it, pursues it, but seldom experiences it in any but the most elemental way.*

The question the play asks in the context of his other works is:

> *Whether man's only happiness lies in acquiescing to the forces of his environment, or whether he has in himself the power to control or defeat his fate. By thrusting captain Keeney to the edge of megalomania O'Neill answered his question negatively.*[6]

All Mr. Keeney can accomplish is destruction. But in ILe the answer is not yet complete; will here is not set in a convincing pattern of destiny such as in The Moon of the Caribees. Mr. Keeney's indurate will in the unprepossessing, insensitive creature drives him to disaster. Captain Keeney, the protagonist of this short play ILe is a hard sailor the sea has ever witnessed. Being a study of mental rather than moral aberration, the captain is motivated neither by greed nor by pride. He is the victim of an "obsessive compulsion."[7] *Like Melville's Ahab, he is sailing "upon the present voyage with one only and all-engrossing object" to get the ile and stubbornly refuses to turn his ship for home although the crew is about to mutiny and his wife is going mad:*

> *Ben. the ice is all broke up to S'uth' ard. They's water's far's you can see. He ain't got no execuse for not turnin' back for, home, the men says.*
> *The Steward. (Bitterly) He won't look nowheres but no'th'ard where they's only the ice to see. He don't want to see no clear water. All he thinks on is gittin, the ile- s' if it was our fault he ain't had good luck with the whales. (Shaking his head) I think the man's mighty nigh losin' his senses.*
> *Ben. (Awed) D' you really think he's crazy?*
> *The steward. Aye, it's the Punishment o'God on him. Did ye ever hear of man who wasn't crazy do the things he does?*

His wife, whom he normally regards with tender affection, pleads with him to abandon his quest and insists that there be no excuse now for refusing to turn back:

> *Keeney, (Hastily) I can't, Annie*
> *Mrs. Keeney. Why can't you?*
> *Keeney. A woman couldn't rightly understand my reason.*
> *Mrs. Keeney. (Wildly) Became it's a stupid, stubborn reason. Oh, I heard you talking with the second mate. You're afraid the other captains will sneers at you because you didn't come back with a full ship. You want to live up to your silly reputation ever if you do have to beat and starve men and drive me mad to do it.*

But Keeney's reply is inarticulate and suggests that there is something deeper interfused:

> *(His jaw set stubbornly) it ain't that, Annie. Them sk'ppers would never dare sneer to my face. It ain't so much what anyone's say– but- (He hesitates, struggling to express his meaning) you see–I've always dome it--since my first voyage as skipper-1 always come back–with a full ship–and–it don't seem right not to- somehow. I been always first whalin' skipper out O' Homeport, and–Don't you see my meanin', Annie? (He glances at her. She is not looking at him but staring dully in front of her, not hearing a word he is saying)? Annie! (She comes to herself with a start) Best turn in, Annie, there is a good woman. You ain't well.*
> *Mrs. Keeney. (Resisting his attempts to guide her to the door in rear) David! Won't you please turn back?*

Keeney. (Gently) I can't, Annie–not yet awhile. You don't see my meanin'. I got git the ile.
Mrs. Keeney. It'd be different if you needed the money, but you don't. You're got more than plenty.
Keeney (Impatiently) it ain't the women: I'm thinking of. D'you think I'm as mean as that. [8]

The captain is clearly not moved by greed, nor yet by pride; rather, he appears to be as was Ahab "gnawed within and scorched without with the infixed, unrelenting tangs of some incurable idea."[9] *He is driven by a compulsion to get the oil because he has always done so; an urge which is as irresistible and inscrutable as fate itself. Dimly aware of his obsession he comprehends it not at all. In this play O'Neill does not use the conventional convenient dramatic device of a confidant friend, a doctor, to explain to the character and to the audience the facts about the internal struggle of which he suffers and his incapability of showing self-control.*

The motif of obsession has been the most favourite of O'Neill's ever since the composition of ILe in 1917. In this play, he recognizes in his protagonist the presence of a "mysterious, irrational, compulsive force–a monomania similar to Ahab's."[1] *Helpless to understand its nature to fight against it, captain Keeney destroys the person whom he loves. Captain Bartlett, in Where the Cross is Made is the victim of a similar aberration. He too is driven against his conscience, to fulfil a compulsive need. The characters in this play are entangled with circumstances which--if not tragic in any strict sense of the term--are destructive of happiness. Suffering in this play is produced by the conflict of will on the part of the determined character, namely, Captain Keeney. No doubt drama has always been, as O'Neill says "man and his struggle against his own fate"*[11] *We do not need to have him remind us that fate today is not the gods of ancient times but some aspect of the social order, some psychological flaw within us*

perhaps the fate is planted by heredity and nourished in the field of environment.

Captain Keeney is a typical hero of an O'Neillion tragedy. He struggles and suffers, but unlike the traditional tragic hero, he does not struggle actively against an external enemy, nor seeks victory over a physical antagonist. "Rather he struggles psychologically and seeks victory over an enemy within. He does not fight against some tyrannical Creon"[12] He struggles against the tyranny of his own contradictory emotions.

The dramatic conflict in ILe arises where Keeney's obsession is blocked by his normal feelings of affection and solicitude. The protagonist, a man of great physical strength, the weak and the helpless victim of a mysterious inner force, is, in a sense, offered a tragic choice he may accede to his wife's demands that he return home, there by preserving her sanity at the cost of destroying himself, or he may succumb to the compulsive force. Fate intervenes as he struggles with the problem. That the Fellow-worker announces that the ice to the north is clearing brings him out of a trance, dazedly collects his thoughts, and proceeds with grim determination to get his oil. Being "Moved on with a push by his monomania, he is capable of giving little need to any humane and normal inclinations."[13] It is clear, after all, that he has no choice in the matter.

O'Neill reaffirms the traditional values of trade. He reclaims the spiritual values of trade for a nation concerned chiefly with material things and for a generation concerned chiefly with entertainment. But in his rebellion against American materialism and in his scorn for the superficialities of literature and theatre of his time he went on to attack all materialism in such away as to minimize the pragmatic values of man's struggle.[14] And by his concern with emotion and conflict he excludes the element of action, in ILe the action is not importamt . A group of sailors on deck are passing the time talking and quarreling. The talking and

the quarreling increase in volume; a mutiny breaks out for a moment. Thus O'Neill excludes the element of action, upon which tragedy depends for its most dramatic effects. O'Neill's scorn for the American dream of material things leads him by contrast to dramatize the "unrealistic pipe dreams which are wholly divorced from reason and from action."[15] Thus O'Neill's drama is valued because it breaks with the tradition of the commercial theatre by dispensing with formal action in order to develop mood, emotion and character.

In line with the notion of pipe dream, O'Neill's heroes are inspired by the "impossibility of the romantic dream"[16] in terms of the sea the character's dreams of romantic adventure and discovery freed from all the drabness and routine of the farm and he, therefore, seeks escape from reality to an impossible ideal. In his first successful play, Beyond the Horizon O'Neill describes the impossibility of the dream of romantic adventure. Thus the dream of an escape to the wide spaces of the world is found in his later plays. His characters seek oil in the Arctic in ILe or gold in California in Gold, silk in Cathy or an idyllic love in the South Seas. His heroes reject security and imagine the romantically impossible. They destroy themselves in their quest for it. The romantic philosophy is very beautiful and O'Neill's early drama including ILe illustrates and describes it beautifully, but it is unreal. In discussing the conflict between dream and reality the drama is always lovely and the reality is always ugly.

In response to the challenge "There is no profit in stalking life for dreams" his heroes replied: "There is no profit in anything but that." It was "all or nothing" and anything less "Than" al was nothing. [17]

There is in ILe the quality of verisimilitude which makes the play convincing. Travis Bogard states that in ILe O'Neill draws on his life as a sailor and his experiences as a sailor in Ile.[18] It is not only what O'Neill knew from his experience as a sailor, but rather what he learned about that experience from reading the novels of

Joseph Conrad. Thus the element of verisimilitude makes the play convincing to an audience of its reality. Equally interesting, one can describe the play as a mood-piece one dependant on atmosphere. The totality of the play lies in the mood, because as O'Neill said "the spirit of the sea is the hero."[19] The sea functions as a force influencing the fate of the seafarers, and one is aware not of its presence. It plays a discernible role. The ice is a physical element in the setting. It seems to suggest that the inhibiting force lies some how outside the individual. The fact is that the forces which present the realization of Keeney's dream lies within him and externally in the world. Robert F. Whitman points out that O'Neill in the play "presents the question of whether man's inability to achieve self-fulfillment springs from some quality in him, or from the world around him."[20] The sea with the sinister shroud of the ice in which it hides its malignant purposes, suggests the awful and mysterious force of nature which thwarts man and his hopes. Throughout the play the wife and the crew blame Mr. Keeney in all that has gone wrong in their lives. The use of the ice or the sea is symbolic, and from Mr. Keeney's point of view the ice symbolizes a force which baffles his will and renders his hope impotent.

Notes

[1]*John Gasnner, Eugene O'Neill (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1965), P. 4.*

[2]*Ibid., P. 6.*

[3]*Travis Bogard, Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), P.91.*

[4]*Ibid., P. 92.*

[5]*Edwin A. Engel, The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill (Cambridge, Man: Harvard University Press, 1953), P. 297.*

[6]*Bogard, Contour in Time, P. 92.*

[7]*Engel, The Haunted Heroes, P. 19.*

[8]*Eugene O'Neill, The Collected plays of Eugene O'Neill (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1956), P. 341.*

[9]*Engel, The Haunted Heroes P. 21.*

[10]*Ibid.*

[11]*Frank Hubert O'Hara, Today in American Drama (New York: Green Wood Pren, Publishers, 1969), P. 242.*

[12]*Frederic I. Carpenter, Eugene O'Neill (Boston: Thayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), P. 171.*

[13]*Angel, The Haunted Heroes, P. 20.*

[14]*Carpenter, O'Neill, P. 176.*

[15]*Ibid., P. 177.*

[16]*Ibid., P. 67.*

[17]*Ibid., P. 178.*

[18]*Bogard, Contour in Time, P. 38.*

[19]*Ibid., P. 85.*

[20]*Robert F. Whitman, "Eugene O'Neill," Eugene O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays. Ed. John Gasnner (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), P. 147.*

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