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## The Use of Expressionism in Three Plays of Eugene O'Neill

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THE USE OF EXPRESSIONISM  
IN THREE PLAYS OF  
EUGENE O'NEILL

by

CHARLES A. CONROY, S.J.

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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## LIFE

Charles A. Conroy was born in Chicago, Illinois, December 15, 1925.

He was graduated from Loyola Academy, Chicago, Illinois June, 1943, and in August of the same year he entered the Society of Jesus at Milford, Ohio.

He began his undergraduate studies at Xavier University Cincinnati, Ohio in September, 1945. In 1947 he transferred to West Baden College of Loyola University and there received the Bachelor of Arts degree in English in June, 1948. He then entered the Graduate School of Loyola University.

For three years he taught English to sophomores at St. Ignatius High School, Cleveland, Ohio. During the summer months of these same years, he pursued various courses in the Graduate Department of English.

At present, he is studying Sacred Theology at West Baden College in preparation for Ordination to the priesthood in the Society of Jesus.

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## INTRODUCTION

During the last twenty-five years Eugene O'Neill has been one of the more important, one of the better playwrights of the theater in the United States. His plays have become important for a number of reasons: their presentation of modern problems; the argumentation, sometimes, of their solutions; the number of characters from the lower strata of society that he has brought to the stage.

Among the things that contributed to Eugene O'Neill's stature as a playwright was his use of expressionism--the drums, for instance, that beat a mad incantation in the jungle night as a Negro Emperor is destroyed by evil hallucinations from his past. This thesis has limited its scope to a study of that expressionism.

In this thesis we will explore the concept of expressionism and its history. We will show its nature as a device, the way it works, and its purpose in drama. While going through the plays of O'Neill, the expressionistic devices he used will be singled out and listed. Further, each of these will be criticised according to the accepted principles of clarity, proportion, and restraint. In the judgment passed, O'Neill was sometimes successful in his use of expressionism; at other times he

was found wanting. The final conclusion of the data assembled proves, we maintain, that as long as O'Neill used his expressionism to analyse and portray emotional problems or conflicts his drama is valid, true to life, good theater. But when he used his expressionism to develop and portray intellectual problems he failed, created poor plays. This then is the thesis: Eugene O'Neill was successful in his use of expressionism when he used it to analyse and portray emotional problems only.

The method of development and proof will be first to present, in Chapter I, a working definition of expressionism. Since the device is not original with O'Neill, it will be necessary to list other dramatists who used it and show by comparison what O'Neill added to the device for his own drama. Chapters III, IV, and V will analyse the use of expressionism in three of his plays: The Emperor Jones, The Hairy Ape, Days Without End, three plays that are usually accepted as being representative of O'Neill's work. The use of expressionism in these plays will be judged according to the norms of clarity, proportion, and restraint to determine how well or how poorly the device has been used.

The Emperor Jones deals principally with an emotion, Days Without End with an idea. The Hairy Ape presents an emotion and ends when it should begin to present an idea, a solution to Yank's problem. From the critical judgments passed on O'Neill's use of expressionism in these three plays, we feel



that we can offer in the conclusion convincing proof to support the thesis we are setting out to prove.

## CHAPTER II

### THE NATURE, FUNCTION, AND PURPOSE OF DRAMATIC EXPRESSIONISM

Since the general concept of dramatic expressionism, must be made clear before we attempt to apply it to any particular play, <sup>of course</sup> it will be the purpose of this chapter <sup>we must</sup> to define and explain the nature, ~~function, and purpose~~ of expressionism in itself.

In Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language, there is the following definition of expressionism.

in 20th century literature and drama, such interpretation of life in stylized and distorted scenes and characters of symbolic reality usually presented so as to reflect the subjective state of the chief character.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the definition does not say that expressionism portrays objective reality as it really appears, but as an interpretation of reality as seen through the subjective eyes of a character undergoing an emotional strain. To one in this condition, objective reality seems distorted and unproportioned--scenes are

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<sup>1</sup> Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language, Springfield, Mass., 1950, 899.

no longer true, people no longer real, but envisioned through this haze of subjective misinterpretation. The scenes and characters are merely symbolic of reality; they stand for an objective truth but are not the objective truth itself. The playwright is pursuing some theme of life that he (the playwright) wishes to portray in this "wild" way. He is rebelling against the ordinary appearance of things. The ordinary or "realistic" appearance of things is not real at all. It is the inner significance that must be brought out, the "behind force" that seems to be directing things against the actor. It is not the surface that gives us the real meaning of life; it<sup>is</sup>'s the forces beneath this surface, i.e. the hidden motives, fears, drives, desires in a man; and the hidden purposes and ends and desires of a Fate, a Providence which set the pattern for this inner struggle.

These things--the forces beneath the surface--must be drawn and pulled out of their hidden places in the mind of man. They must be clearly expressed as the inner workings of his mind and the workings in the providential mind of this "Fate" working for or against man and seeking to help or frustrate him at every turn. These inner actions, then, must somehow be shown to the audience. The portrayal of this inner struggle in man through the means of outward devices is called expressionism.

But how are these inner emotions and problems to be shown to the audience? They must be expressed by the symbolic

distortion of the surface reality so that the audience does not look at it, (i.e. surface actions and expressions which they see as every day occurrences) but rather at the forces at work behind and beneath this surface reality. Thus, re-create the man by distorting his words, his appearance, his actions so that they portray as clearly as possible the inner state of his mind and the inner conflicts which he is experiencing.

The author symbolically distorts the outside world by creating weird scenes, fantastic sounds, odd blendings of light, odd shaping of the scenery so that they portray the relation of outer reality to the inner struggle of the character. The purpose is to show the inner meaning of all these things to man, at least in so far as the playwright estimates this inner meaning. He tries to portray Fate as he sees and understands it by making the audience see, through the distorted vision of the actor, the hidden meaning of man and Fate.

Thus a person in a mad rage, since his anger, as yet, is still internal may through his own eyes see his enemy as a huge fire-eating giant. In reality, the enemy is a slight, nervous, unpretentious person of a very mild temperament, of an even slighter physical construction. The subjective state of this character is in such turmoil that few, if any, objective facts appear as they actually are. The author must now show his audience by some means or other just what the state of mind of his character is, and what the hidden problem poses for this man.

He must portray the inner feelings of hate, anger, fear, revenge and so distort reality that the audience is keenly aware of the problem and sees it through the eyes of the character involved. They must be made familiar with the character's inner emotions that prompt him to any course of action that he may take. They must also see, through this character's eyes, the disproportion reality takes on and how different this "reality" is from things as they actually are. They must be cognizant of the promptings of Fate and the course Fate has taken for or against this character. All these emotions and struggles must be clearly portrayed and shown so that the audience is visually aware of the problem and the possible bearing this problem will have on the actions of the character.

This, then, is the very nature of dramatic expressionism; to be able to express this inner state of mind and so portray it on the stage that the audience is aware both of the outward situation, and the significance of the inner struggle of the character involved.

However, although Webster's definition gives us a good idea of what is expected from the use of dramatic expressionism, yet we feel that it must be rejected on the basis that it would seem to limit its scope to a main character or person, when this is not necessarily true. Expressionism can be used on any character in the play. True enough, it will usually be employed by

one of the main characters, but this is not always the case. Any person in the play could be made to use this device depending on how the author wanted to portray and bring out a given conflict. Then too, the definition makes only a passing reference to the inner meaning that is supposed to be portrayed by this distortion of outer reality. This is essential to expressionism as it is the only way that the author has to show just what the inner emotions of his character might be in a given circumstance.

The Oxford Companion to American Literature provides another definition. Here it is described as,

an aesthetic movement in which the artist expresses his inner experience through the free representation of objective facts...it emphasizes the creator's mood and attitude...and is concerned more with individual intellectual conceptions, and less with the structure of exterior facts.<sup>2</sup>

Here again we see the insistence of the author of expressionistic plays that everyday reality is not at all important to him. What everyday reality is and how the author wants it to appear in this particular case, are two entirely different things. Objective facts are not important to the author; he will throw them about, use them, abuse them, distort them as he wishes (for he is "free" as the definition states) when he puts them on the stage. He is not there to represent the surface appearance of

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<sup>2</sup> Oxford Companion to American Literature, London, 1941, 231.

of facts; (that is "realism" which the expressionistic playwright detests) but he wants to go behind facts. He wants the audience to see behind these facts, all facts, into the real inner meaning of life as the author sees it. He merely uses distorted facts as symbols of this meaning.

The Oxford definition is also acceptable because it stresses the expressionistic playwright's pre-occupation "with individual intellectual conception." The whole world of the inner mind is one of the favorite subjects of the expressionistic author. To him it is the world that is really important. For example, he considers what a man thinks as more important than what he says or does. There, in the mind and inner feelings, is where the greatest struggles and conflicts, failures and successes take place. This element in the above quoted definition is also good and can be used in this work.

That the author is concerned less "with the structure of external facts" does not at all deny that he is aware of the importance of these aids, but merely signifies that he has placed less importance on this facet of the problem. External facts and symbolic distortions of these facts are vitally necessary, but not nearly as important as the actual internal mood and emotional stress of the character.

Yet, we question this definition as being wholly adequate. It would seem to say that the author's moods and attitudes are concentrated on and exploited at the expense of the char-

acter. This cannot be, for, although the author's moods and feelings must be expressed through means of the character, yet these moods cannot overshadow the logical mood and corresponding emotions of the character. The author may have some pet theory to proclaim or some basic philosophy to state, but he cannot merely break into the play, destroy the logical course of events, and state that this is the way he looks at the world and its problems. The audience must be able to feel this from the basic problem which confronts the character and the solution that he (the character) seemingly works out for himself. All distortions of the scenes and the rest of the symbolic devices employed by the writer must fit the problem and mood of the character, must be true to the play's life and not a mere overt parade of the author's opinions. These may be there, but they must be shown through the character.

Thus we find ourselves once more in search of an adequate definition of expressionism that will fit the purpose of this thesis. John Gassner, in his book, Masters of the Drama, has a good one. He defines expressionism as, "the presentation of inner states rather than outer reality, as well as the distortion of the latter by the inner eye."<sup>3</sup>

This definition has the good points of the two pre-

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3 John Gassner, Masters of the Drama, New York, 1940, 485.



ceeding ones besides being simple and direct. It does not limit the scope to the main character alone, for the words, "inner states" seem to preclude this and to refer more to any person in the play. Then too, it does not state that this conception is that of the author alone; for again it says "the distortion of the latter by the inner eye." This means that objective reality is distorted by the emotional upheaval of the character and not a mere stage technique employed by the author.

One thing is lacking in this definition, however, Gassner does not seem to include the inner meaning of outer reality, outer circumstances as accepted by the author. He seems to be restricting his definition entirely to an inner state of mind. The author's philosophy which is in the background is the milieu of his play--the workings of Fate, Providence, the "behind force" seem to have no place in his definition.

On the contrary, the workings of Fate, Providence, the "behind force" are an important part of dramatic expressionism. Without these there is no expressionism as we consider it here. The portrayal of these inner states is only half the story. What caused these inner states; what problems presented themselves what forces, Fates, providences worked on the inner being of this person--all these are the other half of expressionism. Thus, though Gassner's definition stresses the outer portrayal of inner states, it would seem to omit the symbolic portrayal of forces outside man, which portrayal is a true part of expressionism as

we see it.

This is precisely what Lewisohn in his book, The American Theater, is driving at when he discusses expressionism. He claims that,

expressionism has two chief aims: to fling the inner life of the dramatic figures immediately upon the stage; to synthesize instead of describing, their world and their universe into symbolic visions that shall sum up whole histories, moralities, cosmogonies in a brief minute and a fleeting scene.<sup>4</sup>

This coincides perfectly with the full meaning of expressionism as we see it. The inner life must be portrayed but not belabored. The use of symbols is essential but must never so overshadow the action as to call attention to itself and thus detract from the story as a whole. It must be done quickly and clearly so that the audience is aware of the full struggle and yet does not become bored by any one symbolic device that the playwright may wish to employ. Unless and until this is done, the play will be merely a passage of hazy events with meaningless scenes and confusing devices. The means used, the portrayal by symbolic devices, would be far out of proportion to the end proposed, the understanding of the play.

Mr. Lewisohn has come very close to what we hold as legitimate dramatic expressionism. We agree that the problem

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<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Lewisohn, The American Theater, ed. by M. J. Moses and J. M. Brown, New York, 1934, 196.

must be clearly analysed before the author ever sets pen to paper for the actual writing of the play. We also agree that the device employed can never take the place of the real problem, for once this happens we have an audience entranced by the device and not by the problem that the author would wish them to try and solve for themselves.

We see expressionism as the outward portrayal by symbolic devices (fantastic characters, scenes, noises, use of lighting, etc.) of the inner struggle of a man. This inner struggle is also brought about by the playwright through the workings of Fate, providence, a "behind force" which the character can neither deny nor escape. This latter embraces the inner meaning of the forces of the universe that are constantly acting on man's soul. These forces, too, cause in him the emotional upheavels, the soul-searing torments that so affect his view of reality and the meaning of objective truth, that he is no longer his usual self, but a new man entangled in his own problem and inner strife.

Sometimes the playwright of modern expressionism pictures what seem to be the relentless urgings of Fate on the soul of this man and the inner realization of the inevitability of his succumbing to the will of the "behind force" that governs him. He makes his decision; is then pursued by the working of this Fate and finally realizes that the struggle against Fate is hopeless. He awakes to the fact that he was doomed before he ever

started, and thus enters upon that inner struggle that the author tries to portray on the stage. To show how this could work, we will cite an example from Gassner.

A woman is thrown into prison for her participation in a revolution. While there, she mulls over the struggles in which she has just been engaged. The playwright visualizes her thoughts in stylized, fantastic scenes. If the great world is essentially unreal to a character, the author makes the impression by extravagant and fugitive scenes. If a character himself is unreal or only half-alive, the author may give him a mechanical appearance and supply him with a number instead of a name.<sup>5</sup>

Now all this is just what expressionism in its particular application to drama means. It is merely the attempt on the author's part to let the audience see what is going on in the mind of the afflicted character and the significance of that conflict. Without a full view of the character, both internally and externally, the audience might be at a loss to see why he chose this course of action to another one. Once his inner emotions are made apparent and his reactions to these made clear, then it is much more easy for the playgoer to follow this character to his logical conclusion.

Having thus established what expressionism is in general, how it is put to use on the stage and why it is used at all, we will now pass on to a brief summary of the history of expressionism through the ages.

Eugene O'Neill was certainly not the first playwright

to employ a general type of expressionism. The Greeks used it; Shakespeare put it to work in almost all of his plays; Ibsen employed it in many of his later works. The name itself was not used until the twentieth century as can be seen from reviewing our first definition. There were devices in the ancient, medieval, and even fairly modern theaters that could be called expressionism. But we hasten to make it very clear that this would cover anything that was expressive of inner conflict. The Grecian use of the masks and the chorus, Shakespeare's asides and ghosts, Ibsen's foils (one character speaking the inner thoughts of another) all these can fall into a general class which could be called expressionism. All these can and do fall under the idea of portraying the inner feelings, the inner thoughts, and the inner conflict of the character. Too, they seek to show the workings of the external order of providence, Fate, the "behind force" on the life of a given character. But none of these had the facility of showing how outward reality appeared to the emotionally overwrought person. Either their ability was not wide enough to imagine this or, what is more probable, the stage of their day just would not lend itself to such a complete portrayal of circumstances. For, as Barrett Clarke says in A Study of the Modern Drama, "what every expressionist is seeking is, in the final analysis, what every serious artist has always sought-- a

more effective means of expressing life."<sup>6</sup>

We do not mean to imply at all that the ancient greats did not want to express life more fully, but merely that because of technical difficulties they were not able to use all the means as completely as the present day author. They sought to express life, and did an admirable job as the present popularity of their plays bears witness. They were just not as thorough as the present day dramatist and this fact and this fact alone shows us the clear cut distinction between that expressionism and the expressionism of the modern theater.

To portray these inner forces and struggles and their outcome, the Greeks used only two expressionistic devices: the chorus and the mask. The Grecian mask of tragedy or comedy portrayed or summarized the overall inner struggle by over-simplified suggestion. Neither of these brought the clash of emotions within the play, the variations of feelings in the character involved to the forefront of attention. As an expressionistic device, neither one gave the audience a chance to share the inner problem or feel the inner emotion as much as present day expressionism does. Neither was able to show the struggle as intimately. The chorus would thunder out at the audience that this was the problem; this is the emotion that the character was supposed to be feeling at the present time; and this is the way that

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<sup>6</sup> Barrett Clarke, A Study of the Modern Drama, New York, 1927, 408.

Fate will work things out in the present state of affairs. The device did not leave the audience free to work out the solution for itself. The viewer was not allowed to enter into the character, the scene, or the events. Instead he had but to listen and agree, or go home feeling that something vital was being kept back from him and that the play was incomplete. So much then for this ancient use of expressionism.

Shakespeare, too, used expressionism. A. D. Mickle speaks of the device that Shakespeare employed to bring out the inner struggle of some of his main characters, such as Hamlet, and Othello. He says,

Shakespeare's method of presenting such characters was to make them speak themselves to other characters, and then for one other character to sum them up...At times, Shakespeare's outward-living men soliloquise, but such silloquising is never self-revealing.<sup>7</sup>

There is not too great a difference between this form and that employed by the Greeks. Shakespeare seldom if ever used masks, and his characters did not leave the stage when they were supposed to be undergoing this internal struggle. Sometimes they merely stood to one side while a second or third person mused aloud about their problem. Frequently enough his characters sum themselves, up, but only when the stage is cleared of all other actors is the character allowed to speak his inner thoughts and

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<sup>7</sup> A. D. Mickle, Studies on Six Plays of Eugene O'Neill New York, 1929, 71-72.

problems which is certainly an unreal situation. Also, the scenery is never symbolically distorted, there are no unusual effects on or off stage by which the audience could be made aware of the view of outer reality as the afflicted character sees it.

Shakespearean problems were often very deep and soul-searching. Hamlet's, Othello's, Macbeth's soliloquies showed clearly enough that there was an inner struggle and that these people were having a bad time of it solving this inner strife. Fate seems to be working on them as is shown from the lines they speak, but there is missing that vital something, that clear portrayal of the hopelessness that objective reality takes on at a time such as this. Without showing this distortion to the audience, the author frequently cannot show why the problem assumes such great proportions, nor why it is seemingly so very difficult of solution. Thus they have seen only half the character and will not readily understand why he is having so much trouble with a problem the solution to which is at least somewhat obvious.

We come now to a playwright closer to our present day; Henrich Ibsen. This man employed a form of expressionism called the "foil." For all practical purposes this was much the same as a Shakespearean soliloquy. At times Ibsen made his device a little too large for the character involved. Again Mickle has a good passage that might help to explain this matter. He says,

But Shakespeare's method of employing the soliloquy, giving up the whole stage often to single characters, so that they could speak out their secret feelings and



thoughts...was obviously too artificial, too unreal. So Ibsen boldly rejected it and substituted for it the foil. Of course Shakespeare used the foil but Ibsen went further...(Shakespeare's foils) were less that the character they served. Horatio to Hamlet was only like Bardolph to Falstaff...like faithful dogs one can address one's inmost thoughts too, knowing that they will be listened to sympathetically but never understood. But Ibsen's foils were often deeper than the characters they were foils to. They took the place of the introspective man's own mind. They were as understanding and relieving confessional ears.<sup>8</sup>

As a consequence of this, the problem became too involved even for the audience to handle or solve. Even his characters who by their very nature should have been extroverts would have their tremendous inner struggles. He would then belabor this problem by various asides or speeches until the character no longer fitted the nature he was supposed to portray. There would be a complete reversal in his person, and the true to nature element would be eliminated, leaving only a person bewildering both to himself and to the audience.

Again, there was no symbolic distortion of scenery, no suggestive settings or stage effects by which the audience could see reality as it appeared to the confused person. Since the audience could not identify itself with the character, it would tend to lose interest in the problem and perhaps in the play itself.

Now, as we can easily see, this earlier use of expres-

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8 Ibid., 73-74.

sionism differs widely from the use as applied in the present day theaters. Basically they are the same. Both the modern and the earlier playwright try to portray the inner workings of the character; both try to portray the movements of some "behind force," some Fate that is driving and pushing the character forward. Both used some sort of device or other to aid in this portrayal: choruses, masks, foils, asides. Yet there is one difference notable between these earlier forms and the form of expressionism employed by O'Neill. None of the earlier forms went so far as to have stylized or symbolically distorted settings and characters of O'Neill. Frequently, the audience then was left to figure out for themselves just how reality looked to a person in this emotional state. O'Neill would not allow that. He wanted full audience participation in his plays; he wanted the spectator to know everything possible about any one of his actors so that they too might see the problem as the author viewed it and be interested in its solution as if the problem belonged to them personally. To O'Neill, then, this was the prime purpose of expressionism. It was for this very thing that authors and playwrights down the centuries, from the Greeks to the present day, had been striving: a full and complete audience participation and understanding of the problem that was at one and the same time personal to the actor, and basic to people of all times. It

is for this "more effective means of expressing life"<sup>9</sup> that every author and playwright through the ages has been reaching.

To show how the expressionism of today developed from its ancient source, a brief look at the history of modern expressionism will not be out of place here.

More than forty years ago, several young Germans popularized a mechanical sort of stage technique known as expressionism. It is a German product, the word itself was first coined in Germany about this time. It was a direct reversal of Realism which was slowly beginning to fade out, just as Romanticism had done in the previous century. Dramatists were searching ever deeper into the "behind life" of their characters to be able to portray more fully the inner life of their protege. As Clark states,

Younger dramatists, that is to say, dissatisfied with the formulas of Becque and Ibsen and their followers, have sought different means of expression: it is not enough to record what seems to be the actual words and acts of A; his thoughts, subconscious soul, and his acts are summarily presented by means of a symbolic act or speech--aided by scenery or lighting--and a "new" method has been evolved.<sup>10</sup>

A Swedish writer, Strindberg, was probably the first modern playwright to employ this technique to any advantage. His own life, littered with broken marriages, trips to mental insti-

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9 Study of the Modern Drama, New York, 1927, 408.

10 Ibid., 409.

tutions, inner conflicts of all kinds, led him eventually to try to portray all these hidden emotions that he had stored up within himself. In doing this, he gave the theater its first real taste of modern expressionism with such plays as The Dream Play and The Spook Sonata. In both, he employed fantastic settings to communicate to the audience as much as the inner feelings and outward distortions of his characters as he was able. Perhaps to him more than to any other person in the modern theater can justly be affixed the title of "father of modern expressionism."<sup>11</sup>

About the same time that Strindberg was having so much success with this novel experiment in Sweden, a young German by the name of Frank Wedekind started penning his works for the German stage. His Dance of Death and The Tenor showed "his love of sensationalism and his impatience with organized artistry."<sup>12</sup> Around him clustered a group of playwrights such as Hasenclever, Kaiser, and Kronfeld, all with the same idea--bringing to the stage something new and sensational. Jessner, Fehling, and Kortner, noted directors and actors aided in this movement and collected a fine band of stagehands who could construct the scenes and set up the off-stage helps which these new men needed and desired. The theater flourished; the audiences were more than pleased with this new fad which enabled them to see ever more

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11 Gassner, Masters of the Drama, 480.

12 Ibid., 482-487.

clearly, the whole character.

But as often happens, this new movement was suppressed long before it had time to get a real foothold.

These innovations, variously justified and variously assailed, were the last experiments of the German theater. Upon seizing power, the Nationalist Socialist party quickly placed the entire theater under its boot, and most prominent playwrights, actors, and producers either went into exile or were silenced. The theater that had been for decades the most independent, humanitarian, and boldly experimental in Western Europe for nearly half a century bowed to totalitarianism.<sup>13</sup>

Just as the suppression was overrunning Germany, O'Neill was recovering from a serious attack of tuberculosis. During this period of comparative inactivity, he had read very widely. His reading brought him into contact with Strindberg and the German playwrights and their manners. He had written a few of his plays using the new expressionism, but the idea had never been so crystal-clear as it now became. The great advantage that this medium could be put to in the American theater struck him like a thunderbolt. Thus we have the beginning of the expressionistic movement in the American theater: the particular use O'Neill made of this device. Thus what O'Neill employed could be called "new" only in the sense that a more modernistic superstructure had been added to a very old foundation. This new superstructure, then, is what modern playwrights and critics are referring to when they speak of modern expressionism.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 493.

Having determined the nature of modern expressionism and distinguished it from forms used by the Greeks, by Shakespeare and Ibsen, we come to a consideration of its use in the modern theater.

It is clear almost without saying that the author or playwright must have a problem which he wants solved in the play. The problem should be a soul-searching and clearly evident one to the audience. There follows from this that any use of a symbol must always be subordinated to the problem at hand, and that the device cannot be used solely for the sake of the novelty or newness of the creation. As the "punishment must fit the crime," so too, must the symbol fit the problem with which it is connected. We will take a few examples to illustrate this point.

To express an inner emotion of great fear or dread, the playwright, may, perhaps, call for the use of a continuous deeply resonant drum beat. All the time that the character is imprisoned by this emotional state, the drum would continue to sound in the background. Its tempo and volume would increase or decrease as the fear grew correspondingly greater or less. Thus, at a time of an emotional climax, the drum might thunder forth to an almost deafening pitch. The ticking of a clock might, under great emotional stress, assume the proportions of a giant's footsteps on an old wooden floor. The slowly increasing pitch and tempo of background music in a thrilling murder story certainly

helps to capture and hold the attention of the audience.

All these devices are parts of the outward portrayal of this inner message. They are used to show the audience how small, insignificant things suddenly take on huge dimensions in the mind of the actor and finally serve in no mean way to overwhelm him.

It may be that the author will employ merely the use of a mask which the character puts on and takes off at will as the circumstances of the play demand. Still again, as was frequently seen in the days of Shakespeare, the actor may speak his inner thought in an aside, thus giving the on-lookers a notion as to the true feeling that he is harboring in his heart.

But so far we have only the subjective side of the picture. What happens to reality at this time? How do things seem to appear to a person in this state of confusion? Besides the problem of making the audience aware that there is an internal struggle, the author now has the added problem of portraying reality as it appears to this afflicted person. In our day, he (the author) is greatly aided by electricity and all the hundred and one other mechanical devices that our age provides. By clever lighting and shifting of scenes, he can pretty well imitate this distorted vision of his character and show the audience just how things look to him. This is by far the most important part of the entire process, for should the author fail here, he might well ruin his play and fall into that bane of all authors,

melodrama.

The drum beat and the ticking clock could again serve as good examples. That insistent "drum beat" that the actor has heard may be nothing more than the gentle rustling of a leaf against a branch. The actor is disturbed and his heart beat is far above normal. As the danger gets closer, the beat of his heart increases and so does the tempo and volume of the drum, which is, in this instance, an aid to the audience. The audience is aware that the noise is merely a natural result of the wind, but the character is far from convinced of this. To him that particular noise is as a clap of thunder and as his emotional strain is worked up, so too is this noise. The pounding increases and increases again and again, until it is as if some huge god were hammering relentlessly against an empty metal cylinder. Doom and the climax are at hand, and the actor is beside himself with fear.

Now the author has to show all this to the audience. By this time many of them will have started for the exits, literally having been driven out of the theater by the stage mechanics. The author must make the audience aware that the leaf and branch have taken on a far greater significance in the actor's eyes. This he can do by gradually changing "props." The leaf becomes a stick, then a hammer, and finally a huge sledge-hammer, wielded by some grotesque looking character. The branch turns from wood, to lead-piping, to a large tin can and at last to an empty oil-



drum. During the changes in scenery and the corresponding changes in the actions of the character involved, the audience is made keenly aware of all circumstances and is actually carried over to the emotions of the actor.

Witness this in the motion picture, High Noon. Will Caine, the sheriff, has vainly sought aid for his coming gun battle with Ben Miller. Miller's train arrives at noon, and as the time gets closer, the audience is forced to focus its attention on the large pendulum clock on the wall of the sheriff's office. Caine returns to the empty office five minutes before twelve and begins writing. The clock ticks quietly on, and the camera turns its eye from Caine to the pendulum to Caine. As the time grows shorter, the ticks of the clock become gradually louder. In the background the ominous beat is taken up and accompanied by music, equally as fore-boding. The streets of the town are desolate, and there is a dead silence in the local tavern: all aids to increase the mounting tension of the situation. The station-agent looks at his watch and the numbers seem to jump out at him as the small time piece booms out the seconds. At last, seconds before noon, the theme has assumed a terrific tone; the clock thunders out the seconds, the beat of the music booms out the moments. Suddenly all is shattered by the blast of the whistle as the train nears the station. The spell is broken, and if one is aware of it, an audible sigh escapes the spell-bound audience. They have been so caught up by Caine's emotional struggle and so

engrossed in his problem that they too have become, as it were, a part of Caine's soul. The director has let the audience see just how things appeared to Caine, and the unearthly quiet that he must have felt as he realized that with each beat of this clock his probable death became more certain.

Therefore, by means of stylized settings and distorted scenery, the author portrays the way objective reality appears to a man afflicted with this inner struggle. That the inner world of this character is one huge muddle of seemingly insoluble problems, is immediately obvious to the audience from his actions. But why such small things as the movement of a leaf or the ticking of a clock could so antagonize him, would be far beyond their grasp, were they not allowed to see just how the device was seen by the actor. Then slowly but surely they grasp the complete situation and take part in the inner conflict.

Yet with all this the playwright must exercise a certain amount of restraint. The symbolic device that he uses must be closely allied to the inner struggle. The distortion must be in close proportion to the type of character that the actor is supposed to be portraying. If he intends good drama, the author can never use a device for the sake of the device alone. He can never go so far afield that his character's reality, humanity, and individuality would be destroyed or lessened to a notable degree. Therefore, the symbol must fit both the character involved and the situation in which the person finds himself.

The symbol must also arouse and hold the attention of the audience. Once this has been done, then it must focus attention on the problem at hand and keep that problem before the audience. Should the symbol or device ever over-shadow the thing it is meant to portray, then the audience would be even more confused than if it had not been subjected to the device in the first place.

We now come to the purpose of all this stylized acting and setting. Why should the playwright take on so difficult a task when the ordinary portrayal of a play might serve just as well?

The purpose of dramatic expressionism can readily be said to be the same as the purpose of serious drama itself; namely, in tragedy to purge pity and fear, and in comedy to exalt wonder and admiration at moral triumph. It might be well at this point to make a brief digression to explain this purging of pity and fear. Pity and fear in themselves and as we experience them in real life are quite different from the artistic, refined emotions of the stage. In real life,

Pity is a sort of pain at an evident evil of a destructive or painful kind in the case of somebody who may not deserve it, the evil being one which we might expect to happen to our friends or to ourselves and this at a time when it seems to be very near at hand ...Aristotle defines fear as a species of pain or disturbance arising from an impression of impending evil

which is destructive or painful in its nature.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, accepting Butcher's opinion, in everyday life there is no admixture of pleasure with the pain. It is directed immediately towards ourselves and is unrefined. In tragedy, however, these emotions are purged of their lower elements and directed towards universal truths represented in an idealized hero. The pity and fear aroused by the representation of an even greater pity and fear in the idealized character causes the audience to lose themselves and forget their own problems while they are taken up with the tremendous sufferings of the hero. The audience is made to feel a certain "sympathetic ecstasy or lifting out of itself."<sup>15</sup> It is precisely at this point that the baser elements are driven out and there comes into the soul of one witnessing this struggle a certain amount of tragic pleasure. The spectator is a detached person, a kind of judge, who sits in on this trial and views the thing in an objective light. His own problems seem insignificant when he sees the struggle of the character and he becomes lost or at least taken up for the time being in the solution and struggle of this person on the stage. Again, Butcher, in his translation of Aristotle's Poetics, says that

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14 Aristotle, Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, transl. and ed. by S.H. Butcher, London, 1932, 23.

15 R. J. Schneider, The Use of Tragic Irony in Four Plays of Eugene O'Neill, M.A. Thesis, West Baden College, 1949, 16.

pity and fear are purged of the impure elements that cling to them in life. In the glow of tragic excitement, these feelings are so transformed that the net result is a noble emotional satisfaction.<sup>16</sup>

It is therefore the purpose of dramatic expressionism to aid in the dramatic purging of these elemental emotions. By means of stylistic settings and devices, the author seeks to portray more completely the entire problem and to express to his audience not only the internal strife, but also the accompanying external distortions as they appear to the character. Carried beyond himself, the theater-goer enters whole-heartedly into the action that is unfolding before him and feels a certain "noble emotional satisfaction" in this participation in the struggle of another being. If and when this is accomplished by dramatic expressionism in any play, then and only then, can this device be said to ably fulfill its real purpose in the theater. Once the viewer has put himself in the place of the actor and has seen that these problems effect humanity in general, he has become part and parcel of the play. Yet he still views it in the sense of a judge, for the emotions of fear and pity that he feels within himself, and that emotion that would probably crush him in ordinary life, leave him now purged of this self-centered emotion via the detachment of art. He is not crushed by the emotion, but instead is lifted up by its universal significance and resultant emotional purgation.

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<sup>16</sup> Butcher, Aristotle on Poetry and Fine Art, 267.

In proper restraint, proportion, and clarity, we are given the three norms by which we can determine whether or not dramatic expressionism fulfills its purpose in the play. If it is used in this way, it becomes no small aid in bettering the entire story. If any one of these elements is lacking in the expressionistic devices used, it is quite possible that then the entire play will turn out to be nothing more than melodrama. Even the audience will go away with the idea that there was something deep that had to be portrayed but that this was never quite clearly shown. The entire issue will remain clouded by the greatness of the symbol, and the symbol for its own sake would be the thing that the people would remember.

## CHAPTER III

### THE USE OF EXPRESSIONISM IN

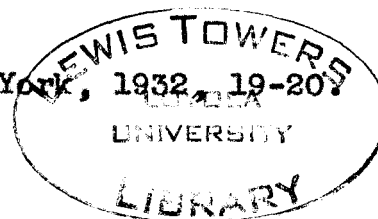
#### THE EMPEROR JONES

Having thus found out just what expressionism is, how ~~it is used in the theater, and what the purpose is in using it,~~ we will now apply it to <sup>two</sup> specific plays of Eugene O'Neill. We will attempt to show that his drama was improved or made worse by the employment of this device, judging the latter on the basis of proportionality, restraint, and clarity. The first play we will treat will be ~~one of his most famous theatrical works,~~ The Emperor Jones.

Written in 1920 and published in 1922, The Emperor Jones is probably the best known of O'Neill's <sup>early</sup> works.<sup>1</sup> ~~It is a~~ <sup>of the Emperor Jones</sup> ~~short play of eight scenes written in an expressionistic and highly imaginative style.~~ <sup>was not expressionistic in full blown, it was definitely</sup>

A giant Negro <sup>(black in today's garson)</sup> Brutus Jones, former pullman porter and ex-convict, makes himself in two short years the despotic "emperor" of a West Indian island. His success is due largely to the myth he has built around himself. The Negroes of the island are a highly superstitious lot and readily believe the fables

1 Eugene O'Neill, Nine Plays, New York, 1932, 19-20.



*A tale that persuades  
the natives that  
entirely drawn  
is Jones' own  
construction, that  
being simple*

Jones has told them. Not the least of these tales is the one by which Jones has persuaded the natives that he can be killed only by a silver bullet. For two years he exploits the populace, enriching himself at their expense. He tells a cockney trader that he has been planning his escape for sometime and that when the inevitable rebellion does come, he will escape to France, there to spend the fortune he has amassed.

As the play opens, the rebellion has already begun. The natives have stolen Jones' horses and have retired to the hills to plot their revenge. At the edge of the forest which surrounds his palace, Jones has cached some food for his anticipated flight. At the beginning of his flight, Jones is unable to locate the hidden supply and darts off wildly into the abyss. In the distance he is aware for the first time of an incessant beat of a tom-tom, paced to the normal pulse and gradually increasing in tempo. The great Jones senses for the first time that all is not going to go as he had planned and becomes greatly unnerved. He seeks the trail that will lead him to the other side of the jungle and to the French gun-boat that awaits him, but he is lost. His courage is sapped by his mental encounters with people and scenes from his past life. These brief symbolic pictures show his return to his own and his races history: the murdering of his companion Jeff; his escape from a Georgia chain-gang; the slave auction block; the hold of the slave ship; and finally, the witch doctor and crocodile-god of the Congo. In



each scene he fires a bullet to rid himself of the fearful apparition. In this final dream encounter, with the crocodile-god, he fires the last bullet, the silver one, which he has kept as a lucky charm and a means of suicide. During his wild psychological return to his savage state, he makes a complete circle in the jungle and returns to the place where he had entered. The savages who have been chanting evil spells and moulding silver bullets throughout the night, now wait to riddle him to death in a hail of silver bullets. The play ends with the trader commenting, "Silver bullets! Gawd blimey but yer died in the 'eighth o' style anyhow."<sup>2</sup>

In The Emperor Jones the nature of expressionism can be the symbolic portrayal of atavistic fear and atavistic race strains. Jones is doomed from the very first moment we see him, and he is fully aware of his plight. All through his life he has had this desire to rule and become a leader, a real "emperor." But all through his life, he has been forced to the realization that he will never reach his goal. This fear and dread of the past history of his race has been the driving force behind all his actions. Fate has decreed for the Negro and for this "nigger" (a word which Jones often uses in reference to himself) in particular, an inevitable doom. Every so often he is allowed to see the "light" of the "white man's world." But he is never al-

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2 Ibid., 35.

lowed more than a fleeting glimpse of this (super-world, and every time he attempts to go beyond the mythical line of his race, he is rudely thrown farther back into the depths of his race history. No action that he can perform, no ideas that he can concoct in his "mighty" brain will ever get him out of the abyss that Fate has set up for his race. As Mayorga says in her book, The American Theater,

It (Emperor Jones) goes further and deeper into the fundamentals of Negro characteristics and shows how the development of the Negro from the days of his Bushman ancestors, and through his slave experiences, has resulted in a type of mind which finds it impossible to escape from its inheritance, even when given its freedom.<sup>3</sup>

Thus O'Neill is faced with the problem of presenting this atavistic race problem by means of expressionism. He had chosen this means as the one most suitable for the portrayal of the character of Jones.

As for the function of expressionism in this play, there is probably no one <sup>work</sup> ~~play~~ of O'Neill<sup>15</sup> that uses this device so liberally. From the middle of the opening scene to nearly the end of the play, each action is represented in some stylized scene or setting. The audience is greeted by the soft, but insistent beat of a distant drum. As the beat increases in tempo and volume throughout the scenes, so do the actions of Jones be-

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Mayorga, The American Theater, New York, 1930, 323-324.

come more flashy and exciting.

During Jones' long night in the forest, he is haunted continually by the spiritual apparitions of his past life. The Little Formless Fears that have crept out of the deeper blackness of the forest glare and glitter at Jones. Their use is clear from the stage direction at the beginning of the scene. Here O'Neill has them,

...move noiselessly, but with deliberate, painful effort, striving to raise themselves on end, failing and sinking prone again...a gale of low mocking laughter like a rustling of leaves...<sup>4</sup>

This "deliberate, painful effort" and the "failing and sinking prone again" can readily be interpreted to portray symbolically the vain struggle that Jones' race has made and is making with Fate. Try as they may they cannot rise to any stature, and they never will be able to do so as long as Fate has decreed otherwise for them. The "gale of low, mocking laughter" could mean that this same Fate watches the struggle of Jones and his race and rejoices in the pitiful effort and inevitable downfall that follows. Jones himself sees in this the futility of his struggle and that of his race, but relentlessly pushes on into the night.

When he meets the first vision, Jeff a companion whom he has killed as the result of a quarrel during a "crap" game, is rolling the dice in rhythm with the slow beat of the drum which by this time has become a little bit louder although no

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4 O'Neill, *Nine Plays*, 19-20.

faster in tempo. Jeff stares into space and doesn't even bother to look at the "emperor" as he speaks to him. He just keeps rolling the dice ever so methodically in cadence until Jones finally wipes out the vision by expending the first of his six bullets.

As he rushes off into the forest, his garments are torn from his body by the brambles until he is left with little more than a loin cloth to cover himself. This too is meant to show that no matter how far one of his race may seem to be rising after the last sentence has been announced by this Fate, he will be right back where he began, right back in his native element no matter how hard he may try to overcome this sentence. Each new scene in the forest is accompanied with another expressionistic device. By this time Jones is quite aware that he is lost and has become frightened. The sound of the drum beat in the distance now grows a bit louder as his impending doom gets a bit closer.

Jones (after a pause, listening to the insistent beat of the drum in the distance) I must 'a' put some distance between myself an' dem--runnin' like dat--runnin' like dat--and yit--dat damn drum sounds jes' de same, nearer, even.<sup>5</sup>

By this time Jones has stripped himself to the waist and is quite frantic. He is in no way ready for the next apparition which shows him the Georgia chain-gang of which he was a member. Again the stage directions are a big help here when they mention that

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5 Ibid., 23

the movement of the convicts is "slow, rigid, and mechanical in perfect beat with distant drum."<sup>6</sup> Jones stands bewildered and sees himself crash the shovel on the head of the guard who has just whipped him for not working. Again he fires in rage at the fantastic show, crashes off into the eerie blackness of the forest--minus one more precious bullet.

Sinking slowly down to rest in a clearing, the tattered body of the once proud "emperor" bends itself in a humble confession of his wrongs to the people of the island. In the midst of this scene, Jones seems to see the auction block and the auctioneer. The "dandies" point with their fingers and make witty remarks. One touches Jones on the shoulder and motions him to stand on the block. He looks up, stares wildly on all sides for a means of escape. Seeing none, he jumps to the top of one of the stumps and stands there trembling and cowering in fear. The auctioneer begins his long spiel and finally Jones is told to step down and go off with his new owner. So carried away by all this seeming reality, Jones fires two rapid shots and the walls of the forest once again close in. Jones is heard trampling madly through the underbrush and crying hysterically. "Only blackness remains and silence broken by Jones as he rushes off, crying with fear--and by the quickened, ever louder beat of the tom-tom."

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6 Ibid., 24

7 Ibid., 28

Scene six of the play is very short and takes place, at least expressionistically, in the hold of the slave ship. Again Jones has fallen from exhaustion. He realizes that he has only one bullet left and that the silver one for his own death. Gradually, as the stage becomes a bit lighter, two rows of shackled slaves are to be seen behind <sup>the taller Emperor</sup> Jones. They row in a rythmical beat, a low wail seems to issue from their throats, and Jones himself is seen slowly swaying back and forth as if following the slow, rolling, pitching motion of the ship. He begins to sing and wail with the chorus as the lights fade out and all that is heard is once again the crashing and mutterings of a now nearly demented Jones as he runs through the forest. Again the beat of the tom-tom is mentioned as becoming louder, quicker, more insistent and triumphant as the inevitable doom catches up with Jones.

The last scene of the play shows Jones <sup>him</sup> going through all the contortions of a damned soul. He is resting on the bank of some great river before a huge stone altar. Gradually he recognizes the place of the Congo Witch doctor, a place of sacrifice. Drums are beating and there is evidently a great ceremony about to take place. The mood takes possession of Jones and he begins to babble and moan all over again. Finally, since the forces of evil demand a sacrifice (so "says" the witch doctor) there is a sharp command and Jones realizes that he is to be the object of this on-coming orgy. As the doctor steps back from the

bank of the river, the head of a huge green crocodile appears. Jones screams in terror and expends his last bullet, the silver one he had intended for his own suicide, to dispell this latest apparition. He sinks to the ground, whimpering, while the tom-tom fills the silence with "a revengeful power."<sup>8</sup>

Finally we are taken back to the edge of the forest where the natives have gathered to wait for Jones <sup>to immerge</sup> to immerge. Guided by his six shots they have been prepared for the grand appearance of their "emperor." A tracker points to the spot where Jones had entered. By this time the tom-tom beat has filled the theater and the audience knows for certain that the climax is at hand. A sound issues from the forest and the soldiers are immediately on the alert. Suddenly there comes the report of many shots not too far in the depth of the woods, and, just as abruptly, the beat of the tom-tom ceases. The limp body of Jones is carried in triumph and dropped at the feet of the trader. The play is over.

But what purpose did O'Neill have in almost driving the audience from the theater by the constant and insistent use of the drum? For eight scenes, it had been beating more or less loudly until it filled the whole structure with its noise. The drum was the symbol of the mental conflict taking place in Jones, and of the deeper meaning of life in general. As he became more

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8 Ibid., 33.

and more frightened, the tempo and volume of the drum beat increased. As the climax was reached, the drum beat was so loud that a few of the critics were driven from the theater. It was the drum that was the outward symbol of the inner struggle of Jones. This, together with the stylized scenes and settings in the forest, gave the audience a complete picture of how things appeared to Jones at this time. Without it they would merely see a man going through a lot of strange contortions with no apparent meaning. With these aids, they were able to see the entire picture and to enter into the very experience that Jones himself was feeling.

As for portraying the entire theme that O'Neill had in mind, it does this admirably and clearly. Even the destruction of Jones cannot be brought about except by the use of the famous silver bullet. The people have had to spend the whole night and many dollars (for the bullets were melted down from coins) to accomplish their end. It was certainly a fitting end for so glorious a leader, to die in a hail of solid silver.

Critics are divided on the question of whether or not O'Neill had far surpassed the bounds of proportion required in art. Do the expressionistic devices used, the drums, the visions, the silver bullets develop and portray the Negro's atavistic fear and race superstition? Or do they overshadow the true fear, call so much attention to themselves that the fear is forgotten? Some say that the constant beat of the drum became so



annoyingly protracted that the audience sighed with relief when it was at last stopped. Others claim that it was indeed a new technique and one which O'Neill was perfectly justified in using to bring about his desired effect. ~~We side with this group and~~ agree with Mr. T. H. Dickinson who says,

*Personality*  
*S*

The Emperor Jones is both good drama and good theater....Seldom have the instrumentalities of the theater been employed so effectively for terror, and to deepen the knowledge of the hidden traits of primitive man. The use of the reverberating drum to imply the deeper rhythms of life from which the Emperor was seeking to escape by his trickery of civilization, a rhythm that was to swallow him as the tide laps the sand, is one the truly great creative achievements of the modern theater. Let no one dismiss it as a mere stunt. Creative too is the reappearance in the mind of the fleeing man of the phantoms of the past history of his race, phantoms which are so much more real than reality that his foolish bullets are wasted on them.<sup>9</sup>

Mr. Dickinson is a critic of worth in the modern theater. Were the uses of the various expressionistic devices employed merely for the effect that they themselves would bring, then surely so deep-probing a critic as this man would condemn the play outright and have nothing further to say about it.

On the other hand, there are those who would say that O'Neill went much too far in his use of this new device. They condemn the play as being too filled with fantastic stage effects, and lightings. The drum beat to them had little more meaning

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas H. Dickinson, Playwrights of the New American Theater, New York, 1925, 106.

than the meaning that would be carried by a young lad who spends most of his day beating on the side of his crib. O'Neill missed the inner significance of the real problem entirely, they would say.

Bonamy Dobree is one of the leading exponents in the anti-O'Neill camp. Regarding O'Neill's work in general, she has this to say,

Mr. O'Neill, one feels, relies too much upon tricks, too little upon the quality of words to do the work he wants done. He seems himself to have been carried away by the excitement of the new...There are...accessory noises in The Emperor Jones; and it is very doubtful if the means have conducted to the end. One can admire and applaud his experimental boldness, but one must insist that the things in which he has experimented are merely subsidiary and a sign of weakness rather than originality.<sup>10</sup>

We concede ~~this~~ much to Miss Dobree; that O'Neill was dealing with something that was ~~and still is~~ to be considered as an experiment in the modern theater. In so far as he was using something that was new, he should have been a little more discreet in its use. The drum beat <sup>would seem</sup> ~~does tend~~ to get on the nerves of some of the audience, and perhaps, there was too much <sup>bizarre</sup> ~~weird~~ lighting and scenery. The play would have been equally as intelligible and as interesting without so continued a use of the device.

Our ~~conclusion~~, which is by far <sup>the most</sup> ~~the~~ more general opinion of the critics is that the expressionism <sup>in The Emperor Jones</sup> ~~is~~ lacking in re-

<sup>10</sup> Bonamy Dobree, "The Plays of Eugene O'Neill," Southern Review, II, 1936-37, 438.

straint, rather than proportion. All the way through the play it is suited to the atavistic fear. Sometimes, as Miss Dobree mentions, it does get a little out of hand. O'Neill had brought out and set the problem before us as clear as a winter's sunrise, but then tended to overcast the situation by the unrestrained use of his device. A little less drum-beating and fewer fantastic scenes would not have lessened the dramatic worth of The Emperor Jones nor impaired the clearness of Jones' struggle.

Criticism of Strange

properly control a device, which in the last analysis is language. Just as he compensated for his lingual constipation in Strange Interlude (by having ~~thoughts~~ to write out the character's thoughts) so too did he introduce all kinds of expressionist devices into The Emperor Jones ~~for~~ ~~want~~ of a ~~letter~~ for the same reason. Perhaps that is being a little rough on Mr. O'Neill, but one could ~~not~~ definitely construct a sound case for such a theory. See p. 75

CHAPTER IV  
THE USE OF EXPRESSIONISM IN  
THE HAIRY APE

A second experiment in expressionism resulted in 1922 in the short, but overpowering play, The Hairy Ape. Eight scenes once again form the only division, and the story is told from the point of view of Yank, the main character. Like The Emperor Jones this play has <sup>tremendous</sup> social implications. As a matter of fact, the parallel between The Hairy Ape and The Emperor Jones is often commented on by critics. O'Neill himself has called The Hairy Ape "a direct descendant of Jones."<sup>1</sup>

The story of the play is a violent description of the enfeebled luxury of the rich and the brute-like existence of the poor. In the cramped "fo'c'sle" of an ocean liner, Yank, a brutal stupid, and profane stoker is <sup>the</sup> recognized champion of the off-scouring of society represented there in the ship's hold. The men are all slaves to the machines that society has created and on which it ~~lives~~. *necessarity depends-*

The first scene shows Yank as the king of the stoke-

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<sup>1</sup> Burns Mantle, American Playwrights of Today, New York, 1942, 72.

hold and glorying in his abnormal strength which makes him sole ruler in this rough domain. However, Mildred Douglas, daughter of the ship's owner, makes a slumming visit to the furnace room and is shocked at Yank's unashamed brutality. She faints away after a disgusted scornful exclamation. Yank is no less aghast at finding in her a whole world which he never knew before, and ~~he~~ realizes that he can have no place in ~~it~~. He becomes sullen and morose at the insult offered him by the representative of a "higher" society and upon reaching New York, swaggers up Fifth Avenue trying in vain to insult and battle the aristocratic strollers who are completely oblivious of him. Arrested, he is sent to jail where his fellows direct him to the I.W.W. to seek his revenge. He is <sup>even</sup> rejected even by this <sup>All embracing</sup> ~~only~~ labor organization and in disgust and desperation turns to the zoo to have a look at the ape, the one creature with whom he <sup>- feels</sup> ~~can find~~ kinship. When he <sup>freed</sup> ~~lets~~ the animal ~~free~~ (to help him wreak destruction on society), the beast crushes him to death.

The nature of dramatic expressionism in The Hairy Ape is the portrayal, through the means of stylistic scenes and settings, of the vain attempt of a person to try to find a place in a society in which he obviously does not belong. In a more universal sense, it is a picture of all men trying to find their place in an intellectual, spiritual universe, only to find that as yet they do not belong to this either. It is the "symbolic picture of the struggle upwards of physical strength toward

spiritual growth."<sup>2</sup> Mr. Gassner sums up the nature of expressionism in this play very well when he says,

The subject here is the ancient one that always was and always will be the one subject for drama, and that is man and his struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with the gods, but is now with himself, his own past, his attempt to belong."<sup>3</sup>

There is no doubt that in The Hairy Ape O'Neill was digging at the roots of an evil that <sup>and is</sup> ~~was present in his day~~; <sup>in industrial society</sup> the social inequality that existed between the classes of mankind. Yank and the members of his furnace feeding crew, readily symbolized the class of the down-trodden; <sup>the have-nots</sup> ~~while~~ Mildred, on the other hand, ~~was~~ <sup>stood</sup> ~~stand~~ for the high and mighty personages that dwelt in the <sup>capitalistic</sup> ~~high and mighty~~ structures of Fifth Avenue. in this high society)

The use of dramatic expressionism in The Hairy Ape was brought about by the actions of the characters and the settings in which these actions took place. First and foremost of all these was the scene in the stokehold of the ocean liner. Each man is intent on one thing only; feeding the huge, black, fire-belching god that is the furnace. They are bent over double from the consistent shoveling and <sup>indeed they have</sup> ~~have much~~ the appearance of apes. All are strong, hairy-chested individuals whose back and forearm muscles have become abnormally large from the sameness and

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Quinn, A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day, New York, 1927, 202.

<sup>3</sup> John Gassner, A Treasury of the Theater, New York, 1940, 776.

constancy of their labor. Even the very framework of the catwalks and steel supports appear to be the outlines of a huge cage behind and in which these men are working.

No one speaks, and the audience is allowed to get the allusion of captivity and complete subjugation to the surroundings. When a voice does break forth from the gloom, it is the voice of one hardened and cracked by the coal dust, the rough, tough, grumbling voice of the professional sailor who knows only the sea and the hardships that go with this type of life. Long, one of the stokers, sums up the feelings of all of them when he says, "Yank 'ere is right. 'E says this 'ere stinkin' ship is our 'ome. And 'e says as 'ome is 'ell...And who's ter blame, I arks yer?...Da damned Capitalist clarss!"<sup>4</sup> The whole scene is one of utter depression and dismay. The talk is about the rough times they have had and how they are always getting pushed around until there seems to be absolutely no place nor any one in society who would be willing to accept them into their company.

Meanwhile the shoveling continues and those who are not actually engaged in either the conversation or feeding the boilers, lean on their tools and stare blankly ahead of them, their one free arm dangling from their side much in the form of some ape. The scene closes as the men once again turn to the furnaces after listening to Paddy and Yank argue rather robustly

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4 O'Neill, Nine Plays, 43-44.

over the merits of sail as opposed to steam. In a fit of rage Yank screams after the drowsy Irishman, "Yuh don't belong!"<sup>5</sup> and that very briefly sums up the theme of the entire play. Not one man in that hold has ever been quite sure just where his place in society was; ~~all~~ ~~most~~ of them have ~~never~~ <sup>more than</sup> known ~~is~~ the steel, <sup>heat,</sup> and heat and coal-dust of the engine room. The bent, ape-like bodies shuffle in a bent, ape-like manner toward the door of the furnace.

Scene two takes us to the lush promenade deck of the liner where everything is exactly the opposite to <sup>of scene one</sup> ~~what we have~~ just seen. The sun shines brightly, rich ladies and their husbands walk leisurely in the brisk, salt air, while the ship's stewards hustle back and forth with hot tea, <sup>and</sup> ~~a~~ trays laden with rich food. The two ladies on which our attention ~~is~~ focuses are languidly sitting in two deck chairs, wrapped in furs and seeming to enjoy the life around them. One of the two is Mildred, the other her aunt; fat, pompous, and filled with a sense of power brought about by her station in life. Everything about the scene and the people is artificial; the walk of the rich, the serving of the stewards, the talk that goes on between the two main persons. They are in a world far removed from <sup>that</sup> ~~the world~~ of Yank and his crew in the hold below.

~~Thus,~~ By the use of these stylized scenes and settings

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5 Ibid., 49.



and actions, O'Neill has clearly shown the difference he intends in the two classes. Nothing in this life above deck is true; the sun is unnaturally brilliant, the sea an unreal green. Even the conversation of the characters is stilted and far above the everyday language in common use. One cannot help but feel and see the complete disparity between the two classes even this early in the play, which is precisely the playwright's intention.

The meeting of Mildred and Yank in scene three only serves to heighten this theme; for she appears in the stokehold in an immaculate dress, the symbol of the rich, while Yank and his <sup>Comrades</sup> ~~comrades~~ are still the same, sooty symbols of the poor.

Scene five takes place three weeks later on the corner of Fifth Avenue in the fashionable section of the city. The skyscrapers arise above them (Yank and Long, his companion) like the walls of some gigantic steel cage. Everything about the place is immaculate: streets cleared of all debris; store windows neatly and gayly set up with rich jewels and expensive furs on display; even the sun seems to be shining in an abnormally bright light as on the deck of the ocean liner in scene two.

Yank and his pal are frankly amazed at all the splendor of this "new world" ~~this world~~ of the capitalist. They talk for awhile in their guttural mutterings and stand on the corner, two black smudges soiling the beauty of this world in which both are striving to "belong."

Soon a crowd begins to empty from the church and to

walk by the two. No one seems to notice them at all as they go on their affected, stiff, over-bearing way. The stage direction that accompanies the scene has them,

...sauntering slowly and affectedly, their heads held stiffly up, looking neither to the right nor left, talking in toneless, simpering voices...A procession of gaudy marionettes...in their detached, mechanical unawareness.<sup>6</sup>

Defiantly Yank bumps into one of them, but instead of knocking the person over, is himself brushed aside by the impact while the rich man walks on as if nothing had happened. He begins to yell and scream at them, but they walk right past, taking only as many steps as are absolutely necessary to avoid the pair. In a fit of rage, Yank tries to tear up part of the curbing. Failing in this ~~no~~ enterprise, he then swings upon a lamp-post and tries to dislodge it for a club. Grunting and panting like ~~some~~<sup>an</sup> infuriated beast, he spies a man running to catch a bus. Seeing his opportunity for a fight sprinting toward him, Yank puts himself in the man's path and waits for him to bump into him. As he does so Yank lashes out with a vicious swing catching the fat pedestrian full in the mouth. The gentleman stands unmoved as if nothing had happened and after missing the bus, turns to Yank and says, "I beg your pardon... (then irritably) You have made me miss my bus."<sup>7</sup> Upon delivering this eloquent piece of understatement,

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6 Ibid., 69.

7 Ibid., 72.

he claps his hands and calls for the police. At once they appear and haul the rueful and wondering Yank to jail.

Here O'Neill has definitely used his device to show that no matter how hard Yank tries to make himself noticed by the other class, he <sup>will</sup> never succeed in his efforts. The poor are doomed to misery no matter what they do to get out of their position; while the rich pay little or no attention to them until forced to do so by some inconvenience to themselves, however slight. The wealthy are interested only in their own and it seems that even the law is right there to comply with their every wish.

Having been beaten up by the police, Yank awakes in scene six to find himself in the "zoo" as he thinks. This brings a roar of laughter from the other inmates of the prison and Yank is brought rudely to the realization that he is in the none too gentle hands of the law. Again the scene is stylistically set with the bars of the cell a very fitting place for "the hairy ape." Even in this surrounding Yank is not allowed to get into the inner circle of prisoners. Not even here will the cruel Fates that are running Yank's life let him rest and feel that he "belongs."

Scene seven opens a month later with Yank walking rather timidly up to the door of the I.W.W. Upon being admitted, he expresses his confusion that there is no secret knock, handclasp and all the rest that would seem to be an essential part of a

society dedicated to the over-throw of the wealthy. When Yank tells his purpose in joining the union, he is quickly but decisively ejected with the words of the secretary thundering in his ears, "Oh, hell, what's the use of talking? You're a brainless ape. Throw him out, boys."<sup>8</sup> Again Yank is made keenly aware of the fact that he does not belong; again he is alone to brood and grunt like the very animal he has been compared to.

Yank: I'm busted Ingersoll, dat's what. Steel was me, and I owned de world. Now I ain't steel, and de world owns me. Aw hell! I can't see--it's all dark, get me? It's all wrong!<sup>9</sup>

As if to agree with him, the moon is hadden and the stage is left empty. A cop comes along and tells Yank to move along or land in jail. Yank drags himself to a standing position and shuffles off into the gloom.

The last scene takes place at the zoo. Once again we see the bars of a cage and behind them, the restless form of an ape pacing back and forth, glaring at this strange person who has been babbling at him for so long. Carried away by his own sermonizing, Yank loosens the door of the cage and the beast comes out to meet him. Yank extends his hand in friendly greeting. Enraged by this audacity, the animal crushes Yank in an embrace of death, throws the limp body into the cage, and saunters off.

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8 Ibid., 83.

9 Ibid., 83.

The rest of the monkeys stop their nervous chattering and watch the silent form. Upon regaining his senses, Yank grabs hold of the bars of the cage, looks around in a daze and forces a mocking laugh.

Yank: In de cage, huh? (in strident tones of a circus barker) Ladies and gents, step forward and take a slant at de one and only--(his voice weakening)--one an' original--Hairy Ape from de wilds of--(he slips in a heap on the floor and dies. The monkeys set up a chattering, whimpering wail. And perhaps, the Hairy Ape at last belongs).<sup>10</sup>

Again we have the bars of the cage, steel bars which have seemed to enclose Yank throughout his life and to keep him fenced off from any form of society that he has sought to gain. While he is talking, the monkeys and animals pay close attention and even for awhile the gorillas itself is faintly amused by this odd "human." But we are let to see that even in this society Yank is definitely not accepted as a member, but only as an oddity that is at one and the same time pathetic and funny. The scenes and actions of the players, man or beast, throughout the play have all been pointed at this end, for nowhere nor at any-time is Yank ever given complete admittance to any form of the society to which he has sought to "belong." His search has been in vain.

All through the play, then, O'Neill has been trying to portray by means of expressionistic pantomime and fantastic set-

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 87-88.

tings the desperateness of the struggle of Yank to find his place in society. This he has done very well. His symbols are clear, for no one could leave such a demonstration without feeling the utter futility of such a struggle. All through the play, it has been the author's purpose to solve this riddle of Yank (the symbol of his type of man) to better his social position and find a place where society will respect him and what he stands for. By the stylized scenes in the ship's hold, on Fifth Avenue, in the jail, and lastly at the monkey house of the zoo, O'Neill has shown how reality must appear to one with this sense of "not belonging" anywhere in society. In this play O'Neill's expressionism is clear. It is in exact proportion to his theme--the desire of Yank to belong and his bewilderment at not being able to belong to any class of society. All the way through the play, O'Neill keeps his expressionism in restraint. Never does it get out of hand as it did in The Emperor Jones. Even to the rather vituperative critic Eric Bentley, the craftsmanship of O'Neill has reached a new height in this work. He says, "as a theatrical craftsman O'Neill is tremendously talented...He is no thinker.... Now every great writer is a thinker...O'Neill has yet, however, to show us that he has a mind."<sup>11</sup> ~~We are in complete agreement with Mr. Bentley and believe that he has conceded us a point by~~

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<sup>11</sup> Eric Bentley, The Playwright as a Thinker, New York, 1946, 320.

~~claiming that O'Neill was no great thinker. This is important to the thesis.~~

In the analysis of The Emperor Jones and The Hairy Ape, it was shown that O'Neill was a good technician, a clever, an imaginative dramatist whenever he used expressionistic devices to portray the moods and emotional conflicts of his characters. When he came to use these same expressionistic devices to present and interpret intellectual problems, he failed. He left his drama of Yank an unsolved problem. Eric Bentley says that O'Neill was not a thinker which would seem to imply that he was incapable of solving Yank's problem. <sup>It seems</sup> ~~It is our contention~~ that O'Neill could not solve the problem because he lacked the talent and imagination to use his expressionism to convey ideas. This assertion will be proved in the following chapter where the expressionism in Days Without End is analysed. In this play O'Neill tried to portray and interpret an idea, but he failed, proving, we think, that he was capable only of handling expressionism on the level of the emotional conflict.

CHAPTER V  
THE USE OF EXPRESSIONISM IN  
DAYS WITHOUT END

The final play that we are going to study in this thesis is probably the most surprising one that O'Neill ever wrote. Days Without End, written in 1933 and produced unsuccessfully in 1934, is somewhat of a reversal of this playwright's usual theme. Almost obsessed with the idea that man is caught in a vain struggle against an overpowering Fate, O'Neill now turned the tables, at least for this one play, to assert that true peace could be found in surrendering to a loving God. Also surprising was O'Neill's sudden and prolonged silence after the production of Days Without End. For a period of twelve years he seemed to be thinking about it. At least he let the public think about it since he produced no new play until the year 1946. The reception of Days Without End, although hailed by some Catholic critics as the culmination of his efforts,<sup>1</sup> was generally regarded as mediocre drama.<sup>2</sup> It is also noteworthy as the last play

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1 R. D. Skinner, A Poet's Quest, New York, 1935, 234.

2 Gassner, Masters of the Drama, New York, 1940, 641 and 660.



in which O'Neill used the device of expressionism.

The story of the play is simple and somewhat melodramatic in a religious way. John Loving, the divided personality around whom the play centers, has sought for truth and love in vain in all the philosophies and religions of the world after having rejected the Catholic faith of his youth when God took the lives of both his parents. In this search a kind of evil spirit has taken possession of him which mocks at life in all its levels and scorns man's struggle for faith and love as a meaningless, absurd effort for importance. This evil spirit in John is represented on the stage by another character, dressed exactly like him, of the same appearance and action, called Loving. This character wears a mask, however, the mask of a John "who has died with a sneer of scornful mockery on his lips."<sup>3</sup> Loving, who is seen by none of the other characters, is heard by them through the mouth of John; his scornful bitter remarks seem to others to come from the hero.

When the play begins, John has just been threatened with the extinction of his one late-found love, that of his wife, Elsa. In a moment of yielding to his evil spirit, John has committed adultery and now fears that the revelation of this to Elsa will ruin her ideal of married love. To find this out he tells her the plot of a novel in which the main character's experiences

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3 O'Neill, Days Without End, New York, 1934, 16.

approximate his own, and then asks her whether the wife in the novel could forgive the infidelity.

Father Baird, a Catholic priest who was formerly the childhood friend and counselor of Jack, has come to town for a brief vacation. His visit turns out to be a grace in disguise, for Loving has always admired the priest, and it is through the father that he finally makes his peace with God. As it happens, Lucy, Jack's accomplice in the adultery, drops in on Elsa before Jack and Father Baird arrive and tells the story of her unfaithfulness to her own husband in terms that do not reveal the name of the man, but details the circumstances rather completely. Thus when Jack unfolds the novel plot to Elsa and Father Baird, the development of the adultery sequence is all too close to the incident that Elsa has heard that afternoon, and she realizes the truth. The end of the novel, inspired by the hateful impulses of Loving, describes how the wife cannot forgive and so kills herself by provoking an attack of pneumonia.

This goads Elsa, who has just recovered from the flu, to go out into the pouring rain to work out the theme in her own life. Meanwhile John tells the priest the fate of the novel's hero after this has happened. In anguish over the death of his wife, the fictional character returns to the church of his youth to pray to Christ on the Cross for forgiveness. When this fails, he curses Christ and determines to go on even without this lost faith and love.

The events of the play turn out just about the same way, for awhile at least. Elsa sickens under an unresisted attack of pneumonia and death seems inevitable. John flees to the church to pour out his prayer for forgiveness. The play ends successfully, though, when Elsa finds she can forgive John and John finds the love of Christ and the death of his evil self at the foot of the cross. So much for the statement of the plot.

What then is the nature of the expressionism as it appears in Days Without End? In this play O'Neill presents the symbolic portrayal of a man divided against himself; he presents the picture of a soul possessed by a spirit of hate and scornful self-mockery opposing the need and the longing he has for faith and love of God. As Joseph Krutch says, "One half of his personality demands love and faith, the other half is cynically convinced that neither is possible."<sup>4</sup> Just exactly what the symbolic portrayal of this evil character, represented by another masked actor on the stage, signifies can hardly be analysed more fully than above. It certainly is not clear whether this is a portrayal of actual possession by the devil in the strict theological sense. It may be just a metaphorical representation of the evil that is in every man. It may also be a peculiar evil that results from the rejection of God and religion in the

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Krutch, The American Drama Since 1918, New York, 1939, 116.

early career of John. Thus it might be some sort of soul scar, a warping of his better instincts by the reaction he has to the deaths of his mother and father. In any event we have a symbolic picture of a character somehow psychologically divided, the forces of hatred and denial of spiritual life in rebellion against the forces of faith and love and the desire to belong to God.

For the function of the expressionism used in Days Without End, we must study the working out of this symbolic device portraying a man divided against himself. All the expressionism is worked out through the appearance, words, and actions of the masked double, Loving. No settings, sounds, or other characters symbolize the interior story. O'Neill has thus cut his expressionistic devices to the minimum. Let us examine the use of Loving, the symbolic prejection of the evil in John's soul, a little more closely. First, his appearance; then his words; and finally his actions.

Loving is described by O'Neill at the beginning of the play:

Loving sits in the armchair at rear of table. He is the same height and figure, is dressed in every detail exactly the same. His hair is the same--dark, streaked with gray. In contrast to this similarity between the two, there is an equally strange dissimilarity. For Loving's face is a mask whose features reproduce exactly the features of John's face--the death mask of a John who had died with a sneer of scornful mockery on his lips. And this mocking scorn is repeated in the expression of the eyes which stare

bleakly from behind the mask.<sup>5</sup>

In this manner we are introduced to the evil spirit of John's life. From such a symbol we are to gather the interior picture of John's cold, calculating intellectual rejection of God, religion, the significance of life itself. The mask is the sneer of death at life; it is the part of him that has told him life is a meaningless struggle; why not be reasonable and put an end to it?

So much for his appearance. Now as to his words, we see that this Mephistophelean "double" is constantly engaged in speaking through John the ideas that deny life, love, and faith. The evil spirit's words are in constant rebellion with the ideas and aspirations and convictions that John knows to be true, but can't be integrated with the suggestions coming from this hate-philosopher within him. The suggestions and ideas of others are also thrown up against this dogma of pessimism inside his soul as well as presented to his sounder convictions which we may call more properly "his own." The result is the "tortured intellectuality" which Gassner notes.<sup>6</sup> From this state of mental split come the two conflicting and habitual responses throughout the play. The one expresses in words that come from John himself the conviction that man must seek the truth, have faith in God's love, live the good life. The other expresses in words that come from

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5 O'Neill, Days Without End, 16.

6 Gassner, A Treasury of the Theater, 787.

the character, Loving, (but which are heard by the others as coming from John) the conviction that scorns all love, faith, eternal truths, and that points pessimistically to the extinction of a meaningless and stupid existence. The development of the plot shows how this evil in John gradually gains ascendancy over his soul, in spite of the efforts of the priest, until the climax when John realizes he must go back to the faith of his youth, back to the church where he once believed. In spite of the scornful protests of defiance from Loving, John finally believes he is forgiven by Christ and can love again. This reassurance of Christ's love forces Loving to admit defeat. He says, "Thou hast conquered, Lord. Thou art--the End."<sup>7</sup>

Thus far his words as an expressionistic function. Now with regard to his actions, we see that O'Neill has used this device with simple bluntness. The character, Loving, usually stands or sits somewhat behind or to the side of John, assuming the general not the specific motions of the hero. He keeps an air of haughty scorn about all his movements. He exercises his influence chiefly through John and his words, as they sound as though coming from John. At times though his influence seems more direct and spiritual when influencing others. Thus after he has made the sinister suggestion, through John, that Elsa

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7 O'Neill, Days Without End, 156.

"Remember it's cold and raining out,"<sup>8</sup> O'Neill describes him as remaining in the room a moment after John has left, still exerting, as it were, the impact of the remark. His evil desire that she go out in the rain in her present condition of ill health and so provoke an attack of pneumonia, to end her misery, is most obvious. The stage directions for his actions point this up.

Loving remains, his gaze concentrated on the back of Elsa's head with a cruel, implacable intensity. She is still staring before her with the same strage fascinated dread. Then, as if in obedience to his will, she rises slowly to her feet and walks slowly and woodenly back past him and disappears in the hall, turning right toward the entrance door to the apartment. For a second Loving remains looking after her.<sup>9</sup>

His most significant actions come, however, near the end of the play. He is described during Elsa's relapse as happy over the issue, "his eyes fixed with sinister gloating intentness on Elsa's face."<sup>10</sup> Finally during John's last effort to return to the parish church to pray, Loving attempts in his actions to block his way. Since he is to represent a spiritual force, Loving cannot be touched or physically influenced by John. In the stage directions O'Neill describes the scene:

JOHN: (Without touching him, makes a motion of pushing

8 Ibid., 106

9 Ibid., 107

10 Ibid., 136.

him aside.) I am going. (He goes through the door to the study, moving like one in a trance, his eyes fixed straight before him. Loving continues to try to bar his path, always without touching him.<sup>11</sup>

The same situation occurs upon entrance to the church, John always forcing Loving back, and the evil spirit striving to check him, until "Loving is forced back until the back of his head is against the foot of the Cross."<sup>12</sup> Here the most significant symbolic action of the expressionistic character takes place. As John gradually sees in the face of the Crucified forgiveness and love and firmly asserts his belief in that love, the figure of Loving staggers, as if mortally wounded, slumps to his knees, and rolls over dead. With the words "Thous has conquered, Lord. Thou art--the End. Forgive--the damned soul--of John Loving!"<sup>13</sup> This mystical character, representing the evil half of the hero, falls into the dead form of a cross as the foot of the Cross. It is meant to be most significant that the first words of the hero after this successful struggle is over are, "I am John Loving."<sup>14</sup> Thus we see him now rid of the divided self, a whole man in his new-found uniting force, God's love. As he says, "Life laughs with God's love again."<sup>15</sup>

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11 Ibid., 149.

12 Ibid., 153.

13 Ibid., 156.

14 Ibid., 157.

15 Ibid., 157.



But what purpose did O'Neill have in using this device? To answer this question we must say that he meant to heighten the theme. And the theme of this play seems to be that the dividing force of intellectual cynicism and pessimism in the soul of a man can be cast out successfully by a return to a belief in and a love of an all-lovable God. At least this is what appears to be the theme. It may, however, be merely a specification of a mere general theme O'Neill has held all along; namely, that man needs "to belong" and whatever cosmic system which will give him something to hang on to is adequate for life's purposes. We draw this conclusion from several sources. The first is the disclaimer that O'Neill himself made with regard to Days Without End. He insisted that the play, "has meaning only as drama and is not to be taken as my own belief."<sup>16</sup> A playwright who projects a truth on stage in which he does not have conviction can hardly convince us of its value or reality. John Gassner has probably come closer to the spirit of the play when he calls it

another study of "split personality" here concluded with a reconciliation between self-tortured intellectuality and religious faith. These and other works gave effective testimony to their author's conviction that "it is only by means of some form of 'supernaturalism' that we may express in the theater what we comprehend intuitively of that self-obsession which is the particular discount we moderns

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<sup>16</sup> Krutch, 116.

have to pay for the loan of life."<sup>17</sup>

So we have seen the nature, function, and purpose of the expressionistic device used in Days Without End. Now let us apply the criteria of clarity, proportion, and restraint to this device.

First of all, is the symbolic device clear? Does it bring the message or theme of the play, the true conflict to the fore so that its meaning will not be mistaken by us? Such clarity is absolutely necessary. As Lewisohn says, for the use of this device:

If this form of art is to be effective and beautiful, it must be very sensitive and very severe at once. Beneath it must be fundamental brainwork, thinking as resilient as steel and as clean cut as agate. The symbolic masses must glow with a clear irradiation from within. Otherwise all is murky and muddled. You can describe fragmentarily and produce fragments of truth. Realism does not commit you to a whole. In expressionism the antecedent intellectual grasp of your entire material must be firm, definite, complete. Everything must be thought out and thought through.<sup>18</sup>

First of all, therefore, we must conclude that this exacting use of expressionism, as pointed out by Lewisohn, is simply lacking in Days Without End. We hinted at this previously when treating the symbolic character, Loving. Loving is simply not clearly etched. What he stands for is just not brought out unmistakably. This can be shown by the terms used by the cri-

17 Gassner, A Treasury of the Theater, 737.

18 Ludwig Lewisohn, The American Theater, 196.

tics to try to grasp exactly what he does represent. Skinner calls him "a symbol of the past, of an older self,"<sup>19</sup> but certainly the true John Loving is older than this evil spirit since it arose at the time of his parents death. Krutch calls him "the other half"<sup>20</sup> of his personality, but if this be so, when Loving dies, John would logically still be only half a man. Gassner refers to Loving as "his [John's] Mephistophelean double."<sup>21</sup> which can certainly be interpreted in many different ways. It could be theological possession by the devil. This is sometimes hinted at in the text, as when Doctor Stillwell refers to this force in John as "Something" for which "[a] little casting out of devils would have been of benefit--might still be."<sup>22</sup> Yet to say this play is an account of theological possession would be forcing clarity out of a device which is just simply not clear. When Loving dies he says, "Forgive the damned soul--of John Loving!"<sup>23</sup> which could perhaps mean that John's soul was damned, in a sense, by the possession and is now to be forgiven, but such an interpretation is belied by the description of how he says the lines. O'Neill says Loving addresses the words to

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19 Skinner, A Poet's Quest, 235.

20 Krutch, 116.

21 Gassner, Masters of the Drama, 660. N.Y. 1940

22 O'Neill, Days Without End, 139.

23 Ibid., 156.

Christ on the Cross not as a devil defeated and remaining a devil, but as though transformed by the defeat into something good, something noble. He speaks of the touch of pride left in the dying Loving, speaking, "in his humility."<sup>24</sup> (Italics mine) Thus we must conclude that this representation must somehow be the hero in some real sense. In what sense remains a mystery.

The entire theme of the play borrows this lack of clarity. If the antagonistic force in the plot is as confusing as we have described, what will happen to the understanding of the whole action? A true antagonistic force is confused. That John is tortured by some evil and finally finds peace by having the evil go is certainly contained in the play, but what precisely is this evil? And how can we be sure it is cast out forever? John Himself, before the climax, seemed to be in doubt about the whole affair, even if he should surrender. Thus Loving suggests that at the last moment the hero, "sees clearly by the light of reason the degradation of his pitiable surrender to old ghostly comforts--and he rejects them."<sup>25</sup> John himself says, "He realizes he can never believe in his lost faith again."<sup>26</sup> In the development of the play as the working out of this novel plot, there is no reason given why he can believe

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24 Ibid., 156.

25 Ibid., 114.

26 Ibid., 115.

other than an emotional reason. The problem is developed as an intellectual one. It was progressing logically towards a conclusion which would have meant failure and even suicide. Then at the last moment an emotional experience takes over, a mystic exaltation in which he "sees" the answer. At this the evil spirit dies and the play is over amid the sudden all-so-significant emotional cries, "Love lives forever! Death is dead!...Life laughs with love!"<sup>27</sup> In the light of the plot development, these expressions simply do not ring true, much less explain everything.

So much for the clarity, or lack of it in Days Without End. The next step is proportion, if one can criticize a device of which one hardly has a hold. Strictly speaking, if we are not sure we have the significance of the expressionism, it becomes somewhat illogical to criticize the device used to bring out that significance for its proportion. But granting for the moment that O'Neill does have the truly exalted theme of the successful casting out of cynical pessimism by belief in God, the device he uses to bring it about is certainly plebian. The device calls attention to itself, as any symbol will, but, without a clear meaning to that symbol, it leaves us with a sort of masked villain who moves in the background behind the hero. (One can almost hear the hissing of the groundlings as he enters

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 157.

the scene.) The device lacks the dignity, stature, and subtlety to be used in a theme of profound spiritual insight.

Gassner comments on Days Without End that O'Neill's apparent solution to the problem of "belonging" was reached on the stage by whipping up "a froth of banalities."<sup>28</sup> Eric Bentley says this play is one of those in which "O'Neill seems profound and turns out on further inspection to be silly."<sup>29</sup> But perhaps Montrose Moses has best summed up the weakness inherent in any play in which O'Neill tries to develop an idea to its logical conclusion. He says:

Dramatically he starts with an idea, intending to see it through, but he often wanders because he sees it through and through. Having raised his situations to the point of emotional tension, his climaxes are followed by anti-climaxes; there is always a tendency toward disintegration of emotional effects he has gained.<sup>30</sup>

Passing then from his lack of proportion to the question of restraint, we find that Days Without End does use the device comparatively little. At least it is restricted to the one area of symbolic character portrayal. Nevertheless we must criticize him for the unrelieved repetition of the character's habitual mode of action. There is no development or variety, no refinement, no subtlety in the presentation of his manner of

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<sup>28</sup> Gassner, Masters of the Drama, 660.

<sup>29</sup> Bentley, The Playwright as Thinker, 320.

<sup>30</sup> Montrose J. Moses, "The New Eugene O'Neill" North American Review, New York, December 1933, 547.

speaking. No less than forty-one times during the course of the play, O'Neill describes loving's remarks as mocking, scornful, or sneering. The symbolic character is given the opportunity to run the gamut of emotional variety from A to B with a vengeance! In the same vein and suddenly realizing at the beginning of the fourth act that this habitual description may have been a little monotonous in its endless repetition, O'Neill tries to make his device develop a bit. He points out, "the sinister, mocking character of his mask is accentuated now, evilly intensified."<sup>31</sup> (Italics mine) Not content with overdoing an idea by means of repetition, he must finally accentuate and intensify what the dullest person in the audience must have realized, say at the fifteenth or twenty-fifth expression! Mr. Skinner himself, who holds Days Without End to be the finest expression and synthesis yet obtained from O'Neill, cannot but admit that the play "suffers somewhat from over-intensity."<sup>32</sup>

Though some critics may say that Days Without End was good dramatically, we shall let that go as not being connected with this thesis. We maintain that as a technician using expressionism to portray an inner emotion, O'Neill has failed to use the device clearly, with restraint, or with proportion; and on this basis, and this alone, we say that Days Without End is

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31 O'Neill, Days Without End, 131-132.

32 Skinner, A Poet's Quest, 237.

a fine example of the poor use of expressionism.



## CONCLUSION

In conclusion we can sum up the thesis by again asserting our original statement which we feel we have proved. Eugene O'Neill uses the device of expressionism imaginatively and creatively in plays that center around an emotional conflict. He does lack restraint, even here, it is true, but on the whole The Emperor Jones and The Hairy Ape prove that in the realm of emotional analysis and portrayal, his symbolic devices have the true quality of dramatic genius.

In Days Without End his use of expressionism proves him an inferior dramatist lacking in expressing his theme, proportion in keeping a balance between exalted ideas and theatrical devices, and restraint in over-intensifying the obvious. As long as he deals with an emotional problem and keeps on that level, he is great as a technician in the use of his device. Once he strays from this path, he and his work fail miserably.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Charles A. Conroy, S.J. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Jan. 10, 1954

Date

H. S. Hughes

Signature of Adviser