



The Detection of Morality Crisis in Eugene O'neil's the Rope

Saeid Rahimipour

Assistant Professor, Farhangian
University

ABSTRACT

Eugene O'Neil, the great American playwright, has contributed to the revelation of problems of different types of humanity at the time of World War First and the Second. This paper deploying content analysis research method deals with the playwright's revelation of morality crisis even within the very deep parts of the family and the society at that time. The paper more specifically manifests the father-son contradiction in the family as the visible illustration of morality crisis at that time in his work *The Rope*. It shows the playwright's tact in his maneuver over the theatre and its elements in the creation of a modern tragedy on the line of revealing such themes as his artistic objective. His techniques reveal that the seemingly controversial father-son relationship has an ambiguous and disastrous outcome.

Keywords: Morality, Crisis, the Rope, Eugene O'Neil.

Introduction

Dramatic art has been one of the most effective genres of literature which has always been deployed and appreciated by the authors, critics, readers, and viewers respectively. In American society during the World Wars, individuals and communities experienced different reforms and underwent different norms. On the line of their artistic goal, playwrights like O'Neill contributed a lot to the enhancement of theater in its enlightening power and the individual in their handling their existential problems of different types. What was mainly at the mercy of changes was the core of families and their relationships with each other. He has been able to spoon-feed the viewers and the readers of his time in order to enable them in getting along with the imminent and inevitable reformations on the way of communities and governments. He has been able to produce "oeuvre in which the struggle between self-destruction, self-deception, and self-redemption is presented as essentially dramatic in nature" (Deedari and Mansuri, 2005: 355) a tact which differentiates him from his contemporaries.

O'Neill's script begins with preparations by the niggardly father, Abraham Bentley, for the return of his prodigal son, Luke. Old Bentley hid the remainder of the family fortune at one end of a rope he arranged in the barn-the noose at the other end is in plain sight. He receives the young man with a mixture of obvious joy and of inarticulate urgings for Luke to hang himself. Young Bentley does not become aware of the morbid joke below the surface of his father's mutterings, and nearly kills the old man before storming out in a rage. It is the half-witted granddaughter, Mary, who finds the gold at the end of the rope and chucks it piecemeal into the ocean.

Corresponding Author: Saeid Rahimipour

E-mail:

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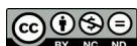
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O'Neill Drama

O'Neill has tried to look at the susceptible layer of the society and human obsessions through his drama. For this he intermingled past, present, and novel techniques to be as impressive as possible. He "experimented with and used effectively these new techniques in his plays while the whole of Europe was already engaged in experimentation. He felt that drama would be incomplete unless it was unfolded on the stage. Although he tried his hand at realism in some of his earlier and later plays, realism as a mode of dramatic expression proved to him quite inadequate since it could not depict the intensity of inward action nor could it externalize his vision" (Larik, et. al., 2013: 75).

Although at that time, there was a sort of campaign going on for turning drama and theatre as money-making business, O'Neill proved to be somehow different in his artistic career. "Most American plays written between the Civil War and World War I were still produced with money-making stars in mind, and playwrights were considered hired guns rather than artists in the way screenwriters were soon to be regarded in Hollywood's studio system. Star power and profit margins trumped self-expression and innovation" (Jackson & Dowling, 2014: 21). O'Neill did his best to contribute to the manifestation and revelation of existential obsessions as his artistic goal. This may have also been on the line of projection of his ideas upon the reader and the viewer. Maybe, what has been asserted in *The Rope* is a reflection of whatever he has felt or seen realistically in his theatre that "his inner conflict is not only a source of weakness but is also something explored and explicitly discussed in the plays" (Whitaker, 2016: 10).

Why he has chosen familial problems as the target and subject of his plays is the fact that he has detected the familial problems as the core problems of the society of America in his own time. This has followed the drama procedure from the past, too.

"Throughout history much of drama has focused on families and secrets, families as necessary, families as unhappiness, families as fate and families as theater. Though one might think that the family as dramatic material has run its course, the opposite seems to be the case as a fascination which still prevails, particularly in America. Perhaps the greatest indication that the family holds the power of attraction is the fact that after a long period of experimentation, playwrights Eugene O'Neill and Sam Shepard returned to the family and wrote more autobiographical-type plays. Likewise, this return to family was also a return to realism" (Flath, 2013: 10).

The Rope

Rope has different connotations and denotations in title. It can be taken as a chain which has tied humanity, which has blurred vision, which has impeded sights on the one hand; close relationship indicating family and dependence and affection, indicating inability to leave one another and many more on the other hand. O'Neill has set *The Rope* (1918) set on a farm which deals with an old farmer Abraham Bentley whose first wife dies due to his unfair behavior and meanness. His second marriage brings him no comfort and he turns out to be the same family torturer. Bentley's daughter Annie by his first wife hints that this second wife's son Luke has another father. His family members try to force the old man to let them know about his hidden gold. What pans out in the end is the fact that their hypocrisy and distrust would lead to their complete failure and the whole family's failure.

Father-Son Controversy

The Rope signifies a sort of modern tragedy. O'Neil has tried to make it resemble as much as possible to ancient tragedies so that the modern themes can be better introduced in this way. He has tried to manifest existential obsessions which existed in the past and are commonly manifested in modern drama. His characterization reveals the fact that they are part of the reality of modern life whose detection can be traced back far in the past. Just like old drama, he characterizes characters who are afflicted psychologically and have tragic flaws. In this play, O'Neil gives rise to the creation of themes and atmosphere illustrating the relationship between the characters which per se manifest the nature of the reality of human flaws and relationships.

Analysis

Different themes can be detected in the works of O'Neill the prominent of which is called the search for identity, the controversy of the individual and the society, and absence of complicated human relationship which are characterized by characters that signify the American society and norms. What is crying out at the very depth of the plays and their themes is the reflection of malady of the contemporary day of American society which is indicator of the afflicted man at the chain of problems of different types in America and many other nations too. They directly introduce the dominant system in America and indirectly reveal the prevalence of many common existential problems of man on the globe.

Maybe what he has been doing regarding the conflict of the Son and his Father has been rooted in a way which is congruent with the main conflicts going on in the author's mind regarding being and identity. The question of morality crisis may be reflective of the philosophy crisis in the playwright's mind. A hunch can be like

this that O'Neill, in his efforts of self-realization through his life cycle, has tried to gain his identity in the hope of establishing his own existence via existential journeys he has done using his play *the Rope*.

The rope may indicate some sort of connection which is linking relationships together, be it in need of adjustment or some sort of limiting the relations. In the play *The Rope* what is most at access and visible is the relationship of father and son which is under suspicion morally.

Clues

The very beginning clue can be adapted from the bitter, rude, and offensive language they use in their conversations. The words are broken, the sentences have no ending, no polite mode and manner can be detected in their verbal exchanges. The already present bitter and hostile relationship can be directly inferred in the passage. Except the little child's loving verbal exchanges, no other respect and affection can be traced throughout the course of the conversation.

The setting, an outdated village house with cheap and torn out instrument and people with shabby clothes, indicates that this poverty-stricken family suffers from presence of comfort, respect, affection, and loving relations. The whole family is afraid of each other. They cannot get along with each other and even do not tolerate each other. The creation of such a family in this setting by the playwright shows the absence of the spirit of humanity due to the familial crisis going on in the society of that time which may have come into existence due to many detectable underlying reasons. The survey of the play in every possible angle gives rise to the creation of such mode of presentation, that is to say, individuals' moral conflict and misconceptions.

Both Luke, Bentley's son, and his current wife, Sweeney have the attitude regarding his personality, namely meanness.

Luke: Is he as stingy with his coin as he used to be?

Sweeney: If he owned the ocean he wouldn't give a fish a drink; but I doubt if he's any money left all. Your mother got rid of it all, I am thinking.

(Luke smiles a superior, knowing smile.) He has only the farm, and that mortgaged. (*The Rope*, 372)

One's family is supposed to be the safest place in which one can turn to each other at the time of difficulty. "O'Neill's family was in opposition with itself. As shown in his masterpiece *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Edmund, who personifies Eugene, struggles with and suffers from guilt. While his relationship with his brother and father was unstable. (Dekkiche, 2014: 13).

Family relationships and the way the family members get together for the sake of better life, for sure, forms the cores of salvation and familial stability. Bentley's unaffectionate relationship with the family members, his ex-wife, and his son has proved to pave the way for forming a sort of hatred and disgust in their relations. The return of the son, Luke, after many years and his unpleasant welcome by his family members shows this reality that they are psychologically in bitter campaign over financial possession. The old Bentley has been cruel in his behavior towards the family members specifically Luke which is against the nature of humanity and morality. The dismissal of a family member is something which is not socially and morally acceptable but it is being exercised in the play as indicator of the reality of the nature of the societies of the time being involved in such practices. They cannot tolerate each other's presence that is why they hurl out lots of curses at each other.

Luke: You just watch me, I tell yuh! (Banging the table.) I said I'd git even and I will git even-this same night, with no long waits, either! (Frowning.) Say, you don't stand up for him, do yuh? (*The Rope*, 379)

Neither the son nor the father care about the family status they have; each is condemning the other for something for which they may not be hold responsible.

Luke: Here's how, old chum! Say, I'd a 'most forgotten about that. Remember how hot he was that day when he hung that rope up and cussed me pinchin' the hundred....remember, when

you come home again there's a rope watin' for yuh to hung yourself on, yuh bastard! (He spits contemptuously.) What a swell chant. (His manners changes and he frowns.) The old slave-driver! (*The Rope*, 373)

Luke defines his father in a way which is not humanistic and is considered ill manner and behavior. When he meets his father for the first time after his return, he is so happy to be glad to see him back but right away he reveals his inner feelings for him.

Luke: (Grinning at Sweeney). Say, watch this. (With tolerant good-humor). On the level I believe the old boy's glad to see me at that...As Bentley attempts to feel of his face.) Hey, cut it out! (He pushes his hand away, but not roughly.) I'm all here, yuh needn't worry. Yuh needn't be scared I'm a ghost.

Sweeney...an' him cursin' you day an' night! I can't put head or tail to it. Look out he ain't meanin' some bad to ye underneath. He's crafty at pretendin'.

In reality, the old man wants the worst for him and has not stopped thinking about him. Bentley (Mumbling incoherently). Luke-Luke-rope-Luke-hang

Sweeney: There ye are! What did I tell you? It's to see you hang yourself he's wishin', the auld fiend!

Bentley (Nodding): Yes-Luke-hang

Bentley wishes him to hang himself and if he could have done, he would have done so sooner in the past. Now that his son is back, he vigorously wants him to hang himself which from law-viewpoint this is the major motive behind suicide and crime.

Luke: All out for the big hangin' of Luke Bentley by himself. (He puts the noose about his neck with an air of carefree bravado and grins at his father)...Look at him, pat. By God, he's in a hurry. Hahaha! Well, old sport, here goes nothin'. (He makes a movement as if he were going to jump and kick the chair from under him.) Sweeney (Half starts to his feet-horrified). Luke! Are you gone mad?

Luke: (Stands staring at his father, who is making gestures for him to jump. A scowl slowly replaces his good-natured grin). D'yuh really mean it -that yuh want to see me hangin' myself? (Bentley nods vigorously in the affirmative.

Luke glares at him for a moment in silence) Well, I'll damned! (To Pat.). A thought he was only kidding'. (He removes the rope gingerly from his neck. The old man stamps his foot and gesticulated wildly, groaning with disappointment. (The Rope, 337)

His father reveals his inner vicious nature regarding his son. If he could, for sure, he would have hanged it himself. But he has always wished to see him hang himself and dead. This is the reality which has been revealed by the playwright. Such a desire can be seen in his son's vicious utterances too.

Luke (Takes a big breathe huskily). Thanks. (He wipes his mouth on his sleeve with a snuffle.) But I'll tell yuh something you can put in your pipe and smoke. It ain't past and done, and it ain't goin' to be! (More and more aggressively). And I ain't goin' to forget it, either! Yuh kin betcher life on that, pal. And he ain't goin' to forget it-not if he lives a million... (The Rope, 379)

This may have originated from many other factors whose origins have not been cleared in the play. The son, too, comes up with the same attitudes thereafter forming a lasting hatred of his father in his mind.

Luke (Grabbing Bentley's shoulder and shaking him-hoarsely). Yuh wanted to see me hangin' there in real earnest didn't yuh? You'd hang me yourself if yuh could, wouldn't yuh? And you my own father! Yuh damned son of a gun! Yuh would, wouldn't yuh? I'd smashed your brains out for a nickel! (He shakes the old man more and more furiously.) (Rope, 377)

This bitterness of behavior goes on more densely in case of Luke who has come up with the real cruel and devastating nature of his father.

Luke (Giving his father one more shake, which sends him sprawling on the floor). Git outa here! Git outa this b'fore I kill yuh dead! (Sweeney rushes over and picks the terrified old man up.) Take him outa here, Pat! (His voice rises to a threatening roar.) Take him outa here or I'll break every bone in his body! (He raises his clenching fists over his head in a frenzy of rage.) (Rope, 378)

The hidden love of the father now is replaced by a sort of hatred which the playwright through suspense has created and at the end of the play it is discovered but with no practical fruit and with a total failure and disaster. These are the literary techniques which are deployed and illustrated through O'Neill's theatre staged and characterized dramatically.

Sweeney tries to calm them down and takes the old man away and takes back to Luke to help him calm down a bit. She as the mother figure is bewildered by the bitter rage obsessing father and son and cannot find a way to settle it down.

Luke (on the verge of bursting tears). How kin I help thinkin'- and him my own father? After me bumming' and starving' round the rotten eart, and workin' myself to death on ships and things-and when I come home he tries to make me bump off-wants to see me a corpse-my own father, too! Ain't he a hell of an old man to have? The rotten son of a gun! (Rope, 379)

This viciousness goes on to the degree that he and Sweeney try to force the old man to show where he has hidden his money. Nothing but rage and anger cannot be found here in the vicinity of their being and their life. There cannot be found any sign of morality and humanity in this family. The son and the father both have forgotten their real status in the family and have turned into savages to survive from the threat of the other.

Luke (With a savage scowl). We won't hurt him-more'n enough. (Suddenly raging.) I'll pay him aw right! He won't want no more people to hang themselves when I git through with him. I'll fix his hash! (He sways to his feet, the chisel in his hand.) Come on! Let's get to work. (The Rope, 382)

Before they go to do their job, Luke tells Annie who is at the doorway; I'll give you a handful of coin to throw into the ocean if you keep silent.

Ambiguous Displeasing Outcome

While they are off for their job to cajole the information out of the hiding place of his money, Anni who is playing with the rope find an bag tied to the end of the rope and finds it full of gold coins. She throws them into the ocean just for the fun of it one after the other. The soiled morality and humanity is sacrificed due to the bitter nature of human and their turning into brutality while it is all a matter of innocent attitude of children to be deployed on the line of turning back humanity to his real status and upon its hinges.

Sweeney: No-except wait a pray that young thief is dead an' won't come back; an'try an' find where it is the auld man has the gold hid, if he has it yet. I'd take him by the neck an' choke him till he told it, if he wasn't your father (Rope, 367)

The question of the rope as the vehicle to kill oneself and the other turns out to be a channel of getting to symbolic wealth at the end of the play. What proves to be promising is the fact that the redemptive power of love brings misfortune to the family which is made obvious by Annie's spoil of the gold coins. The father and the son's variation of moral codes turns the path of life and prosperity to a complete failure and violated shift-coding of their attitudes and feelings which shows the mega linguistic power of O'Neill's theatre theme development.

Sweeney (Resisting Mary's efforts to pull him out, stands shaking his stick at Sweeney and his wife) "Give them sorrow of heart, thy curse unto them. Persecute and destroy them in anger from under the heavens of the Lord." (Rope, 364)

Ironically, the son figure, Luke, as the name signifies has not been able to follow his father's moral codes correctly and may have gone astray in his life. Although the father figure, Bentley, has done his best to enable his son view his life realistically. Although he cries out (*Mumbling incoherently*). *Luke-Luke-rope-Luke-hang* to run into the gold bag, Luke and its real meaning *LOOK, namely Watch Out*, is unable to fathom the reality and tries to torture the old man to tell him where he has hidden his money not knowing that the rope will end in the gold bag. What has panicked Luke has been the surface and accompanying meaning of the Rope, Hanging, and death rather than resurrection of attitudes and new meaning of life and prosperity.

Such a way of theme enhancement makes his play sound traditional, its ultimate and sad-ending tragic on the one side, and modern and new due to the violation of moral codes of generation due to the rapid enhancement of life features at the playwright's era on the other hand.

Though his plays are modern, he strove to bring into his an effect in harmony with traditional tragedy. "He drew from Greek drama such conventions as the chorus and the asides which suited his purpose of exploring the vast, frightening terrain of human thought". (Jayachandran, 2014: 16)

The sad or catastrophic ending which can be detected in old play like the ruin of all evil characters can be detected here too. In *the Rope*, the spoil of the hidden gold puts an end to their prosperity and expectations.

Mary (Picking up a handful-giggling ecstatically). Skip! Skip! (She turns and runs to throw them as...) (The Rope, 383). This symbolic throwing out of goal pieces instead of stones shows the close vicinity of reality and fantasy, misery and fortune, and humanity and brutality.

Conclusion

The big crisis of humanity arises out of the man's violated relationships and attitudes. O'Neill in *the Rope* has tried to deal with the morality codes in the father and son's relationships which have been paralyzed. This relationship has been violated due to the new marriage of the father and the condemnation of the son's family status on the one hand and the in-tumult and shift-coding of their morality principles on the other hand which in the end brings the family into total tragic catastrophe and misfortune rather than prosperity and salvation. O'Neill has created such existential obsessions as his artistic goals to enable his theatre sound traditional while in reality may target many problems of his time. The seemingly miserable relationship of the father and the son in the play results in total morality crisis of the family which is the common phenomenon of so many family on the globe. They could have been taken back to the normal morality hinges of human moral codes if the relationships and the attitudes could have been modified and reformed. It can be concluded that the play "depicts the features of the tragedy of disease, of ill heredity, and psychotic and emotionally disturbed states" (Deedari and Mansuri, 2005: 384) which leads to morality crisis, misunderstanding, brutality, and faded humanity in the play.

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