

# 异化与本真

吴宗会 著

尤金·奥尼尔戏剧  
荒诞特征艺术

ALIENATION AND AUTHENTICITY:  
Absurdity in Eugene O'Neill's Plays

同济大学中央高校基本科研业务费专项基金资助

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## Introduction

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill (1888—1953), hailed as Father of modern American drama, has distinguished himself so much in drama innovations to which his contributions are remarkable and far-reaching. However, it is almost impossible to study those innovations without noticing the intellectual influences from such playwrights as August Strindberg and Henrik Ibsen, so far as O'Neill's themes and stagecraft are concerned. His plays embody the dramatic styles of Strindberg and Ibsen, and integrate realistic portrayal and expressionistic technique as well. He manages to set up a stage with genuine American flavor that comes to catch up with the drama development in Europe. It is through his writing that American drama begins to be recognized as comparable to European drama. His winning of Nobel Prize in 1936, in addition to four Pulitzer Prizes, signified the official acknowledgment of his dramatic achievements and the peak of his fame, despite the fact that his universally acknowledged plays like *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* had not come out yet and he was far from nearing the nadir of his career. As a prolific playwright, O'Neill during his lifetime wrote altogether 21 one-act plays, and 28 full-length plays.

O'Neill's plays are noted for their presentations of psychological explorations as well as penetrating tragic awareness. Moreover, his plays have undergone adaptations more than any other American playwrights' so far. A number of his plays have been repeatedly adapted into films and musicals in America and around the world. Meanwhile, studies on his plays throughout the world are, like the staging and adaptations of his plays, titanic and voluminous, extensive and profound. In short, O'Neill criticism is open-ended.

In O'Neill's plays, his concern about human existence is constant and consistent. He is excruciated by human existential situations more than any other American

modern playwrights, inviting numerous studies concerning his modes of presenting those situations. He features his dramatic world as an absurd one, with human struggle at the core that is expected to be hopeless. His presentations of humanity are of excruciation and penetration, reflecting his deeper concern about human existence than many of his other contemporaries. Combining his personal life experiences and a variety of dramatic techniques, he renders his dramatic world life-like. His theatrical career holds true of the fact that he is transformed from a man who "sees life too often as dramas" to one who "sees dramas as life". (Black, 1993, p.87) Life remains a code word for many of his works and his inexhaustible explorations of human sufferings indicate his profound sense of humanity as well, from which a majority of O'Neill criticism springs. A large number of O'Neill studies are concerned with different themes, such as curse, death, homelessness, pursuit of faith and happiness. The treatment of human existence, as one of the chief themes, has always been the focus of his dramas. It is through delineation of "men being what they are" that O'Neill manages to represent human life as "a gorgeously-ironical, beautifully-indifferent, splendidly-suffering bit of chaos the tragedy of which gives man a tremendous significance, while without losing fight with fate he would be a tepid, silly animal." (Roberts, 1987, p.181) Neither the vile nor the treacherous individuals can be found in his dramas as his characters are reflections of "men being what they are". His pessimistic outlook is nothing more than a revivification of what human life is. O'Neill once said,

I write tragedy. Tragedy is what it is. It is only those who are ignoble in themselves who cannot appreciate the nobility of tragedy. It is only by suffering in the suffering of others that we can save ourselves, is it not so? Through the suffering he could better perceive the condition of life and travel is undoubtedly a good way to fulfill this purpose. I have had no faith. therefore, my interpretation of the lives of the Saints would be purely of their nobility as men and women, their essential characters as human beings, without bias either one way or another as to the truth of their doctrine. (Bogard, 1988, pp.192-193)

Both existentialism and the absurdist theatre also give priority to the state of human existence with regard to such issues as "belonging", alienation, faith, and

human interactions which virtually permeate the whole of O'Neill's work. Hence I would like to review the O'Neill criticism that touches upon these issues in different periods.

Many scholars have explored how O'Neill dramas present the state of human existence from the issues like communication, "belonging", love, survival, and alienation. As early as 1934, Dorothy Macardle in her essay *The Dual Nature of Man* talked about O'Neill's characters' split personality which was perhaps the earliest observation on O'Neill's treatment of human alienated state.

In the 1940s, more critics began to pay attention to O'Neill characters' existential situations. Dorothy Macardle apart, Oscar Cargill, in his essay *Fusion-point of Jung and Nietzsche*, equally took notice of O'Neill's intention to imply the alienated personality in his analysis of the duality of the play *The Great God Brown*. Moreover, Cargill also noticed the nihilism exhibited by O'Neill's characters. It could be safely argued that Cargill was one of the very few who came to recognize O'Neill's attention to human existential plight in such an early time. Indeed, through Lazarus's mouth and with references to Nietzsche's perceptions of tragic life, O'Neill had Lazarus repeatedly say, "Men call life death and fear it. They hide from it in horror. Their lives are spent in hiding. Their fear becomes their living. They worship life as death!" This sort of resignation was a recurring motif in O'Neill's later works as well. From a modernist perspective, Harry Slochower in his essay *Eugene O'Neill's Lost Moderns* tackled O'Neill's characters' quest for belief. His study showed that O'Neill's characters were constantly suffering from double sides of their personalities, either caused by an external power, such as a father, or their own inability to assume the role they longed for. By making a comparison between *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Strange Interlude*, Slochower contended that O'Neill portrayed through female images an extreme situation in which the self and society were alienated. In 1947, Edmond Gagey in his brief discussion of *Bound East for Cardiff* regarded the "belonging" problem haunting O'Neill characters as a common theme for his dramas. However, it was all that Edmond Gagey had done in his essay. As for how "common" the "belonging" theme was, he did not further touch the issue again. Overall, what

merits our attention is that in such an early period scholars already noticed the alienation in O'Neill's plays.

In the 1950s, Edwin Engel in his book *The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill* analyzed the relation between dream and the insufferable reality, recognizing the necessity of O'Neill characters' sustaining their lies for a meaningful living, their resignation lurking behind masked life and submerging into a non-existent state. By focusing on the female character Nina, Engel purified her image as "everywoman" whose final fate was shaped as renunciation and reverie. As was commonly known, the tendency to resignation in human existence became most apparent in the absurdist plays. Around 1959, through a biographical approach, Crowell Bowen argued that there was an Irish curse that kept haunting O'Neill's family. O'Neill's family curse represented the curse of the whole mankind and assumed a universal significance, resulting from a lack of communication of love. He observed, "The tragedy of the O'Neill family was not the lack of love but the lack of communication of their love. In a sense, this was the theme of so many O'Neill's plays — man's agonizing loneliness, his feeling of not belonging, of wanting and not wanting to belong, of being cursed to remain alone, above, and apart." (Bowen, 1959, p. xi) Bowen's work *The Curse of the Misbegotten: A Tale of the House of O'Neill* was a major study tackling human interaction within a family life. It could be equally said of many other families in O'Neill dramas. From the Captain Bartlett of the early sea plays to the Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, O'Neillian families were constantly haunted by mutual accusations, and they tended to love and hate simultaneously. Besides Crowell Bowen, C. P. Sinha tried to seek a "real O'Neill" by tracing O'Neill's tragic vision, believing that the fundamentals of O'Neill's tragic vision lie in his estrangement from his own family which, in turn, constitutes "the mysterious curse of the O'Neills". Similar to Bowen's conclusion of O'Neill's family curse, Sinha thought of human estrangement as playing a major role in failing human interactions. Different from the issue of attempted human interactions, R. R. Khare in his book *Eugene O'Neill & His Visionary Quest* dealt with the theme of "a sustained quest for happiness" which, in his view, was deemed as "the tragic career of his protagonists". Likewise, Khare's

research results showed that O'Neill characters' life was devastating. Their predicaments indicated that their quest for happiness was often met with tragedies and setbacks. The failures could be found among many of the O'Neillian heroes and heroines. Apparently, in this period, Engel and Bowen's focus on the universality of the characters' fate elevates O'Neill's plays to a philosophical level. What's more, other critics show increasing interests in the troublesome family communications.

In the 1960s, consistent with the mainstream studies in the previous decade, scholars seem to be particularly interested in O'Neill characters' alienated lives. Raghavacharyulu and Timo Tiusanen turned out to be the representatives, followed by others who kept tackling issues like "the inner self", "not belonging" and loneliness. One of the studies touching upon these issues came from Raghavacharyulu who in his book *Eugene O'Neill: A Study* made a very detailed analysis of O'Neill characters' alienation, sense of belonging, faith, and their attitudes toward their existential situations. He with sharp insight perceived a series of human existential problems in O'Neill early plays, particularly the problem of alienation, "These early plays of Eugene O'Neill dramatize two kinds of loneliness; the loneliness of the alienated man and the loneliness of the man in the 'lonely crowd' where people become like each other." (Raghavacharyulu, 1986, p.35) This conclusion was very similar to what the absurdists constantly showed in their works. Many concepts mentioned by Raghavacharyulu were in accordance with what both the existentialists and absurdists repeatedly dealt with. Raghavacharyulu's study was undoubtedly so far one of the very few works that particularly focused on many issues concerning horrible human existential situations. However, his conclusions from the study were not reached from the perspective of the absurd. Many of his thoughts were direct descents from the traditional views on the dilemma between illusion and reality in O'Neill criticism. In 1964 or so, Eugene Waith, in his essay *Eugene O'Neill: An Exercise in Unmasking*, associated O'Neill's usage of masks with human search for the inner self. The gradual unveiling of masks was a gradual process for revealing the nature of human existence. It was a matter of "the fundamental problems of existence". Eugene Waith was one of the earliest critics who linked O'Neill's adoption of masks to the revealing of man's self

and his fundamental existence. Meanwhile, some other scholars in this period contributed to other existential issues as well. Human sense of “not belonging” and loneliness were discussed most frequently. Most of their studies hinted at or briefly touched upon the issues of the absurd, however, there was hardly a particular project directed at this spectrum. It was not until the year of 1968 that O'Neill's connection to the absurd was first made directly by Timo Tiusanen in his *O'Neill's Scenic Images* in which O'Neill was labeled as “a forerunner of absurdism”.

In the 1970s, scholarly appeal of O'Neill showed signs of continuing enthusiasm. Around 1971, Horst Frenz pointed out some issues like “nihilism” and “human freedom” that were repeatedly discussed later on. Devoted to *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Leonard Chabrowe's *Ritual and Pathos — The Theater of O'Neill* regarded O'Neill's memorization of family experience as speculation on tragic human existence on a domestic scale which was characterized as alienation and indifference. “The existence he justified as an anesthetic phenomenon was his own. It was an existence tortured by childhood longings, alienated and withdrawn, irreconcilably lonely.” (Chabrowe, 1976, p. 198) Lennart Josephson's book *A Role: O'Neill's Cornelius Melody*, focusing on *A Touch of the Poet*, zeroed in on O'Neill's character's split personalities, and his repetition of words, both of which were the common issues handled by the absurdist playwrights. Frederic Carpenter in his *Eugene O'Neill* made insightful observations on human Sisyphean spirit in their existence. According to him, O'Neill characters conveyed such unyielding human spirit,

The typical hero of an O'Neill tragedy struggles and suffers inevitable defeat, like all tragic heroes. But, unlike the traditional tragic hero, he does not struggle actively against an external enemy, nor does he seek victory over a physical antagonist. “Rather he struggles psychologically and seeks victory over the enemy within. He does not go forth to fight against some tyrannical Creon”; he struggles against the tyranny of his own contradictory emotions. (Carpenter, 1979, p. 176)

This emphasis on the significance of spiritual victory over one's own faith in fighting against the impossible corresponds to Camus's interpretations of Sisyphus's struggle. In his *The Strategy of Survival: Human Significance of O'Neill's Plays*,

Bhagwat Goyal made one of the most prominent studies on the issue of “alienation”. Even though he did not study the absurdism and did not dwell solely on the fact that O’Neill dramas exhibited the very absurd features, he did touch upon the relations of O’Neill to the absurd by dealing with identity, communication and impersonalization so as to manifest human struggle for survival in his antagonistic relationship with the world from the aspects of man and the universe, man and society, and man and his self. Goyal also took notice of O’Neill’s efforts to combine dramatic themes with theatrical techniques which were often seen as a criterion for evaluating the absurd. Goyal’s unambiguous referring O’Neill to Camus particularly deserved mentioning. Perhaps he was one of the first scholars to notice the relationship between O’Neill and the absurdist writers. Despite all the above, Goyal still did not straightforwardly treat O’Neill’s heroes’ existence as tinged with absurdity, which is similar to Raghavacharyulu who equally took “reality” as his perspective. The difference lies in Goyal’s substantial treatment of human struggle in an absurd world. However, he somewhat abruptly shifted his focus from the “alienation” issue to realism because his purpose of study was to explore realism rather than the absurd, regarding O’Neill’s treatment of human existence as “faithful realism”. Thus, what’s problematic was that substantial part of his study concentrated on human “alienation”, while he reached a conclusion that was directed at realism. In other words, his treatment of the absurd came to be something that was about the realism and his discussion had weak links with what he attempted to attain in the end. Despite his conclusion, Goyal went a step further than many of his contemporaries, with regard to his focus on the unyielding human struggle.

In the 1980s, a period for the centennial celebration of O’Neill’s birth, a large number of impressive essays and books came out revolving around the motif of “alienation”. One of the most brilliant was from Peter Egri’s essay *Belonging’ Lost: Alienation and Dramatic Form in Eugene O’Neill’s The Hairy Ape* which explored the theatrical space change that was similar to Ionesco’s dramatic finesse, such as the exaggerated transformation of surroundings. With the case of *The Hairy Ape*, the absurd relation of Yank to the world was exposed in his inauthentic life. Echoing

Bhagwat Goyal of the 1970s, Peter Egri reached the conclusion that human alienation was resulted from the opposition between civilization and nature, and humans could belong to nowhere in their quest because they kept “moving from the illusion of a nonalienated state, through an awareness of alienation, to an attempt to find unalienated values; and the crucial, leitmotif of ‘belonging’ and ‘not belonging’ is the expression of an unalienated and an alienated state.” (Martine, 1984, p.104)

Equally treating the issue of “belonging”, Kelli Larson in her analysis of O’Neill’s family background ascribed the motivation of human pursuit of “belonging” to determinism in which man was an outsider, isolated from others and from the universe. With the Glencairn plays as examples, Larson examined O’Neill’s heroes’ approaches to transcendence when faced with their miserable existential situations by listing man’s freedom to choose as one chief means for survival. Rather than having his discussions restricted to “belonging” alone, as was done by Peter Egri and Kelli Larson, Tejpal Singh in his book *Eugene O’Neill: Quest for Reality in His Plays* integrated realism with the term “existential dimension” in his study. The dehumanization of modern man was represented through the hostile relationship between illusion and reality. Singh’s study indicated that many of O’Neill’s characters were immersed into the lives of which they were unconscious and from which they could not break away. They could not be utterly claimed as the absurd because they “deliberately ignored reality”. Human quest for reality could be accomplished only by a return to the self. Tejpal Singh directly raised the existential questions like “being”. And man’s existence was rather a battle against one’s consciousness. Instead of approaching the issue of “being” from the existential perspective, he chose Marxist point of views by distinguishing the fact from illusion in the latter’s role of corrupting human souls. There were some other critics in this period such as Chaman Ahuja who in his book *Tragedy Modern Temper and O’Neill* came to recognize O’Neill’s affirmation of man’s confrontation with one’s fate, Virginia Floyd who in her book *The Plays of Eugene O’Neill: A New Assessment* distinguished several O’Neill plays as probing into the self.

In the 1990s, we could find that so far the most direct treatment of O’Neill from

the absurdist perspective was made by Linda Ben-Zvi with her essay *O'Neill and Absurdity*. From the perspectives of monologue, aside, and other staging devices, Linda Ben-Zvi made a discreet study on O'Neill's relation to the absurd. In terms of thematic significance rather than theatrical techniques, Daniel Larner touched on one of the salient features of the absurd — repetition and “everydayness” in his evaluation of *The Iceman Cometh*. By making a comparison between Dionysus and those outcasts' revelry, Larner observed that Hickey's so-called salvation broke the balance for celebration of life in the comic rite. In those outcasts' endless waiting for God to motivate them, the repetition of revelries in drunkenness of celebration was undermined by Hickey's identity as a false God. The game rules were violated and the efforts to bring the outcasts to consciousness were doomed to failure. The repetition had to be continuous. Marc Maufort in his essay *Mirrors of Consciousness: Narrative Patterns in O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh* discussed what the absurd interpreted as self-revelation.

Meanwhile, the focus of studies on “alienation” problem was shifted to “homelessness”. In this period, explorations on the state of human existence were much specifically defined through situating man into concrete circumstances with American's unique perceptions of home and family life. As a good case in point, Kristin Pfefferkorn's essay *In His Searching for Home in O'Neill's America* from historical and cultural angles explicated O'Neill's heroes' sense of homelessness with a textual interpretation of *Long Day's Journey into Night*. In terms of O'Neill's Irish origin, Pfefferkorn argued that O'Neill's sense of home was that of a journey featured as withdrawal and retreat, “his travels into the soul.” From neither friends nor theatrical community, could O'Neill have attained a sense of home. In his life, O'Neill's sense of home was offered by Carlotta Monterey, his third wife. In his dramas, O'Neill's inward journey was laid bare through his protagonists' futile searching for home. Through Pfefferkorn's penetrating elucidation, O'Neill characters' acute sense of homelessness brought about their loneliness and alienation ranging from lack of a stable home to that of a trustable community. The issue of homelessness was also handled by D. K. Lal who argued that O'Neill had his

protagonist trapped in a situation in which “he is either broken or alienated, or has failed to discover his identity”. (Lal, 1992, p.155) Because of the splitting between one and the self, equal to the absence of “the self” in one’s loss of identity, “other” could be nowhere and could be anywhere. It was either an absent person or an empty existential space, representing secrets and keeping haunting the heroes and depriving of their individuality. Compared with Pfefferkorn’s autobiographical treatment of O’Neill’s conception of home, Lal’s perspective seems to be more philosophical and intimate than Bhagwat Goyal’s. From the existential perspective, a brief philosophical review of the relation between the self and “Other” was also made by Robert Combs who thought of O’Neill’s later plays as demonstrating man’s “futile struggle against becoming an Other” with “great compassion and a sort of artistic ruthlessness”. (Combs, 1996, p.123)

In the 21st century, different from the above criticism, Chris Westgate convincingly pointed out that the question of “belonging” was rather a philosophical question of how to “be”. Still concentrating on *The Hairy Ape*, Westgate in his essay *Stumbling amid the Ruins: Yank’s Absurd Inheritance in The Hairy Ape* made observations on the state of human existence by talking about alienation effect, sense of belonging and objectification of human subjectivity, echoing what had been said by Bhagwat Goyal almost thirty years before. The objectification of human life jeopardizes human individuality and has the self dehumanized. The answer to the existential problem lies in that human “quest is indeed futile from the beginning” and “there is nothing to belong to”. (Westgate, 2001, p.10) The Sisyphean struggling that was the most basic essence of the absurd was distinctly compared to many of O’Neill’s protagonists’ hopeless experience. In 2000, Diya Abdo in her essay *The Emperor Jones: A Struggle for Individuality* stressed the significance for man’s domination of his own existence. In comparison to Abdo, Westgate attached importance to not only the position of individuality, but also the measure for obtaining it through the Sisyphean spirit.

Five years later, Laurin Porter in the article *The End of the Quest: Freedom and Selfhood in O’Neill’s Late Plays* studied the consistent relation of man’s freedom and

selfhood in his existential state. During man's pursuit of freedom, his selfhood was lost. To own others was the prerequisite for winning oneself, but the problem of how to transcend the other self in the search of peace still remained unresolved. One of the latest studies on the state of human existence was made again by Laurin Porter in 2008. By expounding *Long Day's Journey into Night* from a feminist perspective, Porter in her essay "Why Do I Feel so Lonely?" : *Literary Allusions and Gendered Space in Long Day's Journey into Night* argued that the allusion, gender language and gender space resulted in the impossibility in human communication and accordingly their loneliness. Porter's discussion of "gaze" could be comparable to Sartre's "hell is the others". The alternating forces of isolation and closeness allowed human beings to speculate on the existential state that alluded to the absurd.

Based on the above review, it can be safely said that, in the United States of America in particular, studies on the absurdity in O'Neill dramas have been inconsistent, fragmentary and unsystematic for a long time. O'Neill's relation to the absurd is touched on either in part of one essay or in a short article. In other words, the absurdist features in O'Neill's dramas have not been treated either extensively or profoundly so far. There has hardly been any particular undertaking dedicated to this issue.

Meanwhile, Chinese scholars have also made great contributions in terms of exploring O'Neill's concern about the state of human existence. A number of scholars made specific studies from the perspective of "the self". In his essay *On the Tragical Source of The Hairy Ape*, Chen Lihua(陈立华) pointed out that O'Neill characters failed to be conscious of their true selves and refuse to be faced with them. Meanwhile, Yi Hongxia(易红霞) in *A Dispelled Soul — On O'Neill's More Stately Mansions* took notice of O'Neill's attention to the split selves with the hero torn between "spirit" and "flesh", represented by Deborah and Sara. Through the two plays *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Wang Wei(王炜) argued that O'Neill characters could not live without illusion and they were incapable of identifying where they should belong to, afflicted with either the past or the present uncertainties. Different from the above critics, Sun Baimei(孙白梅) analyzed the loss

of the self by linking “the self” to “belonging”, contending that man became a slave of the machine instead of being its master in the play *The Hairy Ape*. With the loss of the self, man was deprived of the sense of belonging. From her point of view, O'Neill showed strong pessimism in his plays owing to human fate dominated by a mysterious and incontrovertible power.

Besides the perspective of “the self”, some Chinese scholars are devoted to the issue of faithlessness reflected in O'Neill's works. Zou Huiling(邹惠玲) noted that *The Iceman Cometh* reveals O'Neill's loss of faith and that the playwright turned to the pursuit of Dionysian spirit as a substitute. Zou attributed O'Neill's loss of the traditional value system to the loss of Christianity. Under the guidance of Dionysian spirit, O'Neill managed to break away from the desperate situation of faithlessness and locates his faith in Dionysus. Different from Zou's focus on Dionysus, Hong Zengliu(洪增流) contended that O'Neill in his plays fell back on a new substitute for God, “psychological family fate” as he grew increasingly impatient to both Catholicism and Puritanism (Hong Zengliu, 2009, pp. 162 - 177). “Psychological family fate” could meet human desire for the idolism and a new spiritual backup. What's more, he made a comparison between “psychological family fate” and determinism. “Psychological family fate” differed from determinism in the respects of human free will power and the recognition of the power. Such “psychological family fate” was unable to dispel human dread of death, endow life with meaningfulness, or cure the sickness of the Western society. The issue of incommunicability equally appealed to many commentators. Ye Shengnian(叶胜年) commented that O'Neill's characters are trapped in the dilemma between “emotion” and “material” which resulted in the lack of compassion and love in their communications. Through the case of *The Iceman Cometh*, Yang Renjing(杨仁敬) was focused on the communicational troubles in O'Neill plays, arguing that the playwright turned out to be rather transcendental in his treatment of human despair in their existence. Similar to the two critics, Wang Yiqun(汪义群) later in his work *The Study on O'Neill* observed that the nature of O'Neill's tragedies consisted in his characters' courageous confrontations with their current existence. Submerged in troublesome communications, individuality was