

IRRATIONALITY AND THE TRAGIC IN
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Abstract: This paper presents irrationality as one of the key dramatic features in selected early plays by Eugene O'Neill, arguably the most significant American dramatist of the early 20th century. In these works, irrationality emerges as an uncontrollable force governing the behavior of his characters and ultimately shaping their often fatal actions. The interpretative analysis indicates that irrationality serves as a central driving force behind the dramatic impact of O'Neill's early plays and functions as a threshold to the tragic, which pervades his dramatic vision.

Key words: Eugene O'Neill, early dramas, family, emotions, passions, irrationality, a state of mind, the tragic, tragedy.

The shaping of O'Neill's artistic personality

A realistic and highly emphatic portrayal of irrationality¹ suffuses Eugene O'Neill's (1888–1953) characters in many of his early, pre-Provincetown² plays. Observed through a biographical lens, O'Neill could have easily drawn on his personal experience to incorporate irrationality as the compelling force that shaped both his characters and the dramatic structure of his plays. From the moment of his birth, he was thrust into a web of difficulties and misfortunes that influenced not only his formative years but also his artistic development.³ For the O'Neal family, this was a particularly challenging period of a constant struggle to balance family responsibilities with professional demands. James O'Neill (1846–1920), the father of the family, was an accomplished actor whose career was confined to a single, though financially rewarding, theatrical role that required constant touring from one place to another.⁴ Accompanying him

1 "Irrationality" is understood in this paper as a temporary disability of a person to control their emotions, which results in sudden and often violent outbursts of anger, hatred, frustration, and even physical and verbal violence.

2 In 1916, O'Neill joined the "Provincetown Players," an experimental theater group from Provincetown, Massachusetts. It was a decisive moment of his career for their mission was to enable "playwrights of sincere, poetic, literary and dramatic purpose" to "see their plays in action and superintend their production without submitting to the commercial manager's interpretation of public taste" (Dowling 2014: 124).

3 For a detailed and vivid portrayal of O'Neill's life, readers are referred to Arthur and Barbara Gelb's comprehensive biography *O'Neill* (New York, 1965), also cited in this paper.

4 The role was that of the Count of Monte Cristo, the protagonist of a hugely popular melodramatic adaptation of the well-known, eponymous novel by Alexandre Dumas.

on these tours was his wife Ella (born Mary Ellen Quinlan, 1857–1922), who was compelled to raise their children in the harsh conditions of residential hotel rooms. Amid these hardships, Eugene was born on 16 October in a hotel room in Longacre Square (now Times Square in New York City), an event that would leave a lasting impression on the future dramatist. Throughout his life, he recalled with sentimental attachment the third-floor apartment where he was born and lamented the fact that he could hardly recognize the area years after.⁵

Eugene's upbringing was shaped by the complexities of his parents' relationship. The recurring "cycles of punishment and reconciliation" between Ella and James contributed to the overall "untr tranquil climate of their marriage". This troubled aspect of their relationship left a lasting impression on the dramatist, a fact clearly reflected in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1956), his posthumously published magnum opus play. In the play, James and Ella are portrayed as a deeply affectionate couple who nevertheless remain unable to overcome their personal frustrations and disillusionment with one another, which was a heavy burden for the entire family (A. Gelb and B. Gelb 1965: 9–10). The chronic problems within the family, such as Ella's morphine addiction and his elder brother Jamie's alcoholism, were experienced by O'Neill as tragic afflictions that plagued his loved ones and often disrupted the harmony of their relationships.

Apart from familial influences, additional factors shaped O'Neill's artistic development further. Particularly important were his encounter with Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (*Also Sprach Zarathustra*, 1883) and anarchism, both of which encouraged the emergence of irrationality as a prominent feature in his early writing. A unique set of historical circumstances blended anarchism and irrationality for the young dramatist: in the late spring of 1907, he was introduced to Benjamin Tucker,⁶ a "philosophical anarchist" in New York. O'Neill frequently visited his bookshop and "absorbed" his ideas (A. Gelb and B. Gelb 1965: 119–120).⁷ Decades later, having established himself as a dramatist, O'Neill emphasized Nietzsche's profound influence on his spiritual formation in a letter to his friend Benjamin de Casseres, a critic and poet: "Zarathustra [...] has influenced me more than any book I've ever read.

⁵ "Every time I go past, I look up. [...] Third window from Broadway on the Forty-third Street side. I can remember my father pointing it out to me." After a while the hotel was razed and he could hardly recognize the place any more: "There is only empty air now where I came into this world" (O'Neill, as quoted in A. Gelb and B. Gelb 1965: 57).

⁶ "Tucker was perhaps the best-known member of America's individualist-anarchist movement, which advocated that 'all the affairs of men should be managed by individuals or voluntary associations, and that the State should be abolished'" (A. Gelb and B. Gelb 1965: 119).

⁷ Although it is not equated with irrationalism, philosophical anarchism emphasizes radical individual liberty which introduces opposition between an individual and all forms of state-based institutions and communities. This idea is the focus of *Ego and His Own* (1844), a book by Max Stirner whose "philosophy of egoism" impressed O'Neill (A. Gelb and B. Gelb 1965: 121).

I ran into it through the bookshop of Benjamin Tucker [...] when I was eighteen and I've always possessed a copy since then and every year or so I re-read it and am never disappointed, which is more than I can say of almost any other book"⁸ (O'Neill, as quoted in A. Gelb and B. Gelb 1965: 121).

Although the impact of Nietzsche's major work on O'Neill was substantial, he did not elaborate on any particular idea from the philosopher. However, a series of quotations from *Zarathustra* that O'Neill diligently copied with the intention of memorizing them offers valuable clues. Just as he had absorbed the Catholic Catechism at the age of eight, and later sought to forget it, he likewise memorized the following teachings from *Zarathustra* a decade afterward:

Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman – a rope over an abyss. [...] 'Body am I entirely, and nothing more; and soul is only the name of something in the body.' 'Do I advise you to neighbor-love? Rather do I advise you to neighbor-flight and to furthest love! Higher than love to your neighbor is love to the furthest and future ones; higher still than love to men, is love to things and phantoms... My brethren, I advise you not to neighbor-love – I advise you to furthest love! (A. Gelb and B. Gelb 1965: 122).

The general anti-Christian sentiment of these statements was readily embraced by O'Neill during his rebellious adolescence, a period shaped in part by the unpleasant experiences he had endured as a young boy in a convent school – experiences that shook the foundations of his Christian faith. As he matured both as a man and as a writer, he gradually rejected the abstract religious dogmas and turned instead to the lived experience, which for him encompassed life in its full integrity. This profound shift formed the basis of his artistic sensibility – his playwright's instinct – which enabled him to reinvent American drama of the 20th century.⁹

A significant aspect of this achievement is closely tied to his understanding of the world and of life. For O'Neill, life is a unity of both the good ("the beauty") and the ugly ("the vices"), and it is precisely in this totality that it becomes the proper subject of artistic creation. "I love life," he once said. "But I don't love life because it is pretty. Prettiness is only clothes-deep. I am a truer lover than that. I love it naked. There is beauty to me even in its ugliness. In fact, I deny the ugliness entirely, for its vices are often nobler than its virtues, and nearly always closer to a revelation"

8 In addition to Nietzsche, once he decided to pursue drama, O'Neill also read numerous writers "who were to become his greatest influences – Irish writers like Synge, Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Shaw, as well as Ibsen, the Elizabethans, and the Greeks and, perhaps most important, the Swedish dramatist August Strindberg" (Dowling 2014: 98).

9 Diggins provides a valuable interpretative insight into O'Neill's work in light of Nietzsche's idea of the *will to power* as follows: "With Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, O'Neill sensed that 'God is dead' and truth dead as well, that the mind would have to cope with the presence of others and the forces shaping history, and that desire seeks to dominate others because power itself is desirable" (Diggins 2007: 36).

(O'Neill, as quoted in A. Gelb and B. Gelb 1965: 3). O'Neill's emphasis on the tragic aspect of life in his plays, along with the revelation he invokes in this quote, is reminiscent of Aristotelian catharsis – which is connected to one's personal improvement (*sofrosyne*). In another remark from 1921, he described the tragic as “the noblest” dimension of life – its “beauty”: “To me, the tragic alone has that significant beauty which is truth. [...] It is the meaning of life – and the hope. The noblest is eternally the most tragic” (O'Neill, as quoted in A. Gelb and B. Gelb 1965: 5). This perspective reflects his ability to absorb the experiences of both himself and others, transform those impressions through imagination, and render them with mastery as expressions of personal tragedy and of life's general tragic condition, which is not necessarily pessimistic. In essence, O'Neill evokes the spirit of ancient Greek tragedy, which integrates the irrational, the absurd, and the paradoxical elements of existence, elevating life's tragedy to the level of absolute aesthetics with the power to reveal profound truths.

Irrationality and the tragic in O'Neill's dramas

The previous section of the paper identified several biographical factors that shaped O'Neill's artistic sensibility, particularly his inclination to consider the tragic element as essential to drama. Building on that discussion, the present section examines the critical turning points in his selected early plays, arguing that irrationality functions as the central force driving the tragic effect in his early plays. This irrationality, however, neither appears arbitrarily nor operates in isolation. Rather, it emerges as the culmination of a complex internal structure that governs both character psychology and plot development, wherein emotions are heightened into passions through dialogue and action. Consequently, irrationality may manifest as an uncontrollable surge of passionate fury or devastating anger that overtakes characters who fall victim to its destructive power. Many of O'Neill's early plays feature characters from the lower strata of society, individuals entangled in webs of personal misfortune and poised on the brink of despair. Such circumstances create the conditions necessary for irrationality to erupt, often precipitating the tragic outcomes that define these works.

The Web (1913),¹⁰ one of O'Neill's earliest one-act plays, portrays the misfortunes endured by Rose, a young prostitute driven to the limits of her sanity and existence by a dangerous lung disease and by Steve, her abusive pimp. Resentment, bitterness, anger and hatred suffuse their terse exchanges, escalating into both verbal and physical violence. This prepares the ground for irrationality to emerge as the culmination of an emotionally charged dialogue that propels the characters into a volatile confrontation. O'Neill further heightens the dramatic effect by rendering

¹⁰ The year given in the parenthesis refers to the year when the play was written.

Rose and Steve's speech in a non-standard variety of English associated with the working-class residents of New York's Lower East Side. This stylistic choice reinforces the play's realism and the audience's sense of the characters' social and emotional circumstances:

STEVE – (*who has been watching her with a malignant sneer*) Yuh'll have to take that kid out of the bed. I gotta git some sleep.

ROSE – But, Steve, where'll I put her? There's no place else.

[...]

STEVE – Git dat kid outa here or I'll put yuh in the cooler as sure as hell!

ROSE – (*maddened, rushing at him with outstretched hands*) Yuh dirty dog! (*There is a struggle during which the table is overturned. Finally Steve frees himself and hits her in the face with his fist, knocking her down. [...]*) (O'Neill 1988: 18–19).¹¹

The excerpt reveals a moment of violent frenzy – an extreme manifestation of irrationality that precipitates the pivotal turn introducing the character of Tim Moran. A fugitive burglar in hiding, Tim unexpectedly intervenes to protect Rose from her abuser and gives her the money she needs to escape and seek treatment for her illness. The play concludes with a bitterly ironic and tragic reversal: Tim is shot and killed by Steve, who flees unnoticed, while Rose, found alone at the scene, is arrested as the sole suspect. Her child is left crying, abandoned in the aftermath of a fate she could not control.¹²

The theme of infidelity lies at the center of *Recklessness* (1913), another one-act play in which jealousy, pride, rage, vengefulness and hatred are sharply delineated. On the surface, the plot appears straightforward: at his summer home in the Catskills, New York, Arthur Baldwin learns from Gene, the housemaid, that during his absence his wife Mildred was unfaithful to him with Fred Burgess, their chauffeur and Gene's own lover. Confronted with this revelation, Arthur swiftly devises a calculated plan of revenge that leads to Fred's death in a staged car accident, followed by Mildred's suicide. Arthur's fury and desire for vengeance are unleashed in a sudden, uncontrollable outburst during his conversation with Gene, who disclosed Mildred's betrayal thereby setting in motion the play's tragic outcome:

GENE – They've been together all the time you've been away – every day and (*hesitating for a moment at the changed look on his face – then resolutely*) every night too. (*vindictively*) I've watched them when they thought no one was around. I've heard their 'I love yous' and kisses. Oh, they thought they were

11 O'Neill's works are cited from the first volume of his *Complete Plays* (New York, 1988). Further information on the source text can be found in the bibliography section of the paper.

12 Interpreting this play in view of its historical setting, J. Chris Westgate underscores its "more dialectical relationship between O'Neill and American theater during the Progressive Era," focusing on both "sociology" and "sensationalism" (Westgate 2012: 45, 47).

so safe! But I'll teach him to throw me over the way he did. I'll pay her for all her looking down on me and stealing him away. She's a bad woman, is what I say! [...]

BALDWIN – (*springing at her and clutching her by the throat with both hands*) You lie! You lie! (*He forces her back over the edge of the table. She frantically tries to tear his hands away.*) Tell me you lie, damn you, or I'll choke you to hell!" (O'Neill 1988: 62–63).

Baldwin's rage culminates in an act of physical violence that envelops the scene in a darkness of irrationality, setting the stage for the subsequent tragic events. Wounded pride, envy, jealousy, and resentment – intensified through Gene's biting remarks – generate a tension in their dialogue that slips easily into irrationality. At this point in dramatic progression, the action assumes a distinctly tragic trajectory, although the fatal outcomes have not yet occurred. It is precisely the moment when Baldwin regains his composure that initiates the chain of events culminating with a tragedy. The excerpted dialogue illustrates once again the tenuous boundary between irrationality and the tragic in O'Neill's early plays.

Bread and Butter (1914) is among O'Neill's earliest four-act plays that demonstrates his talent for constructing complex, multilayered plots that invite a variety of interpretations. At the center of the drama lies the fraught relationship between a father and son, which echoes O'Neill's own troubled bond with his father, James.¹³ The conflict stems from their opposed worldviews: Edward, a materially- and pragmatically-minded hardware merchant, cannot comprehend the aesthetic temperament of his youngest son, John, and vehemently resists the latter's aspiration to become a painter, having envisioned for him the career of a lawyer. On a broader thematic level, the play interrogates the place and purpose of art within an increasingly capitalist society. Although Edward reluctantly allows John to attend an art college, his resentment and disappointment only deepen over time. Moreover, John's difficulties intensify further when he is pressured by both his mother and fiancée, Maud, to abandon his studies, return home, and marry. Maud's impulsiveness and capriciousness strain their marriage from the beginning. Two years into the marriage, John finds himself trapped in the materialistic environment of Bridgetown – a community devoid of sympathy for artistic ambition, and burdened by a disillusioned and overly jealous wife. His misfortune reaches its peak as he is no longer able to pursue his aspirations and is subjugated to escalating pressure from his family and spouse, which creates a highly charged environment forcing him to suppress his deepest inclinations. This distressing emotional climate drives John to the brink

13 Around that time they disagreed about the course of Eugene's future career. While he desired to study playwriting under Professor Baker at Harvard, James disagreed by arguing that "he had sent Eugene to college once before and the boy had run away" (A. Gelb and B. Gelb 1965: 263–264). In addition, James had hoped that both of his sons would follow in his footsteps and take up acting, which they disliked and eventually rejected.

of irrationality, the threshold beyond which the play's tragic event unfolds. In a sudden fit of violent rage, following a conversation between John and his sister Bessie, Maud unleashes her frustrations in a furious barrage of insults that proves overwhelming for John and sets the tragedy into motion.

MAUD – (*losing control of herself*) Yes, I listened, you–you–you beast, you! – to tell – talk that way about me – about your wife – I heard you – You said I hated you – Well, I do hate you! –sponging on my father – you drunken good-for-nothing – [...]

JOHN – (*very pale, a wild look of despair in his eyes*) Maud! Stop! Won't you please let me alone for a while.

MAUD – (*panting in her fury; her words jumbled out between gasps*) You loafer you! – I couldn't believe my ears – [...] 'Come to Paris with us' – I'll tell her father, too – I know some things about her – And you won't get any divorce – not as long as I live – [...] She's a bad woman – She lived with Carter before – Oooohh!!

JOHN – (*his face livid with rage, springs at her and clutches her by the throat*) You devil of a woman! [...] By God, there's an end to everything! (*He rushes out of the door to hall and can be heard running up the stairs. Then for an instant a great silence broods over the house. It is broken by the muffled report of a revolver sounding from the floor above. Some thing falls heavily in the room overhead [...]*) (O'Neill 1988: 182–183).

The decisive moments of this final tragic act reveal that irrationality operates on two interconnected levels. First, Maud's passionate diatribe – an eruption of verbal violence – provokes a release of her frustrations that manifests as physical violence in John. In this instance, both forms of irrationality arise from complex circumstances: irreconcilable views on life, marriage, religion, and the value of art; a profound lack of understanding, support, and tolerance within the marriage, and the gradual erosion of affection into resentment and hatred.¹⁴ These accumulated tensions ultimately transform emotional discord into tragic consequence. On a broader level, the death of the artist foreshadows the death of art in a spiritually devoid environment.

Abortion (1914) is a one-act play that presents a striking contrast between professional or social ambitions, and personal moral dilemmas. The play dramatizes a difficult ethical struggle that ultimately leads to the protagonist's downfall, despite his outward accomplishments. The central character, Jack Townsend, is a twenty-year-old student and star of his college football team. His prospects for a bright future are jeopardized when he learns of the death of a working-class girl with whom he had a brief relationship that resulted in pregnancy. Under the

¹⁴ Only too late do John and Maud become aware of their differences, which is the only thing they agree on (Wynstra 2023: 32).

influence of his father, who strongly opposed the relationship, Jack had sent the girl to an incompetent doctor to undergo an abortion, during which she died. Jack remains unaware of her death until Joe Murray, the girl's brother, visits him and confronts him with the consequences of his actions. Overwhelmed by disbelief, shock, grief, and deep remorse, Jack briefly attempts to suppress his emotions, but soon finds himself trapped between the glittering façade of his college success and the devastation of his inner collapse. As irrationality overtakes him, Jack seizes a gun left on a table after a brief struggle with Murray and abruptly ends his own life, while his college friends, unaware of the tragedy, search for him, singing and cheering. The turning point occurs when Jack, left alone in his room, realizes that his friends are coming to celebrate his achievements, oblivious to the impending personal catastrophe.

ONE STUDENT – He's not here.

ANOTHER STUDENT – He ran away. (*All go out laughing and shouting. The band stops playing. Jack comes out from the bedroom, his face drawn with agony. The cheerleader's voice can be heard shouting 'He ran away but if we give him a cheer, he'll hear us. A long cheer for Townsend, fellows! Hip! Hip!'*)

JACK – (*staggers toward the window crying brokenly*) No! No! For God's sake! (*The first part of the cheer booms out. He reels to the table and sees the revolver lying there. He snatches it up and presses it to his temple. The report is drowned by the cheering. He falls forward on his face, twitches, is still.*) (O'Neill 1988: 219).

Utterly shattered by what has transpired and recognizing the magnitude of his error, Jack suddenly finds himself caught between the stark antithesis of his outward success – now collapsing in an instant – and his profound internal devastation. The irrationality that drives him into this hopeless state stems from an overwhelming mix of remorse, self-blame, and the looming threat of social disgrace. This sharply delineated contrast between external triumph and inner ruin intensifies these emotions, making suicide appear as the only escape from his unbearable anguish.

The fates of the main characters in *The Personal Equation* (1915) are similarly determined by powerful emotions. This four-act play centers on the conflict between capitalism and socialist anarchism. The protagonists, Tom Perkins and Olga Tarnoff, are a young couple and ardent supporters of anarchist socialism, their convictions fuelled by a passionate hatred of capitalism. Unlike Olga, a prominent member of the International Workers Union, Tom has yet to prove his full commitment to the cause. Consequently, he is assigned a mission to sabotage the engines of the ship *S. S. San Francisco*, which are carefully maintained by his father, Thomas Perkins, with meticulous devotion. Although Tom understands that carrying out the mission will most likely bring him into direct conflict with his father, who opposes his radical views, he remains determined

to follow through. The play reaches its climax in the ship's engine room, where Tom is inadvertently shot in the head by his father, who attempted to stop him. Though he survives, he is left bedridden and unable to speak. The end depicts Olga and Thomas Perkins setting aside their differences to take care of Tom during his recovery.

In *The Personal Equation*, irrationality is closely tied to the dominant emotion of hatred, which permeates the play. A passionate hatred of capitalism, industrialism, and all forms of centralized power drives the anarchist ideology, most forcefully embodied by the character of Olga, who repeatedly articulates these convictions:

TOM – What happened at the meeting [of the union officers]?

OLGA – (*contemptuously*) Just what we expected. They decided not to declare the strike at present. Whitley says they have been bought off by the Companies, every one of them. He himself was offered money by one of the Companies' agents if he would go away for a time and stop his agitating.

TOM – The scoundrels!

OLGA – Whitley was wild with rage. He pleaded with them but they wouldn't listen. Finally he told them what he thought of them and resigned his office. (with a smile) They're not liable to forget what he said, I'll bet.

TOM – But didn't they offer some excuse?

OLGA – Traitors are always full of excuses. They crawled behind patriotism, said it wouldn't be right. (*contemptuously*) Right! To call a strike now when beloved Britain might become involved in a great war.

TOM – What hypocrites! (O'Neill 1988: 353).

Socialist anarchism in the play clearly reflects O'Neill's own engagement with the movement in the early 20th century, as well as his fascination with Nietzsche's philosophy during that period. Both the radical ideas of anarchism and Nietzsche's emphasis on the power of passions are effectively woven into the play, enabling O'Neill to convey the notion that irrationality, when fuelled by passionate conviction, could profoundly alter – or even dismantle – existing social structures. Furthermore, such unrestrained irrationality could easily slip into fanaticism, which poses a danger to the impressionable youth whose blind devotion to social ideals comes at the expense of existential values and individual life – which is a prominent element of the play's tragic dimension. This tension is vividly illustrated in the character of Olga, who maintains unwavering faith in the anarchist creed even after the unfolding events, yet is humbled by Tom's reaction to her proud assertion.¹⁵

15 Such an ending of the play questions the pragmatic side of anarchism. Kurt Eisen sheds some light on this matter: "O'Neill [...] was ultimately more interested in the moral psychology of anarchism rather than its social or political goals" (Eisen 2018: 4–5).

OLGA – [...] We fight and we go down before the might of Society; but the Revolution marches on over our bodies. It moves forward though we may not see it. We are the bridge. Our sacrifice is never in vain. [...] I have suffered and will suffer more than any of them; and I am proud that I can still cry from the depths of my soul: It is well done! Long live the Revolution! (She stands proudly erect, inspired, exalted. [...] And then –)

TOM – (with a low, chuckling laugh – mimicking Olga) Long – live – the Revolution. (His vacant eyes turn from one to the other of them. A stupid smile plays about his loose lips. Whitely turns away with a shudder. Olga stares at the figure in the bed with fascinated horror – then covers her face with her hands as

The Curtain Falls) (O'Neill 1988: 386–387).

Irrationality and the tragic

As a vital anthropological category, irrationality is a prominent feature in Eugene O'Neill's early plays. It appears as a distinct psychological state of characters, arising from complex and often unfortunate circumstances that erupt into heated dialogue. Typically emerging at decisive moments, irrationality permeates the dramatic action just as tragedy is about to unfold, positioning itself as a crucial catalyst for the impending tragic event. Functioning as a threshold to tragedy, irrationality occupies a special place in O'Neill's early works. It marks the culmination of bitter exchanges that intensify throughout a play until the crucial moment when characters, overwhelmed by their own turmoil, become unwitting instruments of an ominous and incomprehensible Fate.¹⁶ As the endpoint of these escalating conflicts, irrationality stems directly from passions inflamed by specific events and scathing remarks. Therefore, irrationality in O'Neill's tragedies is not only a prelude to catastrophe but also a psychological condition governed by a surge of overpowering emotions that engulf the protagonist. In this manner, O'Neill infuses his work with profound emotional intensity, heightening the dramatic impact of the final tragic act and elevating it to striking aesthetic and affective levels. This distinctive feature of his early plays demonstrates his ability to incorporate the essence of ancient Greek tragedy into modern American theater, pointing the way for subsequent developments in modern drama.

In O'Neill's work, these developments are twofold: they concern both anthropology and naturalism. In terms of anthropology, he not only offers a realistic portrayal of the complexity of the human psyche but also, following Nietzsche, emphasizes the central role of passion in human nature. The architects of modern America – its proud,

¹⁶ O'Neill himself usually capitalizes the word "fate" in his plays, which infuses it with a particular, ominous aura.

enlightened “Founding Fathers” such as Franklin, Paine, and Jefferson – constructed a national foundation grounded in rational principles. Yet O’Neill’s plays suggest that reason is frequently strongly shaped, and at times overwhelmed, by passions that steer human will in unpredictable directions. O’Neill demonstrates that passions can be destructive, as in *Recklessness* and *Bread and Butter*, but he also shows that they may be consciously redirected toward specific goals and even positive outcomes, as illustrated in *The Personal Equation*. However, governing one’s passions not only involves an exercise of one’s free will, but is also contingent upon a web of random external circumstances. This is the critical juncture at which O’Neill’s anthropology intersects with his naturalism.

In this context, O’Neill could be related to the late realist tradition of American writers such as Crane, Garland, Norris, and Dreiser, who contributed to the movement that originated in France in the 1860s and dominated Europe for decades.¹⁷ The volatile nature of reality, the injustices and harshness of society, the “ugly” dimension of life, and the iron grip of the unfathomable Fate are among the principal naturalist elements reflected in many of O’Neill’s plays. His penetrating vision dispelled the naive materialistic illusion of the American dream and exposed the superficiality of the melodrama that had dominated American theater in the decades preceding him.

A realistic portrayal of the tragic is among O’Neill’s most significant contributions to modern American drama. His richly eventful early life – shaped by varied experiences across different social environments and animated by a deep love of literature – afforded him an intimate understanding of people from diverse social strata. By sublimating these experiences into his writing, O’Neill developed a profound insight into human nature, and into the tragic dimension of life in particular. Yet the dramatic articulation of the tragic in his works does not simply reflect personal pessimism.¹⁸ Despite the considerable difficulties that marked his personal and family life, O’Neill cultivated a perspective that enabled him to transform the “ugly” and absurd aspects of existence into aesthetic form. This outlook amounts to an essentially artistic worldview, one grounded in a distinctive sense of the tragic. As he himself noted, invoking the art critic Elie Faure: “‘We must take everything tragically, nothing seriously.’ For the tragic view of life embraces all the humor and absurdity of human beings” (O’Neill, as quoted in A. Gelb and B. Gelb 1965: 348). Ultimately, this admission underscores the striking parallel

17 Naturalism, in essence, belongs to the realist tradition in literature centering on the present. The key term associated with it was “veritist,” invented or borrowed by Hamlin Garland (1860–1940). Cf. Wellek VI, 1986: 1–2.

18 The prevailing image of O’Neill as a pessimist is disputed in a more recent biography: “In art as in life, O’Neill embraced suffering as an avenue toward exaltation, and he rejected the label ‘tragic pessimist’, coining for himself the keen phrase ‘tragic optimist’ instead” (Dowling 2014: 10).

between O'Neill's life and his art – a parallel in which irrationality and the tragic occupy a central place.

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Ирационалности и ирационално у раним драмама Јуџина О'Нила

Резиме

У овом раду анализирани су одабране драме из раног опуса (1913–1920) Јуџина О'Нила, утемељивача модерне америчке драме. Након уводног дела, у коме се у сажетом биографском маниру истичу важнији чиниоци који су утицали на формирање пишчеве уметничке личности, посебна пажња посвећена је његовим раним драмама са трагичним исходом. У средишту ове анализе је *ирационалности*, односно специфично духовно стање које се одликује крајњом узбурканости страсти и буром мисли које протагонисте О'Нилових драма нагоне на окончање сопственог живота. Такође је установљено да је ирационалност предуслов завршном трагичном чину и неизоставни покретач упечатљиво емотивног и потресног драмског ефекта. Закључним резултатима анализе утврђено је да је ирационално стање исход сложеног сплета околности које чине драмски заплет, што је најупечатљивије изражено дијалозима наглашеног емотивног набоја. Ирационалност јунака, проузрокована лавином страствених осећања, показује се при томе као неспутана деструктивна сила, али и специфично људска енергија изузетне потенције, која је кадра да мења друштво и свет. Према томе, дубока

страственост, као битно својство људске природе, премда предуслов за ирационално стање, поприма и афирмативне конотације, чиме делимична подударност између ничеанске и о'ниловске ирационалности долази до изражаја.

Специфичан и упечатљив начин на који драмски заплети доводе до ирационалног стања праћеног трагичним чином у први план истиче трагичност као доминантан естетски квалитет О'Нилових драма. Утолико је овај великан модерног америчког позоришта дао изузетан допринос савременој драми осликавши, у свом препознатљивом реалистичном маниру, трагику модерног човека. На темељу сопствених животних искустава, љубави према књижевности, писању, а нарочито позоришту – унео је О'Нил дубоку и комплексну егзистенцијалну тематику у америчку драму, прекинувши дотадашњу националну опијеност површним мелодрамама. Премда се мелодраматичност уочава као приметна црта и О'Нилових раних драма, она ни у ком случају не срзава њихов квалитет до површне сентименталности, већ је њена функција крајње заштравање трагичног чина, који је тако доведен до врхунца реалистичног драмског приказивања. На тај начин је свеукупна трагика савременог човека у О'Ниловим драмама уздигнута до нивоа естетског, при чему ирационалност, као специфично људско стање, задобија истакнуту улогу.

Кључне речи: Јудин О'Нил, ране драме, породица, емоције, страсти, ирационалност, стање ума, трагично, трагедија

Примљено: 26. 11. 2025.

Прихваћено: 2. 12. 2025.