

## **The Dolor of Seamen: A Study Of Eugene O'Neill'S one-act play *Warnings*.**

**Dr. S. Abdullah Shah**

Assistant Professor of English

Islamiah College (Autonomous)

Vaniyambadi, Vellore, Tamil Nadu

### **Abstract:**

This paper proposes to study the sufferings of seamen with reference to Eugene O'Neill's one-act play *Warnings*. In fact, the playwright himself suffered a lot in his sea voyages. But he had a deep love for the sea. The play *Warnings* portrays the sufferings of the hero Mr. James Knapp and his family. He had spent his youth in the ship as a wireless operator for a meager salary. When Mr. Knapp informs his wife that he may become complete deaf at any time, his wife warns him not to speak about his health to the ship authorities. She is very much concerned about her husband's job. Mr. Knapp fails to hear an important about a derelict and he becomes solely responsible for the shipwreck. Out of his guilt, he shot himself and died in the ship.

**Key words:** sufferings, sea voyage, seamen, shipwreck, deafness.

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Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was one of the eminent playwrights of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He set out to create meaningful drama at a time when the American dramatists were locked in standard commercial practices. He was the first playwright to include speeches in American vernacular in his plays and to involve characters of low ranks. He spent several years at sea, where he suffered from depression. In spite of his suffering, he had a deep love for the sea. In most of his plays, sea became an eminent theme.

Human responses to the sea were portrayed by the writers of all ages in personal narratives, poetry, novels, short stories, and plays. Depictions of sea in literature make us understand our lives better. In sea literature, the sea, the sailor, and the ship play prominent roles. The ship symbolizes life, which is a mixture of adventure, excitement, fortune and misfortune. The sailors stand as a symbol representing labor exploitations and the brutal conditions at sea. The sea has been portrayed in literature as indifferent, hostile, and welcoming. It has afforded writers the material for adventure, comedy, romance and tragedy.

Unlike other writers, O'Neill suffered much in the sea voyage. In spite of his suffering, he had a deep love for the sea. He had written more one act sea plays than any other writer in the field of American literature. Moreover, he echoes the life of seamen in a significant manner through his one act plays. Sea life has never been so deeply loved and described as done by O'Neill. In fact he has brought a new dimension to the understanding of literature on the sea through his plays.

Through his Glencairn plays, he diverted the attention of the public towards seamen. His characters were presented as the representations of human beings. In all his early plays, we find the characters as obsessive. Almost all the characters are limited in their freedom due to fate or internal factors. All the characters of O'Neill's plays always face a tragic end. Their wishes are not fulfilled in this world. According to Whitman,

The plays of O'Neill are for the most part unpleasant plays, wrought out of the agony and pain of life. His most successful characters are people of rather primitive instincts, misfits, suffering from disease, economic inhibitions, frustrations, from soul-destroying powers which they cannot understand. These poor souls are usually beaten in the battle of life by a force either within or outside themselves that makes for their confusion and ruin. In fact, few plays of our day have such a plethora of murders, violent deaths, suicides and insanity (555).

In almost all the plays of O'Neill, we find strange characters with pain and crisis. Their suffering is intense, violent and relentless. Most of them suffer beyond the limits of endurance. Especially in the sea plays, the characters suffer from any one of the following reasons: separation from family, failure in career, broken marriage, love failure, shipwreck, hatred for sea, suicidal thought, alcoholism and the like. All his plays make the audience and readers feel for the characters. The characters in his plays were mostly the people whom he had met in his real life.

O'Neill has extensively portrayed the sufferings of the seamen in his sea plays. The one-act play *Warnings* (1913) is taken for study in this paper. In this play, Knapp is represented as a victim of materialistic society. As a wireless operator, after spending his youth in the sea for a meager salary, he loses his hearing and finally takes his own life with a revolver to compensate his guilt. Mrs. Knapp tells her children that their father has a bad cold and has gone to pay five dollars to an ear specialist instead of taking a dose of quinine. She says, "a wireless operator can't afford to take chances" (O'Neill 82).

Poverty of the family has made her think everything in terms of money. Even she measures her husband's health in terms of money. When Dolly asks the reason for his father's strange behavior this time, she answers that the job is the main reason and she adds, "If it wasn't for your brother Jim sendin' us a few dollars every month, and Charlie earnin' five a week, and me washin', we'd never be able to get along even with your father's salary. But heaven knows what we'd do without it. We'd be put out in the streets" (83). When Knapp says that something terrible has happened to him, Mrs. Knapp asks, "What do you mean? You haven't lost your job, have you?" (89-90)

She is very much concerned about the job of her husband and that is the reason she utters the above words. When Knapp informs his wife that he is liable to go stone deaf at any moment, she just scolds the attitude of the doctors in general instead of showing care and affection towards him. She says, "There Jim! Don't take on about it so. All those doctors make things worse than they really are. He's just tryin' to scare you so you'll keep comin' to see him. Why, you can hear just as well as I can" (90). As the doctor has told him that any time he may become completely deaf, he wants to inform this to his higher authority.

Even now Mrs. Knapp tries to convince her husband without caring about his health. She wants him to say that the doctor has told him his hearing would hold out for a long time yet. Realizing the responsibility of a wireless operator, he disagrees with his wife. But she scolds him as a fool and a coward. Knapp is thinking about his health and job while his wife is bothered about herself and the children. When Knapp decides to switch over to another job, his wife asks him to remember the last time he tried and how they had to pawn everything and finally he returned to the same job as a wireless operator. She says:

You'll get another job!"(She sits down and covers her face with her hands, weeping bitterly.)"And this is all the thanks I get for slavin' and workin' my fingers off! What a father for my poor children! Oh, why did I ever marry such a man? It's been nothin' but worryin' and sufferin' ever since. (92).

The above words of her make Knapp return to job. When he is on duty he loses his hearing completely and could not hear the warning given about the ice berg. As a result, he risks the ship and lives of all in the ship and commits suicide to compensate his guilt.

### **Conclusion**

We notice how the economic condition of a sea worker drives him to commit suicide. The nature of Knapp's job and the fluctuating weather in sea has made him deaf slowly. So he decides to inform the ship authorities of his deafness. But his wife compels him not to reveal the truth about his deafness to anyone in the ship. She knows very well if her husband loses the job in the ship then he will not be fit for any other job in the land. It seems that the sea and the ship have utilized well the youth of Mr. Knapp. Now he is old and unfit for the sea.

Unable to compromise with his wife, he decides not to inform of his health to the ship men. The doctor has already warned him that he may become complete deaf at any time. This happens when Knapp is on duty, sending and receiving the messages in the wireless room. He fails to hear the warning given by another ship about the derelict. Then the ship hits and it starts sinking slowly. When everything goes beyond control, Mr. Knapp confesses that he has become completely deaf. Mr. Knapp realizes that he is solely responsible for the sinking. His inability to face his family without a job drags him to go for the last trip. Finally, he decides that he is unfit to live either in the sea or in the land commits suicide and thus surrenders himself to the sea.

This play was composed one year after the sinking of the Titanic. At the time of disaster, the steamer California was within 20 miles. As it had no wireless operator on duty, the sinking Titanic's call for help could not be heard. After this tragedy, a law was passed that stipulated all vessels must have a radio operator on duty at all times (Richter 142). In the book *Conversations*

with *Eugene O'Neill*, it is mentioned that O'Neill knew many seamen who died at sea and he took the characteristics of several men and fused them in to one individual in his plays (Kalonyme 67).

O'Neill's treatment of the suffering of seamen is subtle. Thus, the incidents of death and suicide during O'Neill's sea voyages, his own suicidal attempt, and his life in sanatorium provided materials to portray the real sufferings of seamen in this play.

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