

A Comparative Study Of Themes Of Ibsen And O'Neill's Select Plays

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Abstract:

Henrik Ibsen, a prominent 19th century Norwegian poet and playwright made significant contribution to English literature and earned name and fame especially for his prose plays. His realistic plays deal with social issues, contemporary controversies and sacred institution of marriage in Norwegian society. Apart from debauchery, status of women, their problems and predicaments, excessive feministic freedom and poverty are main themes of his plays. Likewise Eugene O'Neill is known as the American Shakespeare, contributed greatly for English drama in the 20th century. O'Neill as a pessimist, draws the picture of the then American society in his own way realistically. Wrong choices and dreams are fatal for human life presented in his plays. Adultery, sin, vengeance, search for identity, feeling of isolation and debased humanitarian values find expression in his most plays. Father-son conflict, possessive attitude towards land and illicit sex relation bring tragedy in his earlier plays. Greek mythology, mask, commercial greed, evil effect of industrialization are sole cause of sorrow and suffering in human life.

Key Words : Ibsen, O'Neill, marriage, debauchery, suicide, retribution

This article bears the theme of the plays written by Henrik Ibsen and Eugene O'Neill. Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *The Wild Duck* and *Hedda Gabler* looked sincerely as much as the plays of O'Neill's such as *Beyond the Horizon*, *The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape*, *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mourning Become Electra*. Just summarizing and paraphrasing would not cater to the purpose of the article. Microscopic analysis of theme is presented to have a close look at each play discussed here. Thus the themes are compared to find the invisible bridge among all the plays made from the beginning till the end. This will ultimately help the readers know both the writers, their attitude, aptitude, philosophy and vision of life.

Theme is the first conception that comes into a writer. Its flowering requires characters, dialogue, plot and technique to present a drama. So theme and its backdrop; the propellant society is the prima facie and pragmatic concern of every critic. Unless this be analysed, everything turns meaningless. It portrays and projects the writer, his society, his philosophy and his moral vision by some way or the other.

Ibsen and O'Neill in their respective plays, delineating the 19th century Norwegian society and 20th century American society respectively. The themes of the Ibsenian dramas and O'Neillian dramas are completely different in accordance with their ages, traditions, customs, manners, and prevailing circumstances. The above factors are the real determinants for literature of the world. At first, it is obvious to throw light on Ibsen's plays as he belonged to the 19th century Norwegian literature. A central theme of Ibsen's plays is the portrayal of sorrow, suffering, anguish, frustration, agony and travesty of female characters, echoing his mother Marichen. Thus Ibsen's sympathy, kindness and liking for women would eventually find significant expression in most of his plays.

As a realist, Henrik Ibsen depicts the picture of the Norwegian society in the nineteenth century, definitely highlights on the sacred institution of marriage and the status of married women living in a family. In the play *A Doll's House*, marriage, from the beginning, is the most significant theme in which a middle class couple of the then Norwegian family gets involved i.e. Nora and Torvald Helmer, her husband. The play deals with the problems and predicaments in which a married woman is entangled owing to her husband's excessive control upon his wife and its ultimate consequence towards the end of the play. As a social realist Ibsen focused his attention on the erstwhile traditions and customs prevailing in a family when the play *A Doll's House*. Undoubtedly Ibsen favours Nora and tries to idealise her throughout the play, thus Nora wins our sympathy, and favour. But it cannot be denied that *A Doll's House* feminist play, even though Ibsen did not accept it. The dramatist was interested in women's freedom and such interest he put into the play, *The Pillars of Society*. He sketched two women Lona and Dina both of whom have minds of their own and they have their complete freedom. The same thing has happened in the play *A Doll's House*. Nora, the protagonist, wife of Torvald Helmer, and the mother of three children who leaves her home, her husband and her three children behind to have her own identity and to lead her life separately. Thus she violates her marriage vows and exhibits a mind of her own by denying to stay with Torvald even for one night under the same roof. Torvald's persuasion, advice become meaningless for Nora as she determines to leave instantly. Torvald tries his best to convince Nora to forget the past affairs and they will start a new life.

Under no circumstance Nora is ready to obey Torvald whom she believes for a long period of last eight years. Nora says to Torvald:

NORA. (Going out to the right): That makes it all the more certain that it must be done.(She comes back with her cloak and hat and a small bag which she puts on a chair by the table).

HELMER. Nora, Nora, not now ! wait till tomorrow.

NORA.(Putting on her cloak): I cannot spend the night in a strange man's house.

HELMER.But can't we live like brother and sister-?

NORA. (Putting on her hat): You know very well that wouldn't last long. (Puts the shawl round her.) Good-bye, Torvald. I won't see the little ones. I know they are in better hands than mine. As I am now, I can be of no use to them. (P.86)

These above lines indicate, Ibsen, in this play, thinks too much of a woman's rights and too little of her duties.

The play depicts the sacrificial role of women that is found in Nora's and Linde's characters. Ibsen exemplifies Nora's character as she always sacrifices before her marriage even after her marriage. But the male characters are not at all ready to sacrifice their good name, and integrity. In order to support her ailing mother and two younger brothers, Mrs. Linde sacrifices her true love, Krogstad whom she loves truly and most sincerely is unable to marry him as he does not have immediate prospect of getting any job or becoming rich and prosperous overnight. She marries a richer man but fate goes against her and destroys her happy married life when her husband has passed away after some days.

She expresses her true love in the following manner.

MRS. LINDE. You mustn't forget that I had a helpless mother and two little brothers. We couldn't wait for you, Nils; your prospects seemed hopeless then.

KROGSTAD.That may be so, but you had no right to throw me over for anyone else's sake.

MRS. LINDE.I really don't know. Often I used to ask myself if I had the right to do it.

KROGSTAD. (more gently) when I lost you, it was as if all the solid ground went from my feet. Look at me now- I am a ship wrecked man clinging to a bit of wreckage. (P.59)

Ghosts is a controversial play having an apt title. The theme of *Ghosts*, ghost itself, a recurring image throughout the text that has many layers of meanings. On one level, the 'ghosts' refers to the characters and their particular events. However the text has a serious threat to the

erstwhile Norwegian society. As it is a tale of infidelity, corruption, greed, lust, disease and other afflictions.

The central theme of the play *Ghosts* is deception, lies and hypocrisy. Keeping secret and concealing truths have disastrous effects that bring fatal death for Oswald, the only son of Mrs. Alving. The origin of the predicament is Mrs. Alving, herself when she tried to form a good impression on the captain, her husband through a canopy that repletes with lies and deceptions. Mrs. Alving has kept the lies up to the end of the play, thus Oswald has become the victim of his parents' irresponsibility and recklessness. Nora's big secret in the play *A Doll's House* has some similarities with the secret of Mrs. Alving, it is clear. Both the protagonists try their best not to disclose their respective secrets to other characters for which their suffering and sorrow is multiplied. In *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, offspring suffer endlessly. Dr. Rank is a victim of tuberculosis as his father was excessively fond of women and wine. Similarly Oswald meets his tragic end as he suffers greatly from syphilis, which is a characteristic feature of his father, captain Alving who had illicit physical relation with many women. Both fathers died before the plays open. The readers and spectators know about them when the two protagonists, Nora and Mrs. Alving tell other characters about their hubbies.

The theme of *The Wild Duck* is about the importance of illusion and reality, Ibsen shows through his play that how illusion is distinguished from reality. The two contrasting words 'illusion' and 'reality' play very important role in the family life of the Ekdals and it brings a fatal consequence towards the end of the play. The fourteen year affectionate and loving daughter, Hedvig becomes the tragic victim between the real and illusory life of Hialmar Ekdal. Gregers, the son of Old Werle and friend of Hialmar who is an idealist, preaches the ideal which indicates unveiled realities. He insists people to drop their illusions to confront the truth. Reeling, a doctor by profession relies on illusion though he is a realist. An illusion is a lie that saves a man from stress and strain as well as it brings comfort and happiness in real life. If illusions are extracted from an ordinary man he will lose his happiness, peace, bliss and comfort undoubtedly.

The theme of suicide runs through in some of the plays written by Henrik Ibsen. It is obvious that such terrible theme is present in the plays like *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *The Wild Duck* and *Hedda Gabler*. Here the theme of suicide is present in *The Wild Duck*. After the ignominious revelation made by Gregers before Hialmar, it has shattered Hialmar's married life, and peace. Hedvig, their affectionate daughter is aware of her illegitimate birth. She is a product of sexual union of Old Werle and her mother, Gina.

Henrik Ibsen wrote *Hedda Gabler* in the Victorian era, when women had to play the role of the perfect and dedicated housewife. Even women were subservient to men and were dependent upon them for their basic needs. The women had very restricted rights and choices which were decided by the male dominated society. This play depicts a few rebellious women fighting and struggling for a better life. This play, *Hedda Gabler* primarily based on themes of

manipulation, obsession, and a feminist agenda run throughout the play. The woman, Hedda in the plot basically demonstrates these themes.

Eugene O'Neill is recognized as one of the celebrated playwrights in English literature in the twentieth century. The strong themes he has involved in his plays, show his brilliant creativity and realistic knowledge of the American society of his time. The dominant themes are apparent in his most plays cover family life, Greek mythology and mask. These themes are present *Beyond the Horizon*, *The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*. He uses these themes in such a refined manner that give significant contribution to the development of plot and characterization.

O'Neill as a man of firm conviction, he never feels hesitant to discuss the 20th century American society freely and frankly. His plays depict the social and economic issues of the modern time. His plays also deals with the themes of materialism, industrialization, human relation, employer- employee conflicts, ignorance, brutality, selfishness, greed and hatred. Man's isolation, estrangement from the society where he lives and his quest for identity and belongingness from the fundamental theme of O'Neill's plays. Modern man's unending sorrow, suffering and agony arising out of the highly industrialized and commercialized society are also the themes taken by Eugene O'Neill.

O'Neill, in his plays, depicts human sorrow and suffering and he endeavours to justify it. In 1925 he wrote a letter to Arthur Hubson Quinn and explained his objectives and justifications for talking human misery, despondency, despair and unending sorrow.

"...I'm always, always trying to interpret life in terms of lives never just lives in terms of character. I'm always acutely conscious of the force behind-(Fate, God, our biological past creating our presents, Whether one calls it my story certain and of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious , self-destructive struggle to make the force express him instead of being as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. And my proud conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about and that it is possible-or can be -to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values and symbols in the theatre which may to some degree bring home to members of a modern audience their ennobling identify with the tragic figures on the stage.'" (Falk,25-26)

The play *Beyond the Horizon* has many themes such as dreams, responsibility choices and happiness. Dreams play an important role in real life. A life without dreams cannot be successful but when dreams are deviated, they bring utter failures and frustrations in the dreamer's life. In this play *Beyond the Horizon*, dreams are the principal theme amongst the other themes. Each character has their own dreams. Ruth dreams that she has a husband and secured life that proves to be a catalyst bringing all tragedy in the play. Ruth is in love with the

two Mayo brothers from time to time. James dreams that he will have a bigger farm and aspires that his elder son, Andy will wed Ruth Atkins. Robert and Andy are the biggest dreamers in the story having opposite dreams.

The Emperor Jones contains the theme that is different from the other plays which is written in expressionistic style by Eugene O'Neill.

Then Jones quests for his identity and belongingness but he is already away from these things. As a result he is finally estranged from his own self. As Doris V. Falk explains: Jones hopeless flight through the forest is not from the native at all, but from himself-the fundamental self from which his blind pride and its self image have so long separated him, and, which, inevitably, comes to his own. This is the primary symbolism of his movement through the forest in a circle, hypnotized by the rhythm of a drum beat and ending where he began. The progress of Jones is progress in self- understanding, it is the stripping off of the masks of self, layer by layer, just as a bit his, 'emperors' inform is ripped from his back, until at the end he must confront his destiny-himself-in nakedness(p.67).

The Hairy Ape, a classic piece of Eugene O'Neill's, delineates many themes i.e. isolation and search for identity, human regression and industrialization, frustration of class and mechanization and dehumanization. O'Neill writes about this

Yank's continual effort is to search for identity and belongingness fails finally. His revolutionary mind does not find peace in the industrialized and commercialized society.

The Hairy Ape presents the theme of the frustration of class. Mildred and Yank are the two major characters of this play. But they belong to different classes. Mildred is the representative of highest social class where as Yank represents the lowest societal class. O'Neill has taken Mildred from the bourgeois and Yank from the proletariat sect according to Long. Though Mildred and Yank life styles are completely different, they lodge similar complaints about class.

Doris V. Falk remarks in his book "Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension as to the play, *Desire Under the Elms*:

"The father against whom the brothers are in rebellion is Ephraim Cabot, a self-centered, loveless man who has projected his own personality into that of his God, a tyrannic, ascetic, restrictive embodiment of Puritanism, "hard and lonesome and old" like Ephraim. He is a God whom Ephraim identifies with the farm itself, from the rocky soil of which he has sheer doggedness won a living -----"God's in the stones! Ephraim, like the monomaniac "extremists," has dedicated his entire life to this God, who is of course, only an image of his own

ego. Ephraim has already sacrificed his sons by enslaving them to the farm, but the most pathetic sacrificial victim was his second wife (mother of Eben, the youngest son), a gentle, sensitive woman, whom he married not for love, but for land. She died overworked and love-straved, a victim of Ephraim's exploitive egotism (Falk,p.95) .”

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Desire under the Elms has been considered as a tragedy of passion. But there are two other important themes of the play are possessive attitude towards land and a father son conflict. It is certain that sexual passion certainly predominates other theme.

Doris V.Falk writes in his book, “Eugene O’Neill and the Tragic Tension” about his greatest tragedy, *Mourning Becomes Electra*:

“In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O’Neill leaves for a while the war between the God and science and returns to the more limited conflict within the “suffering individual.” But the conflict and the suffering are traceable more specifically than ever to the fixations upon father and mother, to the tension between Puritanism and freedom, pride and love, death and life...(p.129).

Mourning Becomes Electra deals with several themes. The most dominating force that prevails upon the from the beginning to the end is the theme of revenge. Captain Adam Brant, who becomes vindictive and immediately wants to take revenge upon the Mannon family for the ill-treatment of his mother, Marie Brantome. Her misery and suffering cause her tragic death for which captain Brant made the Mannons responsible. However his search for vengeance creates the most terrible consequence afterwards and pulls all major characters towards their tragic fate.

Oedipus complex is also another important theme of this play, *Mourning Becomes Electra*. The Electra complex indicates the sexual desire between the daughter and the father. In this play Lavinia represents as Electra complex that is known from the title of the play. Lavinia deprives of her mother's love and affection. There is always competition between the mother and daughter to be nearer to Ezra. O’Neill involves the Oedipus complex in this play to make the play more apt and meaningful. Here Orin represents himself as Oedipus complex and shows his love and sexual desire for his mother as he is deprived of his father's love and affection.

It is obvious that themes taken by Henrik Ibsen and Eugene O'Neill in their plays reflect some similarities and dissimilarities in analysis of this chapter. Henrik Ibsen involves the themes of sorrow, suffering, anguish, frustration, agony and travesty of female characters whereas O'Neill's plays show relevant themes of family life, Greek mythology, and mask. His plays also involve the themes of materialism, effect of industrialization, human relation, employer-employee conflicts, ignorance, brutality, selfishness, hatred, love, sex, sin and retribution. Apart from most of his plays depict the theme of isolation belongingness, and utter human suffering, his hopelessness and helplessness in the surrounding where he lives.

Henrik Ibsen describes the nineteenth century Norwegian society in the plays discussed in this article. He does not forget to focus the sacred institution of marriage and the status of women living in the family. Ibsen depicts Nora's character in the play *A Doll's House* who performs her wifely duty to her husband, Torvald Helmer. In return she gets nothing but inexpressible abuse and insult from her husband. In the erstwhile society women are completely dependent on men and dance according to the tune played by them. But Ibsen gives women a new identity and unprecedented freedom in 'A Doll's House' especially to Nora who leaves her home, her husband and her three little children ignoring her wifely and motherly duty towards them respectively. On the other hand O'Neill takes theme of dreams, responsibility, choices and happiness in his play 'Beyond the Horizon.' The two Mayo brothers suffer ceaselessly for their wrong dreams and choices though the theme of love plays a significant role in the play. Andy and Robert go astray and take no responsibility of the Mayo family and the farm due to Ruth Atkin's insincere love for the two brothers. The peace, happiness and stability of the Mayo family is destroyed altogether. Ruth Atkin's changing passion brings tragedy for Robert, leading to his untimely death.

Similarly O'Neill projects the theme of incest, sin, retribution, possessive attitude towards land, and father-son conflict in the play *Desire Under the Elms*. Eben and Abbie commit incest by establishing physical relation, all three important characters namely old cabot, Eben and Abbie involve in war to possess the land, and the father son conflict apparent from the outset of the play, likewise the father-son conflict is presented by Ibsen in his play, *The Wild Duck* between old Werle and Gregers. The theme of debauchery is also described by Ibsen in the plays i.e. *Ghosts* and *The Wild Duck*. In *Ghosts*, captain Alving seduced his house maid, Helen before marriage and old Werle seduced Ginna that is the sole reason of strife and discontentment in the plays.

In the play *Mourning Becomes Electra* presents the themes of Oedipus-complex, sin, retribution and adultery. The theme of vengeance prevails from the beginning to the end of the play. Captain Adam Brants takes revenge on General Ezra Mannon. The passion between Christine and captain Adam Brant becomes so intense that they murder General Ezra Mannon. After revelation of the adultery between captain and Christine, Orin becomes vindictive to take revenge upon captain Adam Brant and immediately after Orin shoots his mother's paramour to

pacify his discontented soul as he excessively loves his mother than anyone. Christine gets frustrated after the death of captain Adam Brant and commits suicide then Orin makes that his life is empty and meaningless without his mother. Thus the themes of adultery, sin and retribution find better expression in the play. Lavinia is left behind to atone the sins committed by the Mannons and decides to live in the haunted house after her love for Peter is shattered instantly. The theme of Oedipus- complex is also expressed between general Ezra Mannon and Lavinia as well as Christine and Orin. As the daughter is excessively attached to her father, her mother fury and discontentment gets manifolded. Similarly Orin's attachment with his mother is so deep; he is deprived of his father's love and affection. Though there is no such physical contact the Mannon as well as between relation is reflected.

Hedda Gabler is the strongest and most powerful character in the play *Hedda Gabler* written by Henrik Ibsen as compared to Lavinia. The themes of Hedda Gabler are manipulation, and obsession besides these two themes, Hedda's ego, selfishness and pride are incorporated in the play that destroy the good forces morality and spirituality in the play. Hedda is neither satisfied with her newly married life nor with her past lovers who come forward thick and fast in her life.

Hedda's ego centric attitude and adamant nature bring tragedy for many characters who are obsessed with Hedda's love even after her marriage. Hedda's life ends in smoke when she plays a manipulative role with several characters. On the other hand Lavinia's enmity with her mother cause all tragedy and waste in the play *Mourning Becomes Electra*. In the nineteenth century in Norway women were less independent than the twentieth century women. But Henrik Ibsen proves in *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* that the women are more independent and powerful. The characters of Nora and Hedda Gabler, the latter's character can be compared with Abbie in the play *Desire under the Elms* in respect of liberty given to women by Henrik Ibsen and Eugene O'Neill respectively.

This article also delineates the themes of two expressionistic plays i.e. *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*. These two plays are completely different from the other plays by the same dramatist and the plays by Henrik Ibsen in respect of themes of *The Emperor Jones* based on slavery, autocracy, gullibility, spirituality, racism and oppression. These themes through the character of Emperor Jones, the autocrat slave ruler, who meets his tragic end at the end of the play. Similarly, the second expressionistic plays discussed in this chapter is *The Hairy Ape* who loses his belongingness and suffers from loneliness and estrangement. The play also explains the themes like human regression by industrialization and dehumanization. Yank is the protagonist of the play, suffers from the start of the play. Though he searches for identity and belongingness, he fails and gets frustrated as he is unable to identify himself with human world.

Finally he endeavours to get his new identity with the animal world and meets his most tragic and shocking death when he comes straight before the gorilla. Eugene O'Neill depicts human sorrow, suffering and predicament realistically through his plays discussed in this chapter. In this

chapter, the different themes adopted by Henrik Ibsen and Eugene O'Neill are of different kinds and of same types. Both playwrights create social plays keeping an eye on the Norwegian society in the nineteenth century and the American society in the twentieth century respectively.

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