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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FROM STATION OF LIFE TO STATION OF DEATH IN THE CHARACTERS OF DANCER AND THE GENTLEMAN OF O'NEILL'S PLAY THIRST ALONG WITH DIVERSE SYMBOLISM

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Abstract

The Thirst centres on the struggle of three shipwreck victims to survive on a small white raft adrift on a “glassy” sea. Descending into madness as a result of their thirst, they prey on each other until they sacrifice their humanity to the uncaring, black-stained sea. Despite their common predicament, the three are separated by social, as well as psychological, forces. The Dancer is called ‘young’ from the stage direction of the play. O’Neill described her as figure of ‘pitiful care’. The Gentleman has been portrayed by O’ Neill in The Thirst, as a ‘symbolic agent of the practical civilized world’—Virginia Floyd. “All through the action of the play he exhibits mostly civilized and dignified behaviour and upholds his morality to the bitter end.”—Alfred Routz. While himself suffering, he mostly sympathizes with the unbearable suffering of the delicate ‘young’ lady that the Dancer is. For, this reason, O’ Neill presented the European man as the name of Gentleman. ‘Symbolism’ is indicative of a lot deeper sense in simple and commonplace matter. Conventional well-known materials are used to suggest some deeper sense or truth of life and society through a symbolic treatment. A careful reading of O’Neill’s plays will show that in each play he seeks to communicate his feelings about life. It is invariably true that the natural objects he uses in his plays like the ‘sun’, ‘the sky’, ‘the sea’ (p,51)etc. are symbols and images of something. The same thing is true of his ‘stage props’ and even of the ‘make-ups’, ‘costumes’, the looks’, ‘the important gesture’(p,51) and even the vocal nuances of his characters.

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Introduction:-

At the stage direction, there are details of the Dancer’s dress and ornaments: “... she is dressed in a complete short-skirted dancer’s costume of black velvet covered with spangles”(p,52). Her long blond hair streams down “over her bare, unprotected shoulders. In the case of her ornament “When she lifts her head a diamond necklace can be seen glittering coldly...”(p,52) . The dress and ornaments of the Dancer are indicative of her life-style as a professional Dancer.

The Dancer appears weaker from the opening of the play: she is “a young woman lies with arms outstretched, face downward on the raft.”(p,54) She is described by the playwright as a lamentable figure because of her, ‘Continuous weeping has made a blurred smudge of her rouge and the black make-up of her eyes...’.

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She is represented as a more immature and a sentimental figure. She is not accustomed to the horrible situation that confronts her. 'Hunger', 'Thirst' and 'unbearable tropical heat' torture that fashionable Dancer. She is totally ignorant of the weather of 'tropical region', and its wide spread 'pitilessly clear sky'(p,52). She feels excruciating pain of the burning Sun, "My poor skin that I was once so proud of!" Below the 'life raft', the sea water is agitated with the 'waiting fins of sharks', they are waiting for human flesh. Her fond expectation for a rescue ship remains a dream.

The Dancer is mentally agitated by the profound silence of the condition. She shouts loudly towards the 'pitilessly clear sky' that "My God! My God! This silence is driving me mad!"(p,59) she wants to speak with someone to get rid of this mad silence. She becomes afraid of the uncanny silence prevailing over the sea. Everywhere she sees 'great crimson spots'. She is totally restless and sighs and pines for what is not: "To wait and wait for something that never comes".

She is deeply tormented by her thirst for water. Amid so much Sun and so much sea, her 'throat grows dry and aches' and she badly needs a 'drink of water' but the irony is that "Water, water everywhere/ Nor any drop to drink"(Coleridge: The Rime of the Ancient Mariner). She dreams of an island with water, naturally she gives way to utter hopelessness and cries out "What have we done that we should suffer so?"(p,62)

She is the epitome of Western philosophy of extreme materialism. She is proud of her beauty and the Gentleman recalls everyone was enamoured of her beauty and captivating by her dance performance. She 'was coming home, home after years of struggling, home to success and fame and money'. She incidentally mentions of an Old English Duke who loved her. But she did not like him. Still she took his present, the costly diamond necklace—which she does not want to part with.

Although the Dancer is afraid of Mulletto Sailor, she tries to entice him at first by her diamond necklace and then by her 'bare leg' and 'braided hair'. She is confident about the temptation of her flesh 'I have still one chance left'. When she offers her body to the Sailor for a most costly thing in her present condition- 'Water', we understand the logic of her respective action. In this way, her end is not tragic but a pathetic one. At the rejection of the Sailor, she becomes 'mad', dances a 'grotesque dance' in her frenzy and collapses (died) on the raft.

The playwright gives a detail description of the physical appearance of the Gentleman from the stage direction of the play, 'who evidently had been a first class passenger'(p, 54), is seeing in 'what was once evening dress', but now 'reduced to the mere caricature' of it by 'Sun and salt water'. The Gentleman is described as 'cuts a sorry and pitiful figure as he sits staring stupidly at the water with unseeing eyes. His scanty black hair is dishevelled, revealing a bald spot burnt crimson by the sun', with his 'drooping moustache', 'with his lean face blistered with sun burn', haggard with 'Hunger' and 'Thirst'(p, 55,56).

The Gentleman is not free from greed for material wealth which had its roots in his very biological past. He clearly states hoe 'he laboured hard for long twenty years for earning money and wealth'. When the ship crashed it was therefore but natural that 'he would go back to to his steer room to retrieve his wallet, but instead of it he picked up the Menu Card'. It is a card of "a banquet, proposed to be given in his honour by United States Club of Buenos Aires---"Martini cocktails...champagne—and here we are dying for a crust of bread, for a drink of water!" Lost in despair and desperation, he cries out in an utter agony—"God! God! What a joke to play on us!"(p,59)

The 'middle aged' Gentleman due to extreme thirst cannot keeps himself fully free from committing sinful act. He is suspicious of the Sailor and expresses his 'intention to kill him'. He shares with the Dancer the belief that the Sailor 'has hidden somewhere water for himself'.

The Gentleman's behaviour with the Dancer is mostly that of a civilized man comforting a distress woman, he speaks with her continuously so that he can relieve her from 'thought of death'. He is full of compassion and consideration for her—"Your pardon, dear lady! I am afraid I spoke harshly. I am not myself"(p,63). He comforts her by telling her that 'the sharks are harmless creature'. He also tells her about 'the prospect of reaching an island where there would cool water'. For the Dancer's sake he approaches the Sailor and demands water from him- "Give her the water"(p,66).

The Gentleman's behaviour with the Sailor is mostly that of an un-civilized man. In his hurting of abuses against the Negro Sailor, there is undoubtedly the dominance of racialism. He gets angry and calls the Sailor 'pig', 'a black dog'. It is he who suggests to the Dancer to tempt the Sailor with 'the diamond necklace'. He is a jealous personality, for the Dancer grotesquely starts preparing herself for looking beautiful before the Sailor, the Gentleman curiously feels that she is going to abandon him and trying to get the water all for herself. Forgetting for a moment the painful predicament which forces the Dancer to debase herself in such a manner, the Gentleman ascribes selfish and hideous motif to her desperate way of getting the water from the Sailor. He uncharacteristically mock her and says, "You are frightful" and "What is would you do that dance for him? Dance, Dance, Salome? I will be Orchestra. He will be the gallery; we will both applaud you madly(p,69)."

His gentility or Christian conscience stopped the Sailor's plan to eat the body of dead Dancer. He has to sacrifice his own life for his unselfish resolve to make no compromise with the selfish cannibalism of the Sailor. He dies with him, but his action is one of gentlemanly attitude and conviction, without the slightest touch of self- satisfaction.

The play, *The Thirst* opens with some recurring images of stasis and 'frozen time' endowed with graphic qualities. The 'Sun' is seen straight overhead burning motionlessly of the 'glassy tropic sea' is still. The sun 'glares scorchingly' as if to burn down all. The dramatist symbolizes in its circular recurrence as the 'great angry eye of God'. Again, "the sky above is pitilessly dreary, of a steel blue colour merging into black shadows on the horizon's rim". Like the Sun, the sky is a 'hostile force, pitiless and dreadful'. On the other hand, the 'sea' is 'glassy tropic sea'. This is wide, lonely and silent. It appears like the 'realms of death that awaits human beings after their last journey of life'.

The title 'thirst' itself is a symbol. It symbolizes 'thirst for water, for life and for rescue'. The shipwrecked passengers want to live and drinking water is here the first requirement. They madly run after water, fall out among themselves and even blame one of them. But there is no water for any one of them. The wild Negro turns desperate by thirst, rushes to drink the blood of dead Dancer. The Gentleman throws the Dancer's body into the sea to save it from the sailor's cannibalism. Finally, the sailor and the Gentleman, too, fall into the sea.

The image of 'sharks' are mentioned all through the play from the beginning to the end. They are said to 'infest the still surface of the sea with their fins', 'slowly cutting the sea water in lazy circles'. Again, at the end of the play, when all are lost in the sea, the circle of the fins is said to be no more. The Sailor sings to cast a charm on the sharks. The Gentleman tries to give comforting assurance to nervous lady that the 'sharks do not eat people'.

The 'life raft' is a symbol of last effort to survive in a world in which mortality is inevitable. It stands between the junction of 'death' and 'life', but from where 'life' is far away, but the first is too much near. So, the three passengers are not return to their junction of life.

The play has some other recurring images like 'blood' and 'red colour'. They are also symbolically used to enhance the atmosphere dread and mystery. The Gentleman feels his eyes 'hot, just like the balls of fire'. The Dancer perceives the 'great crimson spots' everywhere, as if the sky 'is raining the drops of blood'. The sea is bloody, the sky is bloody and at last the sea would be reddened with the blood of all the characters.

The 'diamond necklace' is another recurrent image in the play. It was given to Dancer by an Old Duke. She did not like her. She took it as an ingredient ornament of her body. At the end of the play, the Dancer is ready to sacrifice her worthy diamond necklace for a drop of water. After the death or tragic consequence of all the characters in the sea, the diamond necklace glitters alone on the life raft.

The play opens and closes with same images. After the three characters die, O'Neill wants to create the effect of the 'eerie heat waves float upward in the still air like the souls of the drowned'. O' Neill uncompromisingly wants these effects to be created so that the natural objects give specific symbolic meaning in the play.

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