

## Biblical Themes in Eugene O'Neill's Plays

LI Wenhua<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Department of College English Teaching and Studies, Shandong University of Finance and Economics, Jinan, Shandong, China.

\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

Eugene O'Neill was born in a devout Catholic family. Young Eugene had fervently prayed to God to heal his mother's drug addiction, but God did not hear his prayers. Disappointed Eugene abandoned his Catholic faith at the age of fifteen, and began to explore a new god for replacing the old one since then. Eugene O'Neill is an honest, sincere and compassionate dramatist; his works focuses on the meaning of human life. Although European writers and thinkers, such as Freud, Jung, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Shaw, Chekhov, Synge, Conrad, Nietzsche and Strindberg exerted important influences on him in philosophy, psychology and drama, they could not bring him satisfaction and joy. O'Neill's exploration of the ultimate meaning of life had finally returned to the biblical doctrine. Through dealing with the recurrent themes in O'Neill's plays, this paper aims to point out that biblical doctrines are indispensable to O'Neill's plays.

**Key words:** Sin; Evil; Desire; Truth; Light

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### INTRODUCTION

Eugene O'Neill was a descendant of Irish immigrants who were devout Catholics. When Eugene was seven, he

was sent to Mount St. Vincent boarding school sponsored by the Sisters, and received the education of the orthodox doctrine. When Eugene was born, his mother Ella was treated with morphine because of the difficult labour and finally became a morphine addict. Eugene fervently prayed to God to cure his mother's drug addiction, but God did not hear his prayers. At the age of fifteen, Eugene abandoned the Catholic faith—the values and beliefs that have united the Irish through the ages.

O'Neill's abandonment of faith was also closely related with the times. In 1883, along with the German philosopher Nietzsche's enlightening declaration: "God is dead", the Bible as the center of the Western traditional values collapsed. Darwin's theory of evolution and the rapid development of science and technology further shook O'Neill's Catholic faith.

For O'Neill, the loss of belief was not as simple as he imagined and his life always maintained a certain contact with God. O'Neill's father, James, often prayed for God's blessing in his last days. Furthermore, Biblical doctrines are the recurrent themes in O'Neill's works, and O'Neill often declares that his most concern is the "human relationship with God".

### 1. THE LAMP OF THE WICKED WILL BE SNUFFED OUT

Because Adam and Eve were deceived into eating the forbidden fruit by Satan, they were banished from the Garden of Eden as a punishment. Sin spread rapidly in the human beings. Selfishness, prejudice, arrogance, pride, evil, violence, oppression and hatred are the evidences of what the Bible calls sins. Because of sin, the human beings are trapped in a dilemma with no escape. When God saw the human beings getting entangled with corruptions, He felt heartbroken. Man is continually making efforts, such as good deeds, education or philosophy to get close to God and the abundant life, but unfortunately he fails. God

is good and gracious, so God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to incarnate as a man to save His people. On the Cross, Jesus Christ died in our place to pay the penalty for our sins. Jesus' blood cleansed our sins, and he became the mediator for humans' returning to the embrace of God as well as a bridge between God and the human beings.

The pattern of sin—punishment—repentance—salvation in the Bible produces a profound influence on O'Neill's creation. It is clearly reflected in his expressionistic masterpiece *The Emperor Jones*. Jones was a black slave who suffered severe oppression and exploitation under white people. He was once auctioned like an animal at the market and then sent in a dark and smelly salve ship to the United States. After he arrived at the United States, Jones worked as a coolie on a train. He murdered Jeff because of gambling and was imprisoned. Being whipped by a jail guard, Jones was angry and killed the white guard and then fled to an island in the West Indies where he put the white man's greed and fraud values into practice. He deceived the local blacks that he had the power of enchantment and only a silver bullet could kill him. So Jones became an emperor from the fugitive in less than two years. He was so insatiable that the taxes he added on the indigenous blacks almost bled them white. As a result, the indigenous blacks were forced by his cruelty and tyranny to rise up. Jones was scared and fled into a forest. Jones was once a Baptist Christian, but the greed drove him to put Jesus aside temporarily and sold his soul to the devil. As he was running in the forest, those ghosts with whom Jones had a grudge, such as black Jeff he killed, jail guard who oppressed him, etc. continued to appear in front of him. Indigenous blacks were chasing Jones and the drum-roll was getting more and more urgent. Jones felt frightened and began to recall the faith that he had abandoned. Reflecting on the crimes he had committed, Jones fell on his knees to beg God's forgiveness painfully.

The process of Jones' escaping in the jungle is that of confession and atonement, as well as that of his returning to religion and finding his lost soul. Eventually, Jones atoned his sins through his physical death. The tragedy of Jones bears out what the Bible warns: "Do not fret because of evil man or be envious of the wicked, for the evil man has no future hope, and the lamp of the wicked will be suffed out" (Proverbs, 24: 19-20).

## 2. BLACK DESIRES IN HUMAN NATURE

The United States had completed a transition of free competition capitalism to monopoly capitalism, and entered the stage of imperialism from late 19th century to the early twentieth century. The rapid development of science and technology, and the Industrial Revolution which had replaced manual labor with machines brought great changes in human life and ideas. On the one hand, the concept of "Man will conquer nature" was growing in

popularity, the traditional moral values almost collapsed, material and money became the dominant power to govern humanity; on the other hand, highly developed industrialism, science, technology, commercialism and pragmatism inspired "American Dream"—it is marked as rich material dreams. The modern people who abandoned the Bible let their own desires get unlimited expansion, and the United States quickly became the society with the supremacy of materialism and pragmatism.

The story of Jesus and a woman who was drawing water from a well reveals the human plight of succumbing to desires well. One day, Jesus left Judea and went back one more to Galilee. He had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar. It was about the sixth hour, Jesus was wearied and sat down by Jacob's well to rest. Then there was a Samaritan woman came to draw water at that noon time. The lady had five husbands, but she couldn't feel satisfaction. Jesus did not accuse this woman, because Jesus could see through our difficulties, and understand our suffering; he considerably provides palliatives, and firmly indicates the way of peace. The woman gave him water to drink; Jesus also invited the woman to drink his living water. Jesus says: "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4: 13-14).

"This water" refers to money, power, beauty, pleasure and other desires the human beings can never be satisfied with. Human beings are tied up with endless desires, but "Jesus' water" is the water of faith, satisfaction, joy, love and hope.

As one of the greatest playwrights in the history of American theater, O'Neill is deeply worried and pessimistic about the corruptions of modern American society, such as the uncontrollable lusts, moral degeneration and the chasing of material prosperity. In *Desire under the Elms*, O'Neill profoundly reveals the greedy desire, the distorted humanity as well as the ruined spiritual values. In *Desire under the Elms*, everyone was a slave of desires—desire for money, desire for material possession, and the lustful desire. These desires shrouded the Cabot's farm which was under the elms in New England. Simeon and Peter dreamed of going to California Gold Rush; shrewd Eben used stolen money to buy inheritance rights of the farm from Simeon and Peter; they all hated their father Cabot and cursed him into hell early. Abby in order to occupy the farm, married old Cabot against her will. Eben refused to yield, he cursed Abby as a witch; he determined to recapture the farm and take revenge for his mother. Father Cabot brutally abused his wife and children for making the farm prosperous and the sky even became the warm field in his eyes. Under those elms, there was not only burning greedy materialism but also lustful desires. Elderly Cabot could not meet the sexy, enchanting Abby's physiological needs. Abby did her

utmost to seduce and tease the vigorous and strong Eben; the two eventually broke through the moral and ethical constraints, and they were driven by lust to commit incest which ended in the tragedy of their son's death.

In *Desire under the Elms*, O'Neill analyses the black desires of greed and immorality in human nature, which can only lead to devastating outcome. It is exactly what the Bible prophesies "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16: 26).

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### 3. THE WAY THE TRUTH THE LIFE

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When *Days Without End* premiered, the public notice of the premiere claimed that it was a modern miracle play, and it portrayed the conflict between atheism and religion, but religion ultimately won.

In *Days Without End*, John Loving was born in a Catholic family. His home atmosphere was one of love. When John Loving was at the age of fifteen, his father contracted pneumonia during a flu epidemic. John reverently prayed to God to preserve his father's life, but his father was dead, and John's faith was a bit shaken. When his mother also fell ill because of the grief and exhaustion, John thought it was the punishment for his suspecting of God, and John prayed to God over and over again to cure his sick mother. However, the miracle did not happen, and his mother finally passed away. At this point, John found his God as deaf, blind and merciless who returned hatred for love. Enraged at God, John cursed his God and denied Him. He promised to give his soul to the devil for revenge. However, John Loving went into a great spiritual crisis because of the loss of faith. John Loving's soul divided into two: John was painful due to the loss of faith; Loving was full of hatred and suspicion. After he abandoned his God, John journeyed towards the truth. He had studied Greek philosophy, theory of evolution, mechanistic philosophy, and even Taoism and Buddhism, but these could not let John satisfy. Finally, John was in love with Elsa and he regarded the love as the truth. Driven by the mysterious demon in his heart, John and Lucy had adultery, and tarnished the pure love. His wife Elsa painfully went into a heavy rain, and got pneumonia with death expected. John felt remorse and was constantly tortured by betraying the love of God. He wanted to get forgiveness, hoped to alleviate his crimes through praying, and tried to rediscover the lost faith. When John tried approaching God every time, the devil Loving would be cynical or an unwarranted obstruction. Father Baird prayed for John: "Dear Jesus, grant me the grace to bring Jack back to Thee. Make him see that thou, alone, hast the words of Eternal Life, the power still to save—" (O'Neill, 1988, p.172).

After an intense inner conflict, John went to the old church. Even though the devil Loving tried to prevent John from entering the church, John was exceptionally

sturdy at this time and he forced the devil Loving back.

In front of the huge Cross, John suddenly knelt down, and raised his hands up to the figure of Christ as he sobbed and prayed. When John saw Jesus' eyes lighting up, he felt as if God answered his prayers, John was overjoyed: "Ah! Thou hast heard me at last! Thou hast not forsaken me! Thou hast always loved me! I am forgiven! I can forgive myself—through Thee! I can believe!" (O'Neill, 1988, p.179). The devil Loving fell down in front of the Cross and died, as if some unseen force knocked him down. John's soul merged with Loving's soul and John Loving regained a new life. John Loving praised: "Life laughs with God's love again! Life laughs with love!" (O'Neill, 1988, p.180).

John Loving's journey of mentality confirms what Jesus says: "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14: 6). The glory of the Lord, which is perfect truth, goodness, and beauty, cannot be shaded by anyone. The Bible credo is the light in front of the people. Abandoning the doctrine of God, the human beings can only have a disorderly and cruel world and go to degenerating and evil.

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### 4. LIGHT OF THE WORLD

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After human race enters the modern society, God as the center of the world is constantly challenged with the development of natural sciences and social sciences. People have more confidence in themselves, and show more interest in the world around. They question the authority of the Bible, and have the willingness to search for and discover truth by them. However, there are no necessary values or morality if there is no God. The loss of faith means the loss of the soul and the fall of the spirit, and life is inevitably full of darkness, nothingness, anxiety and restlessness.

As a playwright with a strong sense of responsibility, O'Neill deeply concerns about the belonging of the human spirit and soul. In his late realistic masterpiece, *The Iceman Cometh*, O'Neill profoundly demonstrates the modern state of loneliness and sadness of life without the faith, as well as the confusion and hesitation of people.

*The Iceman Cometh* tells a story that takes place in cloistered Harry Hope's saloon at New York's West End. The people gathered at Harry Hope's saloon were a group of losers who were abandoned by life. Without the courage to live or the courage to die, they indulged themselves in alcohol, doing a variety of self-deceiving "Day dreams". Harry Hope's saloon is an ideal place for them to escape from the painful reality to the fantasy world and the past. As the prostitute Margie says: "Jees, Poil, its de morgue wid all de stiff's on deck" (O'Neill, 1988, p.600).

Hickey was a knowledgeable salesman. He would come to the saloon to celebrate Hope's birthday each year. Today, however, the salesman Hickey was very different from the past, and he came to tell people that he quit

drinking. He was also like a missionary to persuade them to abandon absurd "Day dreams", to act bravely, to face life and fulfill their dreams. Hickey made them uneasy and distraught. Because of Hickey's encouragement, Willie wanted to talk to the district attorney and get a job; Chuck and Cora decided to get married, and buy a farm for settling down; Mosher would look for the circus owner, hoping to reproduce his glory as a circus performer; McGloin determined to go to police station tomorrow; Lewis determined to leave Hope's saloon, and look for a clerical job; Wetjoen would look for a labor work. Since his wife's death, Hope had stayed in the saloon without going out. Following Hickey's advice, Hope gingerly went out of the door for a walk to the constituency... But one by one they were frightened to come back. Hickey was taken away by detective Moran soon after he murdered his wife. The saloon owner Harry Hope found a reason to escape: Hickey changed and he was a lunatic. This let them have a reason to continue the orgy—there was nothing happening and they were teased by an insane person. After Hickey was arrested, the drinkers were relieved. They went back to their "Day dreams" state and went on the drinking binge.

In *The Iceman Cometh*, O'Neill shows deep sympathy and compassion to modern people who lose the faith and the value of life! The tragedy of the seventeen roomers in Harry Hope's saloon reflects what Jesus says: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John, 8: 12).

## CONCLUSION

Eugene O'Neill is a good and honest playwright who has a compassionate feeling for people. His works are questioning the ultimate meaning of life. After abandoning his Catholic faith which is an inescapable part of the Irish life at the age of fifteen, O'Neill began to explore a new god for replacing the old one since then. Although the philosophy of Nietzsche, the philosophic theories of Schopenhauer, Darwin's naturalistic theory, Freud's psychoanalysis had more or less influences on O'Neill's theatrical creation, they did not give him the satisfaction and joy. O'Neill eventually returned to the biblical

doctrine for answering the above questions. The biblical doctrines are indispensable to O'Neill's plays. So we can conclude that Eugene O'Neill has never turned his back on God; he is a faithful follower of God.

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