

Doom, Desire  
and the Polis  
in Eugene O'Neill's  
Drama



# Doom, Desire and the Polis in Eugene O'Neill's Drama

By

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To the memory of my father

To my children Safwane and Amal who offer me much hope  
to work for *a continual becoming*

To my mother Salha and elder brother Mahfoudh for their greatest  
support and love



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## INTRODUCTION

“Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come.”  
(Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 4-5)

Eugene O’Neill’s dramatic work marks a turning point in the history of American theater. It signals the birth and rise of modern American tragedy. His artistic production and tragic genius enabled him to gain a solid reputation on the American theatrical scene and the continent. He is America’s greatest playwright and winner of the Nobel prize in 1936. Thus, the “American tragedy stepped on to the stage of national and international significance with the work of Eugene O’Neill,” writes Egri (1988, 21). Indeed, he founded an outline of the history of American theater, experimenting with various dramatic forms and techniques. The concept of doom, the representation of desire, the formulas for phantasy and schizophrenia, neurosis, and delirium are reconceived by the playwright. His investments of theatrical language, style and stage directions carry shifts of perspectives, deviations of discourse, tragic mutations, and transitional phases of performance. The *polis* and its institutions/state apparatuses, regulations and laws that produce different subjectivities/desiring machines become the actors of the libidinal energy of drama.

O’Neill’s stage is the place where American thoughts, ideas, and events are enacted. In Greek as in modern theater, the stage is the mirror of the *polis*. In fact, “the origins of the *polis* help explain the ancient Greek understanding that the community comes before the individual” (Sheehan 2007, 23). Whether in the distant past or more recent times, the “polis” is the most pertinent term used to depict the space where the subject’s desire is transformed into despair because of prescriptive regulations and oppressive institutions. Freedom and subjecthood withdraw their essence only from life in the *polis*. The term, *polis*, is still viable in theater to define order and the relation between the subject and power, between organism and organization. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt contends:

The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking

together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. “Wherever you go, you will be a *polis*”. (1958, 198)

The theater is the space where human desires, dreams, and socio-political matters in the *polis* are diagnosed. It was a dynamic process with a crucial function in Greek civic life and in the changing beliefs, structures and practices of the modern *polis*. Theater has been perceived as the medium for the well-being of the community. It seems to be a common space to dramatize moral, existential and socio-political issues. As Easterling contends, the “theatre was a dynamic phenomenon, and we should expect its ritual, social and artistic functions to change rapidly during a period of intense activity and experimentation like the fifth and early fourth centuries” (1997, 46). O’Neill’s theater is the appropriate space for the performance of modern *great deeds and actions* in the midst of an overruling *polis*. Actually, “during the height of his popularity in the 1920s, Eugene O’Neill dreamed of a theater committed to the realities of the human experience as he saw them” (Hayes 2021, 167).

O’Neill’s perceptions and visions of tragedy are articulated in modern figures and structures. But his views as well as his characters remain within the patterns of the tragic flaw or *hamartia*, a pathway leading to downfall. In the introduction to *Poetics*, *hamartia* is defined by Malcolm Heath as a crucial concept that includes errors made out of ignorance or misjudgment:

But it will also include moral errors of a kind which do not imply wickedness. Aristotle’s attempt to prescribe the best kind of tragic plot is therefore not as narrowly prescriptive as it may seem at first sight. His procedure is negative. He excludes various kinds of plot which he thinks demonstrably less than ideal; but that leaves considerable scope for diversity. The change to bad fortune must come about because of a *hamartia* (that is, not deservedly); but since *hamartia* can take a variety of forms, the best kind of tragic plot is not narrowly prescribed. (1996, xxxiii)

This Aristotelian norm is taken up in O’Neill’s modern tragedies to describe the causes of defeat, as well as to unlock the depth of the human psyche pitted against the ineluctability of event, fate, and other inscrutable forces. O’Neill invokes new perspectives on the tragic vision of the modern human struggle, his sufferings and incapability to perceive what lies beyond and ahead. In fact, he revolutionizes the American dramatic scene.

The postmodern world, like the modern and the ancient world, is yet another stage on which are enacted human conflicts, myths, dreams, desires, and desperations. The basic themes of life, death, alienation, struggle, free will, determinism, fate, defeat, rebirth, and utopia have philosophical and existential implications. In *The Anti-Oedipus Papers*, Félix Guattari argues that “myth is not a reference anymore but, rather, a transitional fantasy, a theater of deterritorialized events” (2006, 157). From a postmodern prism, O'Neill's drama develops new significations of the flows of desire to liberate it from the ancient doom and make collective investments freed even from the constraints of writing. Desire is inscribed in obvious structures and meanings. These issues have also been addressed by most modern American playwrights, including Eugene O'Neill and his contemporaries, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams.

Modern critics find that Eugene O'Neill writes with intense dramatic power, comparing his dramatic work to that of European dramatists, like Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg. The sustained critical works of Berkowitz, Bigsby, Bogard, Diggins, Dowling, Dubost, Manheim, and Maufort focus on crucial issues and provide different perspectives on O'Neill's modern literary production. Thus, in the modern world, the individual is pitted against psycho-sexual and socio-economic forces that prevent him from achieving adequacy with the life world. Human beings are liable to err, and their struggle is always shaped by deplorable episodes. Their lives are drawn on the flaws which implicate the inevitable contingent power of doom.

The aforementioned critics provide different views on O'Neill's dramatic sense of modernity, desire and fate. But, they do not deal with fate/doom and desire as a focal dimension with philosophical implications. In *Eugene O'Neill and the Founders of Modern Drama*, Michael Manheim evokes a vital critical point, writing: “the plays are always open in their implications for the future. We find ourselves moved to exclaim with Olga at the close of *The Three Sisters*: “If we only knew, if we only knew!” (1989, 55), (*The Three Sisters* is a play written by Anton Chekhov). In O'Neill's plays, fate is not perceived from a metaphysical point of view as it was in Greek and in Shakespearean tragedy. Rather, it tends to be treated equally with determinism. In O'Neill's plays, the subject is engaged in a fatal struggle, like the tragic hero in Greek tragedy, but his fate is no longer predestined by magical and supernatural forces. In fact, material forces and the physical laws of the *polis* overdetermine the subject's fate.

Despite balanced and comprehensive assessments of O'Neill's drama, the critical studies remain fragmented and limited. Some views and perspectives have escaped the critical attention and intrigue of modern investigators to come up with outstanding achievements concerning the issue of doom and desire from a wide range of (post)modern perspectives stemming from the corpus. Here El Shirbini's view seems to be pertinent, contending that "it seems apparent that much of O'Neill's work was truly before its time, and it is only with the advantage of time that critics have come to embrace his work and recognize his genius" (1998, 8).

Through my analysis of O'Neill's drama, my intention is to come to a deeper investigation of human struggle in modernity and the specific definition of "fate" under the control of modern systemic man-made forces. O'Neill's plays evoke "a drama of souls, the adventures of "Free Wills", with the masks that govern them and constitute their fates" (Hinden 1993, 90). The real struggle is between Man's will and the power of fate, becoming a human artifact, besides being a divine determination. In O'Neill's view, there is an ironic fate pursuing and molding the character's life. His protagonists are doomed desiring figures struggling against forces yet to be defined. Indeed, in the modern American *polis*, the subject aims at emancipation from various repressive and oppressive consumerist forces including sex, lucre and accumulation of wealth, and seems to be consumed himself in this system of production, a victim and supporter of a system, a *polis*, where he has no say and no choice. His being and his desire are confiscated by the obscure forces that invest/infest him as well as his space/time.

In both literature and philosophy, fate is often the antithesis of the individual's desire. Thus, in ancient Elizabethan and modern drama, fate is the tragic climactic event of the plot. In Sophocles' tragedy, human life is shaped by tragic incidents, protagonists suffer and struggle in the face of a powerful divine fate - the "awful warning from the gods" (Sophocles 1994, 81). Human beings are condemned to embrace an *evil destiny* because of some guilty actions or flaws. Fate is equated with destiny (good or bad fortune), and doom, inevitably leading to a deadly or tragic end. Defining the concept of 'fate' and tracing its etymology, Bollas writes:

Fate derives from the Latin *Fatum* which is the past participle of *fari* which means to speak. '*Fatum*' is a 'prophetic declaration' and '*fatus*' is an oracle ... Destiny from Latin *destinare*, means to fasten down, secure, or make firm, and the word destination is a derivative of this root. Thus destiny is linked to action rather than words. If fate emerges from the

word of the gods, then destiny is a preordained path that man can fulfil.  
(1989, 32)

In fact, O'Neill uses *fate* and '*evil destiny*' interchangeably. 'Evil destiny' is equal to doom. Fate is a power which controls the course of life. The workings of fate culminate in the destruction of man's will and life. The notion of fate in O'Neill's drama emerges to stress the (post)modern conception of forces and contingencies that shape the process of life. The playwright draws a link between the classical and the (post)modern definition of fate/doom. His attempt is an actualization of human subjection to an unalterable course of events determining the tragic closure of Man's struggle. Thus, the focal point is that "the tragic climax of the Greek tragedy comes when human will confronts the limits of divine power, and so encounters its doom" (Orr 1989, xv). Fate is an operative life force which guides and controls humanity. Sin, guilt, Man's desire, and defeat are dramaturgically staged in O'Neill's theater to display the inscrutable forces of tragic fate. Greek perspectives on fate are inevitably a starting point to cover its multiplex perceptions in O'Neill's drama. Desire is not free as long as it is conditioned by the power of fate.

From a large standpoint, the issue of fate has been the subject of much debate in ancient, modern and postmodern drama, and philosophy. Fate is perceived, conceptualized, and historicized in multi-faceted ways. It is granted various descriptions and definitions. It is a crucial issue highlighted by ancient philosophers such as Aristotle. In Greek tragedy<sup>1</sup>, fate is sealed even before birth, and it is the tragic link between life and death, the individual cannot escape the fate that the gods had in store for him/her. O'Neill's modern perception of fate is that it develops a new vision of Human struggle against Life Forces. In O'Neill's drama, fate is defined as the "Force behind" that determines the process of living. Our philosophical and literary study of fate in O'Neill's drama compels us to explore other doctrines, namely "free will" and "determinism". The "Force behind" and other inscrutable forces not only haunt and alienate the individual in a fragmented and dystopian world, but also restrict his

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<sup>1</sup> Tragedy has six main elements: plot (arrangement of events), character (actor participating in the action), diction (language used), thought (message, meaning), spectacle (props, costume, decorum), song (chorus). The aim of tragedy is to combine the six elements in order to make the audience feel pity and fear. These emotions are awakened and released through the process of purgation, *catharsis*. Again, the aim of tragedy is to bring about catharsis to arouse in the spectators sensations of pity and fear and then purge them. Therefore, spectators leave theater cleansed of any sense of evil.

freedom within the confines of necessity. Fate with its power and weight becomes equal to Man's will. Man's fate depends on his surrender to desire. Indeed,

O'Neill has made his characters the victims of circumstances over which they have no control. They move in a world of dark and sinister forces, which govern the destinies of men and women helpless and impotent before the workings of these unpredictable powers. This does not mean that his characters are weaklings whose lives are pathetic but not tragic. Just the reverse is true. It is the great character whose life becomes significant when it struggles against the inevitable. (Winther 1934, 176)

Doom, desire and free will (over)determine contingent human actions in the *polis*. The interaction between these concepts shows that the desire of *being* is a pure intention, and that *becoming* is a process towards the freedom of the subject. The desire of the subject needs to be liberated from the burden of all repressive and oppressive forces inherent in the body politic and all state apparatuses. In O'Neill's tragedies, under study, the subject is not driven by the energy of desire only, but also by the libidinal inscriptions grafted on and inscribed in the configuration of the modern capitalist *polis*. The subject's daily struggle aims at freeing himself from vacuous capitalist consumerism, its facets of absurdist guilt and nihilism, and the schizophrenic neurosis and paranoia it entails.

The selected plays serve as textual bases to articulate the relationship of the tragic triad of doom, desire, and the *polis*. The six plays that constitute the corpus examined in this book are: *The Hairy Ape* (1922), *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), *Strange Interlude* (1927), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), *The Iceman Cometh* (1939), and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1941), all of which are laden with mad desires, visions, utopian dreams, eutopian endgames, and schizorevolutionary thoughts. O'Neill's plays portray the discontent and the restlessness lying at the heart of the modern American *polis*. As Singh contends, he "gave new dimensions to modern tragedy with his adroit use of myths and symbols, and, thus served as a link between the ancient classical and the modern tragedy by providing continuity, vitality, and perspicacity which the twentieth century tragic drama lamentably lacked" (1991, 13). His plays provide the audience with a new perception of an existentialist desire: artificial, revolutionary, and deterritorializing. The relationship between the individual and the lifeworld is an important issue in O'Neill's dramatic work. He focuses on the subject's perennial struggle to attain a state of selfhood, positing despair as the very essence of the human condition. The ancient dramatic legacy is combined with modern thought and philosophy,

establishing a continuum in the staging out of the human person and his/her world:

O'Neill's purpose, stated again and again, was to establish in America a theatre comparable to the theatre of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides – and that was a religious theatre, replete with smoking altars and priests in robes. But, O'Neill, to his credit, did not start by staging revivals or by imitating the grand manner. He took themes and subjects from his experience, “grim and depressing” as they were, and “with the utmost sincerity of expression” carried them to the bitter end. (Sewal 1991, 8)

In *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill combines the ancient myth, Oedipus complex, with modern psychology. *Mourning Becomes Electra* is a classic American drama of love, revenge, and suicide. It is considered by some critics as a modern version of Aeschylus' *Orestia*. *Desire Under the Elms* stages a family torn apart by greed and passion. In both tragedies there is a heavy price paid for sinful pleasures. These plays provide Freudian and Lacanian explanations of the character's passion, desire, and possessiveness. O'Neill's characters are engulfed in tragic mutations, looking for alternative means to possibilize spiritual healing.

In *Strange Interlude* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, the subjects lead a constant existential struggle to attain a state of worth. O'Neill figures out his protagonists as the lunatics whose aim is to find an escape route from existential malaise. The resort to sexuality, drugs and alcohol entrap the subjects in an absurd world. Freedom guarantees free choice, but it deludes the subject. The subject's will is limited and fragmented by *desire* in a dystopian world. In *The Hairy Ape* and *The Iceman Cometh*, the characters are obsessed with the utopian myth of the American Dream and lucrative success. They are unable to go beyond the delusions of the material world, which are deeply buried in the national psyche. O'Neill's protagonists are entrapped in a world of alienation, paranoia, territorialization, and schizophrenia. Money and business seem to be false gods. The capitalist culture and the totalitarian regime compel O'Neill's characters to be schizorevolutionary subjects. The two plays treat (post)modern socio-political issues. They seem to embed a serious call for the revised conception of schizophrenia as a revolutionary liberating process, which gives birth to nomadic desiring machines.

Reading the dramatic texts or attending the performances of the plays is crucial to draw an insightful analysis from pertinent perspectives. As a matter of fact, these readings yield themselves to screening O'Neill's

texts as psychoanalytical, existentialist, and eventually phenomenological. Indeed, our analysis and advocacy of the seemingly crucial comments on the phenomenological struggle of humanity on the one hand, and the actualization of tragic dilemmas in the American scene on the other hand, will be based on the following perspectives and prisms: Psychoanalysis, Existentialism, New Historicism, and Schizoanalysis. These multiple perceptions are designed to allow multiple insights and unveil various facets to the tragic vision of modernity. These theoretical perspectives will also be deployed to explore the discursive and poetic practices for further understanding of the configuration of O'Neill's subjectivities. In this, I hope to cover some unexamined alleys of research on O'Neill.

In examining the problematic of doom and desire in the American *polis*, Greek perspectives are an essential vantage point. Like ancient dramatists, O'Neill endeavors to create a theatrical aura where the audience can be touched by the complexities of life, and to fathom the enigmas of tragic thought and event in the discursive practices of the *polis*. Indeed, any exploration of the tragic events and the vanity of human efforts and desires in tragic theater has to be initiated with fatalism and a sense of destiny/fate or doom. For Dawson,

it is impossible in discussing drama to avoid concepts like 'Fate' and 'destiny', since, particularly when tragedy is under consideration, they can foster all sorts of misunderstanding. For instance, Suzanne Langer continues: 'Destiny is, of course, a virtual phenomenon - there is no such thing in cold fact.' Here 'thing' and 'cold fact' quite fog the issue, as I think does 'phenomenon'. Destiny is a mode of understanding, and we can talk of it in connection with real life (which is full of facts at all temperatures). ...Of course, characters in plays may talk of Fate or Destiny, and this becomes part of our understanding of them and their world. (1970, 86-87)

From a Greek theatrical perspective, the concept of tragic fate is grounded in Sophocles' Oedipus myth. Commenting upon the Oedipal narrative, Michael Meyer writes:

Although the gods do not appear on stage in *Oedipus the King*, their power is ever present as the characters invoke their help or attempt to defy them. In addition, Greek tragedy tends to be public rather than private. The fate of the community -the state- is often linked with that of the protagonist, as when Thebes suffers a plague as a result of Oedipus's mistaken action. (2000, 985)



Fate is personal and not universal, but "the inevitability of erring is not confined to tragic heroes - they exemplify human life in general" (Oudemans and Lardinois 1987, 106). The philosophical interest for us is that the inevitability of erring is not confined to a weak will ingrained in human nature, but to the flaws inscribed in a contingent power of doom.

Like the Greek tragedians, Eugene O'Neill relies on myths and the Aristotelian philosophical perception of human tragedy and its sophisticated enactment in theater<sup>2</sup>. The plot is an essential technique in the construction of tragedy. Aristotle considers it, in *Poetics*, "the source and (as it were) the soul of tragedy" (1996, 12). In this respect, Human life is structured like a tragedy; it is a play performed in an alien theatrical space. Fate lies at the center of the plotted pattern of a predestined life; it shapes the rehearsed process of life, dramatized mainly through the inescapable limits of recurrent tragic actions. Indeed, human tendencies to infringe moral laws result in guilt. Guilt becomes the curse entrapping man and condemning him to confront his tragic fate. The tragic tension manifested in facing fate reaches its highest sense through the chorus' songs and lyrical poetry. But the question is: Is this tragic flaw still viable in modern theatrical patterns?

The psychoanalytical perspectives of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan are applicable to O'Neill's domestic plays to probe the psyche and the repressed. Psychoanalysis is founded upon the investigation of the conscious and unconscious constituents of the psyche and the basic structures of civilization. It is concerned with the interpretation of dreams<sup>3</sup>, unconscious desires, and sexual repression. Freud's technical

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<sup>2</sup> In *The Greek Sense of Theatre*, J. Michael Walton defines theatre as a place where the contemplation of the vicissitudes of life is possible. Actors can assimilate the forces molding life in reality through staging heroes and Gods. Thus, "on that stage nothing stood in isolation. Background, setting, costume, mask, properties and performers related, and composed a series of pictures illustrating for the audience the wider implications of what was a fairly simple story" (Walton 1984, 29).

<sup>3</sup> In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud states that "the first work to treat the dream as an object of psychology seems to be Aristotle's *On Dreams and Dream Interpretation* (1999, 1). Aristotle concedes that the nature of the dream is indeed, daemonic, but not divine- which might well reveal a profound meaning, if one could hit on the right translation" (Freud 1999, 7). Dreams are unrealized desires and unfulfilled wishes. They are unconscious repressed in the psyche. The *polis* with the structure of its civilization creates the constraints -laws of prohibition- to the subject's desires.

strategy is to explore the behavior and drives of the subject to attain his/her desires. Dreams, Oedipal desire, psychical repression as well as the id (the wholly unconscious of the mind, consisting of the drives and of material later repressed), the ego (which is partly conscious and contains the defense mechanisms and the capacities to calculate, reason, and plan) and the superego (also only partly conscious, which harbors the conscience, and beyond that, unconscious feelings of guilt) form a big parcel of psychical probes. Psychoanalysis is based on close reading and interpretation of language. It is directly related to literary criticism, paying much attention to puns, slips of the tongue, displacements, and condensation.

Like Freud, Lacan focuses on unconscious motives and emotions. He claims that desire is a central drive that unconsciously determines man's actions. In O'Neill's tragedies, the unconscious forms the essence of selfhood. The true self lies in the unconscious. There is enough evidence in O'Neill's plays that tragic thoughts are inspired from the inner truth of the individual's psyche. Thus, his tragedies seem to be successive attempts to explore *the unconscious which is structured like a language*. O'Neill's protagonists are unconsciously driven by libidinal desires to confront their fate. Indeed, Lacan tries to free desire from the Freudian fixed scheme. Instead, he looks at its dialectics<sup>4</sup>. Thus, Oedipal desire can be understood and recognized through "the discourse of the Other." Bertens states that

for Lacan, we need the response and recognition of others and of the Other to arrive at what we experience as our identity. Our 'subjectivity' is construed in interaction with 'others', that is, individuals who resemble us in one way or another but who are irrevocably different. We become subjects – that is to say, ourselves – by way of the perspectives and views of other. (2008, 126-27)

Lacan's perception of the dynamics of desire<sup>5</sup> is based on the unconscious, which implies '*a structural relation between language and desire*'. Desire

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<sup>4</sup> The dialectics of desire means that the latter is not fixed. Rather, it is in continuous movement from one subject to another. It is an impulse shared at least by two subjects. It appears not only in the discourse of the subject, but also in the discourse of the Other.

<sup>5</sup> In *Logics of Disintegration*, Peter Dews holds that Jacques Lacan adopts Hegel's theory of desire which is always mediated by the desire of the dominant/Other. It seems that O'Neill develops this perception and makes his characters desire each

incarnates itself in symbolic language. In *Ecrits*, Lacan contends: “we would like to know more about the effects of symbolization in the child, and psychoanalysts who are also mothers” (1677, 36). In this context, Felman infers from Lacan’s *Ecrits* that ‘desire is incarnated into symbolic speech at the moment of its emergence’ (1994, 81). In *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Desire Under the Elms*, the use of symbols is central in implementing the tragic seeds of human fate. Characters express their repressed and latent desires through eloquent speech acts. Indeed, from a Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective, we rely on the speech act or “the discourse of the Other” in order to explore the subject’s dilemma with desire in O’Neill’s plays. O’Neill treats desire, in the domestic sphere, as an unconscious tragic determinant leading the subject to a fateful psychological disintegration.

Discourse, which effectively makes the libido of the desirer present and active, constitutes the substance of the unconscious. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Lacan argues that “if psychoanalysis is to be constituted as the science of the unconscious, one must set out from the notion that the unconscious is structured like a language” (1977, 203). Here “Lacan reinterprets Freud in light of structuralist theories, turning psychoanalysis from an essentially humanist philosophy or theory into a poststructuralist one” (Klages 2006, 74). The development and the change, or the dialectics of the subject’s desire, are determined by the effects of speech. The deconstruction of the drives and dreams is an attempt to reproduce the protagonists’ discourse, and diagnose the complexities of human existence.

Existentialism is a basically actional, phenomenological approach to the subject’s *free will*, *desire* and *determinism*. Here, I rely, basically, on the philosophical theory of Jean-Paul Sartre in studying the existential dimensions of desire and fate. Sartre claims that man is free and responsible for all his choices and decisions in spite of all existential forces engulfing him in tragic tensions. From Camus’ view, O’Neill’s protagonists’ daily struggle is geared towards fulfilling their desires, but the real world disappoints them. In modernity, the tension between desire and existential malaise intensifies the subject’s alienation and despair, shaping therefore his/her absurd fate. Any attempt to invest desire leads to bad faith, Sartre’s concept of “*mauvaise foi*”.

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other's desires. This perception resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's postmodern theory of “desire of desire”.

O'Neill's protagonists are modern individuals whose confrontation with material forces makes them conscious of their alienation from their aims and desires. Hence, they realize the absurd meaning of life. Free will, the dynamics of desire and the inescapability of doom form an important dimension of O'Neill's existentialist perception of subjectivity. Desire is central to the subject's existential struggle for self-realization. It is a dynamic force leading to the emergence of self-consciousness. *In Inwardness and Existence*, Walter A. Davis comments on Hegel's "self-consciousness" and the relation between desire and the object: "Self-consciousness is the return out of otherness. Its first form is desire, which grounds the world in the subject. The world is before me not as object of knowledge but as field for desire" (1989, 25). Desire is a field of investment, but it is entrapped in the mechanics of the *polis*.

Despite free will, the helpless individual is in a perpetual process of reclaiming freedom and being. This Sartrean idea is hypothesized in O'Neill's plays articulating desire as a natural necessity that controls the subject's free will. Dilman highlights Weil and Spinoza's claim that man is subjected to necessity; that he acts in the "bondage of necessity" (12). Man cannot escape the forces working through his will, especially 'moral gravity'. This is Weil's conception of freedom within the confines of necessity. The existential forces that overdetermine the individual's fate act from within and from without. Man is both a subject and an object of desire. He exercises his will in a world of necessity, which makes the contingencies that encroach on his life a prison house. Furthermore, and from a Deleuzian perspective, O'Neill seems to insist on the emancipation of desire from the crucible of libidinal necessity.

In articulation with Existentialism, New historicism will serve here to further continue the phenomenological exploration of the tragic event and discourse of O'Neill's modern tragedy. New historicism adopts Derrida's notion that "every facet of reality is textualized" and Foucault's idea that "social structures are determined by 'discursive practices' (Barry 1995, 179). These poststructuralist ideas are historicized in O'Neill's drama. In his plays, there is a clear relationship between the American theater and the *city-state/polis*. Indeed, "New historicism is a mode of critical interpretation which privileges power relations as the most important context for texts of all kinds. As a critical practice, it treats literary texts as a space where power relations are made visible" (Brannigan 2005, 6). The web of language itself in O'Neill's plays reveals the characters' real drives and their resistance to the dominant forces that delude them in their fight against their doom. In this perspective, the relationships between

language and power, textuality and the world, desire and subjectivity, social discourse, and desiring subjects are closely related and dealt with by Eugene O'Neill.

*The Hairy Ape* and *The Iceman Cometh*, in particular, do seem to be strongly engrained in New Historicist outlooks and claims. Indeed, Stephen Greenblatt, the prominent New Historicist critic, demonstrates that artistic production reveals the conventions and relations between institutions and social practices. The literary text is not simply a product of history, but rather a construction of the interaction between the individual/the community and ideologies. Thus, O'Neill's artistic work is a mapping of cultural, political, social, and economic dispensations. His plays, *The Hairy Ape* and *The Iceman Cometh*, shed light on the history of America during the first half of the twentieth century. The main historical aspects are subsumed in the processes of power relations and ideology.

New Historicist perspectives will thus offer an additional instrument to broaden the scope of O'Neill's literary and philosophical investigation of the history of desire in the American *polis*. In his dramatic texts, economic and socio-political forces overdetermine the fate of the individual/community. These forces put the subject, in O'Neill's America, on the track of struggle against the reigning capitalist institutions and ideologies agitating for emancipation from terrible historical fate. Accordingly, O'Neill's plays need to be approached from insightful poststructuralist views 'to avoid any hasty move towards a referent outside the text.' In *Historicism*, Simon Malpas gets along with New Historicist basics that

texts are part of the everyday, are firmly embedded in the institutions and power relations of general culture, that there is no separate realm of poetic utterance, and that such formal isolation drains literature and culture of any political and social importance. Only by refusing to separate expression from other forms of social and cultural interaction, New Historicists have argued, can art or literature come to be meaningful or important to us at all. (2006, 60)

The American critic Louis Montrose insists on "a simple definition of New Historicism a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually the combination between the interest in the textuality of history and the historicity of texts" (Barry 1995, 175). Simon Malpas advocates these ideas, supporting his views with Stephen Greenblatt's argument: "the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex,

communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society” (2006, 61-62). Indeed, these poststructuralist views are pertinently applicable to O’Neill’s plays.

O’Neill historicizes the notion of the American dream, the enormous effect of ideology, lucrative success and the spirit of capitalism, and the sense of annihilation and death. We ground our critical analysis on the details of the text and its historical dimensions. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes:

Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphorical, historical, psycho-biographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general. (1982, 158)

Beyond Historicism, Poststructuralists Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault approach texts from the perspective of language. It is impossible to access reality except through texts. New Historicist views thoroughly grant a mode of critical interpretation of O’Neill’s dramatic texts and bring to light hidden assumptions by fathomning images and metaphors. O’Neill historicizes and textualizes the circulation of socio-political desire in the modern American *polis* at a certain epoch. The American dream and the capitalist ideology delude Americans. The Pursuit of Happiness through different ways affects the socio-political practices of the *polis*. In addition, the Nietzschean theory of “the will-to-power”, the “eternal life”, the “death of God” and Schopenhauer’s pessimistic philosophy and the notion of “the will-to-life” are textualized and historicized in O’Neill’s plays.

The poststructuralist perspective has a bias towards Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of desire and subjectivity in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* and *A Thousand Plateaus*. In *Poststructuralism*, Catherine Belsey argues that “poststructuralism itself notes the conventional tendency of western philosophy to assume that meanings exist before language names them, and calls this assumption ‘logocentrism’, inventing a new term by putting together the Greek *logos* (meaning sense, idea) with familiar suffix ‘centrism’ (propensity to centre on)” (2006, 44). The postmodern theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari provide schizoanalytic prisms and perspectives for the notion of desire and doom.

Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy is adopted as critical theory to analyze the subject's action and discourse. This section falls within the prismatic scope of schizoanalysis as an invitation to read O'Neill's plays differently to convey deeper meaning of desire, subjectivity, and the power of fate. Indeed, discourse analysis can free theatrical speech from the contingency of space and time; that is discourses anticipate the birth of new modes of subjectivity. At this level, discourse analysis seems to grant a pragmatic perception and understanding of desire, subjectivity, and nomadology in O'Neill's drama. Ultimately, within the theoretical framework, much emphasis will be laid on discourse analysis<sup>6</sup> as a method to understand the language used and its various implications.

From schizoanalytic perspectives, the critical study of the subjects' discourse in O'Neill's plays is a radical breakthrough in literature and schizophrenia. Schizophrenia is a revolutionary process that makes the realm of the subjects' thoughts, desires, challenges, and struggle wander beyond the ancient and modern tragic territories. For O'Neill-(postmodern) *thinker and perspicacious*- desire and its flows are fated to be cast in a material world, to take a dynamic political essence. It seems that O'Neill's notion of desire coincides with that of Deleuze and Guattari. In *The Hairy Ape* and *The Iceman Cometh*, O'Neill creates theatrical situations in cramped spaces where revolutionary subjects provide discourse community, reflecting schizophrenia and nomadology.

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<sup>6</sup> In *Discourse and Literature: The Interplay of Form and Mind*, Guy Cook highlights the relationship between discourse analysis and literature: The main focus of discourse has been upon mainly the social nature of communication, "stressing contextual aspects of meaning which are interactive and negotiated, determined by the social relations and identities of the participants in communication. Under the influence of this approach, something of a consensus has emerged in recent years, that literature is just one more genre among equals, functioning in one much the same way as others. Particularly influential in the formation of this view has been the Hallidayan conception of language as a social semiotic, and the belief that the function of discourse is a blend of the interpersonal and ideational. Literature is considered primarily a mode of social interaction. It reflects and creates "its own institutions and power relations. In this view, there is nothing distinctive about either the language of literary discourse or its representations of the world; it is rather that some texts become literary when presented as such by institutions or when read in certain ways by readers, and that is all" (1994, 1). In fact, discourse is a dynamic process of shaping and being shaped. Discourse analysis is a sophisticated mode to interpret the speech acts of O'Neill's subjects.

Deleuze and Guattari develop a new perception of desire. Their schizophrenic perception does not rely on a closed system of meanings, but rather tends to produce revolutionary meanings which are triggered and seduced by capitalism. Like Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, in *Anti-Oedipus*, owe much importance to *the unconscious which is structured like a language*. The unconscious discourses of O'Neill's characters will be looked at through this prism. Their focal philosophical points are the politics of desire and forms of alienation.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari contend that “schizoanalysis treats the unconscious as an acentered system, in other words as a machinic network of finite automata (a rhizome), and thus arrives at an entirely different state of the unconscious” (1987, 18). They enhance the idea that all social and historical infrastructures are shaped by libidinal desires. Consolidating this inference, Sim argues that “for Deleuze and Guattari, individuals are ‘desiring machines’, who lack the sense of unity we generally associate with individual identity, but who find the opportunity to express their desire being curbed by the socio-political authorities (with fascism as the most potent example of how the process works)” (2005, 6). Indeed, the postmodern perspectives are pertinent to broaden the investigation of the main aforementioned issues.

The new additional site to academic research on O'Neill's drama is the postmodern Deleuzeguattarian perspectives on the reappropriation of desire. These perspectives anticipate new plateaus for the human psyche to wander freely beyond any psychological and social confinement. In the introduction to *Anti-Oedipus*, Seem invokes the idea that “a schizoanalysis schizophrenizes in order to break the holds of power and institute research into new collective subjectivity and a revolutionary healing of mankind. For we are sick, so sick of ourselves!” (1970, xxi) The two postmodern philosophers celebrate madness, delirium, schizophrenia, and neurosis as positive symptoms against the oppressive capitalist systemic power. Their philosophy is a critique of fixed representations, celebrating schizophrenia as a revolutionary potential to emancipate humanity from confinement and stasis.

Moreover, while investigating the dramatic issues from divergent perspectives, I will consider the impact of philosophy on O'Neill's vision of the human condition and his perception of Fate. The philosophy of Aristotle and Plato is a basic ground for O'Neill. Thus, Greek philosophy inspires him to use symbols and myths in the plot-structures to transfigure contemporary American themes in domestic tragedies, *Desire Under the*



*Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. His technical utilization of various plots, styles, and settings allows me to study the philosophical views and conceptions of 'free will' and 'desire' having a wide impact on his perception of Man's fight with fate. In a creative manner, O'Neill tries to find a modern equivalent of the Greek sense of fate - "a modern psychological approximation which can move modern audiences," as Egil Tornquist advances in *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill* (2004, 20).

The philosophy of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche engendered in the playwright a concern for the forces of evil, the "sickness of today," and nihilism in modern America. I will, also, focus on how this philosophy shapes O'Neill's approaches to human tragedies and the loss of faith in God while leading a constant battle with "evil destiny," a major cause of his mourning. In *Eugene O'Neill: Beyond Mourning and Tragedy*, Stephen Black advocates that "the view of life that evolved in Eugene owed a debt to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as well as to Greek mythology and had analogies with psychoanalysis" (1999, 90). Nietzsche's philosophy appealed much to O'Neill, especially his works: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *The Birth of Tragedy* where the philosopher contends that "God is dead." Bigsby points out that "O'Neill declares that the task of the modern playwright is to dig at the roots of sickness of today as he feels it - 'the death of the old God'" (1996, 43).

In some interviews and essays, O'Neill acknowledged his indebtedness not only to the Greek tragedians, but also to modern philosophers: Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche. In this respect, Bigsby states while quoting Schopenhauer:

It is no wonder that O'Neill should have been drawn to Schopenhauer, who regarded the drama as 'the most perfect reflection of human existence' and shared O'Neill's belief that tragedy was the highest form of drama, for in that form, he insisted: 'We are brought face to face with great suffering and the storm and stress of existence: and the outcome of it is to show the vanity of all human effort. Deeply moved, we are either directly prompted to disengage our will from the struggle of life, or else a chord is struck in us which echoes a similar feeling'. (1996, 42)

Further still, O'Neill's plays are full of music and songs - the eternal music of life which is derived from Beethoven. We can highlight, then, the paradigm of rebirth which is recurrent in Nietzsche's philosophy. Nietzsche had an enthusiasm for the philosophical pessimism of Arthur Schopenhauer in "The World as Will and Idea". This philosophical

content fascinates O'Neill and makes him believe that man is at the mercy of fate in a universe devoid of meaning and purpose. Schopenhauer's concept of the "will-to live" is merged with an O'Neillian urgent call to exercise free will in an oppressed world. Thus, Schopenhauer's definition of the "will-to-life" as an inherent drive within human beings to stay alive and reproduce finds its representative echo in O'Neill's plays.

This book is divided into three chapters. In chapter one, "Figures of Desire and Fate in O'Neill's Textual Time," the focus is on the interaction between desire and fate as two basic determinants of the individual's life in the domestic sphere. O'Neill assigns the notion of human fate a modern content, and stages the subject as a victim of other forces governing the *polis*. Heredity and legacy, psychology and desire are life forces that affect the subject's process of living and determine the outcome of his/her struggle. The burden of the past is another force to be confronted: The past is unchangeable. It is another determinant of the subject's present constant struggle against what Eugene O'Neill describes as the "Force behind." The latter is highlighted in various dramatic contexts as something beyond human (re)cognition, predestinating and overdetermining one's fate.

Predestination and overdetermination entail multiple causes of the individual's tragedy. Fate is grounded in human existence, and so (pre)determines the flaws and flows of the human condition. Human beings are subject to the overriding power of fate. Fate or human destiny seems to be a natural necessity governing the human world. Thus, Oedipus' fate has become a pattern of man's fate. It is "a necessity because (the individual) colludes with it unknowingly" (Dilman 1999, 34). To extend the ancient perception of fate, it is the curse which foregrounds the causes that predetermine the individual's destiny, as Dilman argues: the individual's destiny is fixed or determined in advance by human affairs (1999, 33).

In O'Neill's domestic plays, *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Desire Under the Elms*, the Unconscious is examined as the essence of selfhood. In *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, Freud assumes that "whatever is repressed from consciousness or replaced in it by something else remains intact and potentially operative in the unconscious" (1963, 128). This idea is explored by O'Neill, drawing tragic mutations between the conscious and the unconscious. His protagonists are unconsciously driven to confront their fate. O'Neill psychoanalyzes his protagonists like Freud's patients

lying on the couch. To investigate the characters' psychological discourses, I rely on puns, allusions, images and symbols as indispensable tools.

The critical analysis of *Desire Under the Elms*, *Strange Interlude* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is based on the philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Gilles Deleuze. There are existential forces that engage the subjects in tragic tensions. Along their relentless struggle, the subjects aim at attaining a state of *well-becoming*, but the real world disappoints them. Despite their free will, the subjects are unable to avoid existential malaise. For O'Neill, there are existential forces which overdetermine the subject's fate. In the American *polis*, freedom of choice and action cannot lead to redemption and happiness. The fulfillment of desire has become a tragedy. Free will cannot guarantee enough power to avoid existential malaise or fill the void that results from modern sickness and mania.

O'Neill maps various fateful forces to draw tragic mutations in his drama. Thus, the tragic flaws carry shifts in perspectives which mark mutations in language, style, and stage directions. The plays under study, in the private sphere, are a mapping of mutations from, essentially, psychoanalysis to existentialism. Mutations in O'Neill's tragedies are the flows that give life to his tragic mind in different historical phases. This issue seems to have an eternal effect on the audience. In fact, O'Neill draws tragic mutations from the ancient notion of guilt, modern psychical repression to existential absurdity. Freedom of consumption of alcohol, drugs and sex, casts the modern subject in an absurd world, where relief can be found only in the cessation of consciousness.

O'Neill draws the combination of ancient and new perceptions of evil, figuring out the crisis of the human condition. His initial account on the notion of evil, as a force of doom, is devoted to the Greek perception of evil forces. Indeed, evil is a contingent necessity shaping the frame of the physical world. The playwright invokes Greek philosophy to implement his perspectives on human nature, which is inherently bad. Desire for freedom is simply an absurd obsession which cannot be regulated. There seems to be an encounter between O'Neill and Sartre at the level of his existentialist view of Freedom as an evil energy which constitutes the heart of existentialist subjectivity. In O'Neill's drama, being conscious of the inevitability to escape the forces of bad fortune, the subject loses faith in resistance. The existential struggle for becoming leads to nothingness.

In chapter two, “Desire, Schizophrenia and Becoming in the American Polis,” *Desire Under the Elms*, *The Hairy Ape*, and *The Iceman Cometh* represent realistic drama in the public sphere. O’Neill tackles the issues of collective desire, illusion, reality, and the struggle for *becoming*. He stages his protagonists as postmodern subjects striving within the confines of capitalism, seeking freedom and emancipation. The subjects are entrapped by false beliefs and illusory promises about the Pursuit of Happiness. “They are caught in a cultural moment, not fully able to abstract themselves. For such abstraction they would really have to be dead, as the play’s language keeps suggesting they are” (Fleche 1997, 46). Pipe dreams and alcohol are means of sustenance and resistance until they reach the moment of the ‘Long Sleep’ -death. The abandonment of pipe dreams seems to be a transition from illusion to death.

In O’Neill’s plays, desire is deflected from its essence. Subjectivity is alienated from its normalized and standardized form. The subject becomes socially, politically, and economically neurotic. Thus, “*The Hairy Ape* is a modern tragedy, a story of the doomed worker, skewed to his station by a triumvirate of capitalism, industrial right, and rigid class boundaries” (Rundle 2009, 131). The capitalist government/state apparatus is staged by O’Neill as an oppressive force, which dooms the subjects to suffer from neuroticism and nihilist absurdity. O’Neill’s protagonists are evolving in closed circles. They are territorialized, seeking lines of flight.

O’Neill seems to anticipate the postmodern conception of desire, doom, neurosis, delirium, and schizophrenia. The subject is unable to find any form of outlet to retreat into space and get beyond its absurd confines. On the whole, the subject is entrapped by material forces, and struggle becomes the only mode to give meaning to his life. In the capitalist American *polis*, the subject is filled with the spirit of capitalism. At this level, much work will be devoted to searching enough evidence in the protagonists’ speeches. In the socio-political sphere, there are various collective actions and political manifestations to resist the dominance of the state apparatuses and totalitarian regimes. But, O’Neill’s subjects seem to be unable to alter their condition, for doom is stronger than their will.

In the light of the Schizoanalytic perspectives established by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, I analyze the characters’ socio-political discourses, focusing on the forces that shape and produce their potential for willing to be emancipated from modern stasis and crisis. Indeed, through the Deleuzeguattarian philosophy, I study the politics of desire,

territorialization, schizophrenia, and nomadology in O'Neill's drama. The capitalist system gives birth to desiring machines<sup>7</sup>. O'Neill is mapping the discontinuity of the forces that determine the subject's fate. The subject's endeavors to liberate desire from contingent necessities cast him/her in a utopian world.

In chapter three, "Utopia, Dystopia, Eutopia," the focus will be, in both the private and public spheres, on O'Neill's protagonists expressing their denunciation of dystopia and their clinging to the quest for (e)utopia. The will is a utopian effort to act beyond doom. Longing for unattainable and unrealized dreams makes desire for a new subjecthood replete with an ironic fate. In *Contour in Time*, Travis Bogard explains that "by 'ironic fate', O'Neill meant that the lives of the characters are controlled, despite their wills, by a power of destiny that is inexorable, malevolent insofar as it can be said to have purpose, but in essence meaningless" (1972, 17).

The overlap between desire, free will, and determinism in a utopian space justifies, extensively and inclusively, a strong dramaturgical technique in O'Neill's drama: *hamartia*. In the American *polis*, the subject is free to desire the very things that turn his fortune into tragic alienation. Then, the apocalyptic desire is imbued with romantic illusion which will lead nowhere but dystopia. Perhaps, the myth of dream, as a *household word* as Singh argues, reveals the subject's willingness to live in a natural world full of peace and security, but this involves the ineluctable tragic game of human existence. Struggle is a long discontinuous heroic process, but it subdues the subject in his latent desire for death and rebirth. This is O'Neill's dramatization of eutopian endgames.

In O'Neill's tragic thought, death is seen as an ultimate outlet. It is a return to the 'Paradise lost'<sup>8</sup> where purgation of one's psyche of guilt and anger is possible. But, to my mind, the subject's fall is not a reversal of

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<sup>7</sup> Taylor and Winquist clarify the philosophical view of Deleuze and Guattari that desiring machines are forces modeled on Nietzsche's 'will-to-power,' that exist only in relation to one another. They are not essences. They are subjects propelled by libidinal desire. The latter is an energy creating the intensities of life. The flows of desire are created and mediated by Capitalism. So, it is systemic oppression which leads to the birth of new alienated machines called 'desiring machines', because their entity is formed by desire and its interaction with capitalist forces.

<sup>8</sup> '*Paradise Lost*' is a poem written by John Milton (1608-1674). It has been influential in the field of literature and poetry. It is the realm from which man inescapably falls into chaos because of doing evil.

doom into an *Edenic state*; it is the will to freedom to go beyond a confined territory full of disgust. Furthermore, it is the will to life which drives all subjects on the same track towards a new arcadia. In *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, Singh argues that the arcadia theme is an outlet for O'Neill to escape from traditional pastoral thought. This sort of escape is a dramaturgical stratagem deployed by the playwright to engage his audience in the search for new plateaus and (infra)structures of a new *polis/state*. 'Polis' is the version that Plato defines in *The Republic* as community or state. Its basic foundation is justice and democracy. "And when we have got hold of enough people to satisfy our many varied needs, we have assembled quite a large number of partners and helpers together to live in one place; and we give the resultant settlement the name of a community or state" (Plato 1974, 117). In O'Neill's theatrical realm, the *polis* is liable to be another 'virtual'/utopian society where socio-political alternatives may figure out new standardized free subjectivity.

O'Neill's philosophy and vision of the tragic deterministic principles are a bid for cutting with not only the ancient legacy, but also with modernity. O'Neill's tragicomic episodes are very critical of the current contemplation of human existence and freedom. He seems to establish a viable hypothesis breaking up the common function of theater, which is limited to fear, pity and purgation. O'Neill models new dramatic elements to establish a postmodern timeless and spaceless stage. The inhabitants of his libidinal theater are nomads disguising themselves to conform to actual doomed figures in the nihilist materialist American *polis*. O'Neill's subjects are overdetermined to act in a postmodern schizophrenic explicit fashion. The call to *revolt* against the vile *state apparatuses* seems to be the right path for desire to survive beyond the ironical grotesque of modern territories. Insurgency is a radical move towards emancipation and constitution of new spaces of freedom. Indeed, O'Neill seems to confirm Hegel's view: "The history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom" (1899, 19).

In the postmodern world, the subjects are staged as nomads or desiring machines adopting new lines of flight. O'Neill's protagonists are desiring machines who struggle to release desire from its socio-historical confinement. They seem to establish other territories for the flows of desire to circulate freely. Escape is therefore an attempt to free one's desire from a *state of being* and invest its flows in a *state of Becoming*. O'Neill's protagonists believe that free will sucks its energy from revolutionary schizophrenic desire on new plateaus. The establishments of the postmodern plateaus originate in virtual psychical and socio-