LATER WORKS OF O'NEILL:
IBSEN'S SUSTAINED INFLUENCE

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Abstract

Critics and students of Eugene O'Neill often discuss Ibsen’s influence on Eugene O’Neill, limiting their discussion of this influence to the early phase of O’Neill’s writing career. This paper, however, seeks to show that O’Neill was never able to break away from the influence of Ibsen; indeed, O’Neill continued even throughout the later period of his writing career to dramatize many of Ibsen’s main motifs and to draw upon his phrases and dramatic techniques. They both shared a lasting concern for such issues as the burden of the past on the present, life illusions in the form of pipe dreams, and the painfulness of reality. A comparison of two of O’Neill’s later plays, Long Day’s Journey Into Night and The Iceman Cometh, to Ibsen’s Ghosts and The Wild Duck, reveals O’Neill’s indebtedness to Ibsen during the former’s later career.

Although some critics argue that Eugene O’Neill deliberately cut himself away from Ibsen’s influence in the middle of his career,\(^1\) one can find that there are so many similarities between Ibsen’s works and O’Neill’s later works that it is easy to realize O’Neill never entirely succeeded in breaking away from Ibsen. O’Neill’s last known remark about Ibsen, made in 1932, reveals his profound repulsion for Ibsen’s work;\(^2\) however, O’Neill’s own work suggests that he perhaps internalized and “remanufactured” many of Ibsen’s issues and stylistic techniques. I will investigate selected works of the two playwrights to reveal that O’Neill continued to be influenced by Ibsen in his later plays, especially by Ghosts in Long Day’s Journey Into Night, and by The Wild Duck in The Iceman Cometh.

We know for a certainty that O’Neill took painstaking care in reading a book by George Bernard Shaw called The Quintessence of Ibsenism. This book elaborates on the revolutionary nature of Ibsen’s thinking by carefully explaining the anti-idealistic philosophy which pervades each of his plays. That O’Neill was so affected by Ibsen’s ideas is obvious:

He was wildly excited about Shaw’s Quintessence of Ibsenism. It was his favorite reading... and he kept underlining the points with which he agreed with Shaw in red ink to such an extent that the book was almost entirely underlined.\(^3\)

Shaw certainly helped Ibsen become vivid and alive to the young, impressionable O’Neill.
O'Neill was impressed enough to devote many of his early works to maintaining Ibsen’s concerns. Egil Törngvist draws close parallels between O’Neill’s early works and Ibsen’s plays. The issue of women’s awakening expressed through A Doll’s House abounds in Reckless and Thirst (I & O, p. 216). Many of the stylistic features of The Emperor and Galilean are reflected in Servitude, though its philosophy is most evident in Lazarus Laughed (I & O, p. 225). A synopsis of Anna Christie could nearly be the same as one for The Lady from the Sea (I & O, p. 222). Ghosts shows its strong influence on O’Neill in Where the Cross is Made, wherein the issue of life’s illusions is more clearly dramatized than in Ibsen’s play (I & O, p. 220).

O’Neill’s middle works, from Desire Under The Elms to Days Without End, show the least of Ibsen’s influence, according to Törngvist. It is curious to note that in Ah, Wilderness, though, O’Neill borrowed direct quotations from Hedda Gabler, and of the few articles I could find comparing the two authors, those that deal with O’Neill’s middle period predominate. Nevertheless, the evidence I present in this article leads me to believe that the impact of Ibsen on O’Neill’s later works, from The Iceman Cometh on, is as strong as ever.

In Ghosts and Long Day’s Journey Into Night, some of the essential issues are the same. Both plays reveal a drama of the past which is reflected in the suffering of the present, the latter being entirely an outgrowth of the former. In Ghosts, Osvald shows signs of becoming just like his father who idled his time away in dissipation. Mrs. Alving is extremely distressed to see the same symptoms in her son; his actions signify the “ghosts” of the past to her. In Long Day’s Journey, the characters reveal bits of their past through their arguments, and the past is blamed for such miserable conditions of the characters as James’ dissipated life, Edmond’s affliction by tuberculosis, Mrs. Tyrone’s addiction to morphine, and the father’s defensiveness due to stinginess.

The reality that the characters face in both plays is a source of suffering and hardly a source of joy. In Ghosts, Mrs. Alving reminisces about her past and reveals the bitter reality of her marriage to a dissipated man. She had created an illusion of an ideal marriage for the sake of community opinion as well as for duty. As the drama of her past unfolds, we realize that she has attempted to hide the sins of the past and has lived in a kind of lie. She then attempts to reveal the truth, but her dream of living peacefully and happily with her son after her husband’s death is shattered by the reality of Osvald’s illness.

In Long Day’s Journey, all of the characters create some illusions to keep the face of reality from appearing. Their motivation for maintaining the illusions is based on each individual’s desire to keep himself from feeling the pain of his own and others’ suffering. For example, Edmund doesn’t tell his mother about the seriousness of his illness because he knows she doesn’t want to know, and her knowledge of it and her subsequent suffering would hurt him, also.
On a more specific level than the effects of the past and the painfulness of reality, O'Neill has drawn on other techniques of Ibsen that are found in Ghosts. The element of time is nearly the same in both plays (I & O, p. 233). The five characters in Ghosts act out their drama in eighteen to nineteen hours. In Long Day's Journey, the five characters take just a few hours less.

The resemblances between the characters' conditions cannot be ignored. In each play, the author lets us know early that the women of each family have lived in relative isolation from the rest of society. In Ghosts, Regina gives us the first indication of this isolation: "I'd like so much to live in town. Out here it's terribly lonely--and you know yourself, Pastor, what it is to stand alone in the world." Mrs. Alving reflects the same loneliness in keeping her husband from the eyes of the community: "I've endured a lot in this house to keep him home in the evenings--and nights, I had to become his drinking companion as he got sodden over his bottle, holed up in his room. There I had to sit alone with him... (G, p. 230). In Long Day's Journey, Mary bemoans the fact that she was never able to cultivate good friendship and was forced to move from place to place with her husband, leading a lifestyle that ensured her isolation:

She pauses, looking out the window--then with an undercurrent of lonely yearning:

Mary: The Chatfields and people like them stand for something. I mean they have decent, presentable homes they don't have to be ashamed of. They have friends... They're not cut off from everyone.

This isolation is one of the major contributing factors to the problems these women endure: Mrs. Alving and her suffering to maintain the image of an ideal marriage; Mary and her deadening but comforting morphine addiction.

At least one family member in each play has a serious illness and a dependence on morphine. In Ghosts, we find quite early that Osvald has a serious illness which prevents him from working, and at the end we find that syphilis has made him dependent on morphine. O'Neill divides the sickness and the morphine addiction between two people. We know early that Edmund had tuberculosis. This sickness is at the root of Mrs. Tyrone's return to a dependence on morphine because she cannot face the pain of knowing her son is afflicted. In a sense, her morphine addiction is a secret illness which, like Osvald's illness, is not fully revealed to us until late in the play, although we suspect Mary's illness earlier than Osvald's (I & O, p. 232). Like isolation, illness is another root cause of suffering for members of the family in the two plays.

Yet still another contributing factor to suffering is the father's alcoholism. This alcoholism not only brought about the wife's isolation, but also affected the children. Mrs. Alving "had to sit alone with him, forcing [herself] through his jokes and toasts and all his mauldering, abusive talk, and then fight him bare-handed to drag him into bed--" (G, p. 230). His drinking forced her to send her child away so
that he wouldn’t ‘‘be poisoned just breathing this polluted air’’ (G, p. 230). But because of the husband’s drinking and resulting dissolute behavior, the son picks up an inherited disease.

In Long Day’s Journey, Mr. Tyrone used to go out drinking with his acting companions, and Mary endured the consequences:

I would never have married you if I’d known you drank so much... I didn’t know how often that [her husband being left at the door by friends] was to happen in the years to come, how many times I was to wait in ugly hotel rooms. (LDJ, p. 113).

Mary associates this dissipated behavior with her own sons’ behavior:

All he likes is to hobnob with men at the Club or in a barroom. Jamie and you are the same way, but you’re not to blame. You’ve never had a chance to meet decent people here. (LDJ, p.44)

In both plays, the word ‘‘ghost’’ is used to set up a symbolic attachment to the past. For Mrs. Alving, ghosts occur when a present action shows evidence of being influenced by past sins. When Osvald is heard flirting with Regina in the dining room, Mrs. Alving responds: ‘‘Ghosts. Those two from the greenhouse have come back’’ (G, p. 232). These ghosts haunt her by reminding her of her own faults in dealing with the past. Mrs. Tyrone is said by Edmund on two occasions to be a ghost, because she lives in the past glory of her innocent youth: ‘‘She’ll be nothing but a ghost haunting the past by this time’’ (LDJ, p. 137) and ‘‘Yes, she moves above and beyond us, a ghost haunting the past...’’ (p. 152). Her morphine addiction makes her act in this way, enabling her to relive the past and avoid facing the pain of present reality. Although ghosts for Mrs. Alving indicate past evil and for Mary the ghost-like qualities help insure her memories of a beautiful past, for both authors ghosts are a symbol of memories of the past.

Törnqvist noticed great similarities in dramatic technique between the two plays. The plays cover approximately the same time span, the sets are dominated by a table and four chairs, and the location of the home is near the sea (I & O, p. 232). Of particular interest to Törnqvist is the similarity in weather conditions. In Ghosts, the summer weather changes from steady rain, to mist, through darkness, and on to sunrise. This sunlight ironically establishes the grimness of Osvald’s madness (I & O, p. 232). In Long Day’s Journey, the summer weather goes from sunshine through haziness, to fog, and on to foggy darkness. The darkness indicates ‘‘the Tyrone tragedy is visually proclaimed’’ (I & O, p. 233).

Threads of The Wild Duck are perhaps even stronger in The Iceman Cometh than are those of Ghosts in Long Day’s Journey Into Night. The subject of The Wild Duck, revolutionary for its time, is again an issue in The Iceman Cometh: There is danger in forming ideals for other people and interfering in their lives with the intention of enabling them to realize those ideals. For one thing, you interfere with their illusions, their life-lies, their pipe dreams, which are (or in Ibsen’s case, might be)
essential for their happiness. Although O'Neill had a more pessimistic view of these illusions, Ibsen preceded him in establishing their importance in dramatic context.

The characters’ way of life and their surroundings are quite different in the two plays. O’Neill’s characters are misfits living and vegetating in a dirty saloon. They are chronically drunk, but they hang on to the dream that they will accomplish something one day. Of course they procrastinate, and every day becomes an excuse to drink until tomorrow.

Ibsen’s characters, on the other hand, live in a poor but respectable house. Hjalmar’s family thrives on an existence which avoids problems because Hjalmar discourages everyone from thinking too much: he makes his embarrassing dinner at Werle’s house appear successful to his family so they won’t worry; he avoids conversing seriously with Old Ekdal who is content to shuffle around the house; he and Gina resign themselves to their daughter’s going blind; and he instills his non-thinking attitude into Gina, who easily forgets her sordid past and creates the illusion of a completely morally-based marriage for the family. However, Hjalmar, like O’Neill’s characters, has a grand dream—he intends to create an invention that will raise his family out of poverty. The necessity of providing a living for his family and the diversions of hunting in the loft, though, make procrastination inevitable for him, and he only dreams of finishing his project some day.

Not only does non-thought sustain illusions for some of the characters in The Wild Duck, but so does alcohol. Old Ekdal drinks as much as he can afford, and Dr. Relling and Molving are always drinking to keep from thinking too much. The difference in the role of alcohol in both plays is that O’Neill seems to have taken the importance of alcoholism in sustaining illusions and given it a more striking role.

To express the notion of where the characters really stand in their relation to society, both authors use the symbolic phrase “the bottom of the sea.” The stress that both authors place on this phrase in their plays indicates a close affinity between O’Neill and Ibsen.7 Ibsen first used it literally to show where a duck will go when its life is nearing its end:

Gregers. Ah, so she dived right for the bottom, eh?
Ekdal. You can bet on that. They always do, the wild ducks—streak for the bottom, deep as they can get, boy...And then they never come up again.8

Through Gregers, Ibsen sets up the symbolism of the phrase for the characters:
Gregers. If I could choose, above all else I’d like to be a clever dog.
Gina. A dog!
Hedvig. Ah no!
Gregers. Yes. A really fantastic, clever dog, the kind that goes to the bottom after wild ducks when they dive under... (WD, p.428)

Gregers thinks that the Ekdals have sunk to the lowest level of society because of their illusions, and he wants to raise them. He even imagines that Hedvig picked up
the symbolism:

Hedving. I happen to think of that in there [the other room], it always seems to me that the whole room and everything in it is called “the depths of the sea”! But that’s all so stupid. (WD, p. 438)

O’Neill’s characters do recognize that they are at the bottom of the sea. In the very beginning of the play, Larry reproaches Rocky for “losing the faith”:

Have you no respect for religion, you unregenerate Wop? What’s it matter if the truth is that their favorite breeze has the stink of nickel whiskey on its breath, and their sea is a growler of lager and ale, and their ships are long since looted and scuttled and sunk on the bottom? 

He refers to the saloon as “The End of the Line Cafe, The Bottom of the Sea Rathskeller” (IC, p. 631). By stretching the symbolism even further, one could even say Larry is at the bottom of the sea when he is at the bottom of the bottle:

All I know is I’m sick of life! I’m through! I’ve forgotten myself! I’m drowned and contented on the bottom of a bottle. (IC, p. 686)

So I sit here, with my pride drowned on the bottom of a bottle. (IC, p. 722).

At one point Hickey enters, using the same phrase to indicate a different symbolism; the bottom is the point at which peace is achieved after abandoning the belief that dreams are reality:

Let yourself sink down to the bottom of the sea. Rest in peace. There’s no farther you have to go. Not a single damned hope or dream left to nag you. (IC, p. 665)

Later, however, he uses the same phrase to mean what Larry meant:

I know how it is, Son, but you can’t hide from yourself, not even here on the bottom of the sea. You’ve got to face the truth and then do what must be done for your own peace and the happiness of all concerned. (IC, p. 683)

The overall symbolic meaning of the phrase in The Iceman Cometh is the same in The Wild Duck. Even with slight inconsistencies of meaning in O’Neill’s play, O’Neill’s abundant use of the phrase is a repeated performance of Ibsen’s elaborate use of it.

Even O’Neill’s use of “pipe dream” is not entirely his own creation. Ibsen, through Dr. Reller, refers to the illusions that people create to avoid the harshness of truth as “life-lies”: “The life-lie, don’t you see--that’s the animating principle of life.... Deprive the average man of his life-lie and you’ve robbed him of his happiness as well” (WD, pp. 476-77). Earlier in the play, Hjalmar refers to the same principle as a “pipe dream”: “I also thought this home was a good place to be. That was pipe dream. Now where can I find the buoyancy I need to carry my invention into reality?” (WD, p. 458) Isn’t the pipe dream of Ibsen’s the same as O’Neill’s pipe dream in the mouth of Larry?: “The lie of a pipe is what gives life to the whole misbegotten mad lot of us, drunk or sober” (IC, p. 623).
In both plays, the "villain" is an idealist who sets out to wreck the illusions of others and make them realize his own way of thinking is the best. Gregers' ultimate purpose is to reform Hjalmar, to make him realize the truth so that he can be transformed by it and made happier by the knowledge of it in his marriage:

Gregers. With this treat rapport—the kind
that forges a whole new way of life—a life, a
companionship in truth with no more deception—
Hjalmar. Yes, I know, I know all that.
Gregers. I was really positive that when I
came through that door I'd be met by a transfigured
light in both your faces. And what do I see
instead but this gloomy, heavy, dismal—
(WD p. 459)

For Gregers, the ideal is always the truth. Likewise, in the
Iceman Cometh, Hickey wants his friends to achieve happiness the way he did
(although we know he didn't). He wants them to discover that their dreams cannot
come true so that they can drink without having to strive for anything and they can
be totally at peace with themselves:

No, boys and girls, I'm not trying to put anything
over on you. It's just that I know from experience
what a lying pipe dream can do to you—and how
relieved and contented with yourself you feel
when you're rid of it. (IC p. 664).

In the end, neither villain makes his friends any happier.

It is interesting to see that both Gregers and Hickey, in their attempts to
transform their friends, place their friends in almost heroic regard. They know that if
their friends actually do live up to their expectations of them, they will be admirable,
the embodiments of their own ideals. The challenge to transform them leads Hickey
and Gregers to believe the friends have the real willingness and strength to change.
With Gregers this regard for heroic qualities is made apparent:

Hjalmar. Do you think a man can recover so
easily from the bitter cup I've just emptied!
Gregers. Not an ordinary man, no. But a man like you—! (WD, p. 459)

Relling [to Gregers]. Oh, yes. Your case has complications. First there's
this virulent moralistic fever; and then something worse—
you keep going off in deliriums of hero worship;
you always have to have something to admire.
that's outside of yourself. (WD, p. 476).

With Hickey, we can see this need to have someone to admire that's outside of
himself in the hopes he has of seeing Harry, Jimmy and Larry transformed. They are
the hardest challenges, but the ones most capable of realizing Hickey's own ideals once they decide to try:

Well, I knew you'd be the toughest to convince of all the gang, Larry. And, along with Harry and Jimmy Tomorrow, you're the one I want most to help. I've always liked you a lot, you old bastard! (IC, p. 681)

Again, Hickey appeals to Larry's unique capabilities:

He's lost all his guts [referring to Parritt].
He can't manage it alone, and you're the only one he can turn to. (IC ,p. 680)

Finally, one might contend that both Ibsen and O'Neill were expounding two different philosophies--where Ibsen was optimistic, O'Neill was pessimistic. However, it becomes immaterial whether these plays reflect varying philosophies which are based on the outcome of illusion on the characters; what is significant and what I have illustrated here is that O'Neill drew substantially upon the same issues as well as on similar phrases and techniques to express these issues. With all of the similarities in issues and stylistic techniques, there is too much evidence to deny that Ibsen remained in O'Neill's mind long after O'Neill thought he had pushed him aside.
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Footnotes

1 The foremost critic on this matter is Egil Törnqvist, "Ibsen and O'Neill: A Study in Influence," Scandinavian Studies, 37, (1965), 215. Subsequent references will be to I&O in the text.
2 L. Langner, The Magic Curtain (London, 1952), p. 288 O'Neill's remark was as follows:

Ibsen has set back the theatre for many years by his very success in developing a so-called "naturalistic" method which in reality is not naturalistic at all. Ibsen's realism in the theatre is just as manufactured as the theatre of Sardou which preceded it.

3 Langner, p. 288.
4 One of these articles compares Desire Under the Elms to Rosmersholm: another compares Ghosts to Mourning Becomes Electra.
6 Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1955), p. 44. Subsequent references will be to LDJ in the text.
8 Henrik Ibsen, The Wild Duck, in Henrik Ibsen: The Complete Major Prose Plays, pp. 426-27. Subsequent references will be WD in the text.

Bibliography