

Between Absence and Presence: The Female's Position and Possession in Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*

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The moment the women's war dust settles, they succeed breaking the tradition to introduce a powerful voice that has changed the literary and the social scene forever. Whether the message has always been positive is controversial. But for Eugene O'Neill, the innovator who influenced the American theatre during one of its momentous periods of development, this issue is tackled from an extremely new and unique treatment.

In *The Iceman Cometh*, one of O'Neill's most significant plays, for instance, O'Neill chose to give the most important female characters no voices of their own. He even deprived them from physical presence onstage. Actually, in an art focuses on a present action in which events are presented not narrated to an audience, this strategy – the use of the absent female – is one avenue worth exploring. Essentially, however, many plays are built round the quest for the absent male, neglecting the profound loss modern drama may play out for the absent female whose presence is always taken for granted.

So, in order to better understand the concept of the absent female, the female which is central to the dramatic action but never appears on the stage, one needs first to define the nature of the absent character and its unique construction in dramatic literature. This will be section one.

An absent mother and wife in O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, their position and possession would be the concern of

section two. Despite their absence, the male characters continue to discuss, remember and manipulate them to such an extent that these offstage female characters displace a dominant presence even in their absence.

Discussion of the results of the study is found in the conclusion.

I. Who is The Absent Character?

Since Aristotale, mimesis, the imitation or direct presentation of an action in drama has been given a privileged position. Espousing the unities of place, time and action has been considerably an attempt to assure its effectiveness – by proposing the contraction of dramatic action. As a result, there has been the increased use of the narrated discourse to the foreground in order to emphasize the dramaturgy of that which is not present, but which is always represented or mediated through the discourse of an Other.

Yet modern drama is a drama of reflection in the sense that it focuses on a present action in which events are presented, not narrated to an audience. Peter Szondi, for instance, defines drama as "always primary, its internal time is always the present" (Rosefeldt: 4). He argues that:

Drama, not only takes place in the present, but also demands a presence that can be seen and heard. Moreover, drama demands an embodied presence. More than poetry or fiction which depends on an imaginative response, drama ia an attempt to bring into physical presense that which absent. (Ibid.).

Focusing on presenting is by all means at the core of this discourse. But of prime importance, however, is the need to lookout and understand the other face of the icon, i.e. the workings of that which is not present or absent. This understanding can be achieved relatively by recognizing the nature of the absent character.

Essentially, the absent character is a character who never appears in the plot and therefore, is never on stage, for his appearance would instantly give him unmediated presence. Following the same line of reasoning, formalist critics divide dramatic action into two modes: *fabula* (story) and *sjuzet* (plot). Story according to Elaine Stone and George Savona "is the basic narrative outline; plot, the means by which narrative events are structured, organized and presented" (Guerin: 102).

In other words, the story may include actions that have taken place before the beginning of the play. Evelyen, Hickey's dead wife in *The Iceman Cometh*, for instance, is never seen or presented to the audience. As a character she exists in the gaps or margins of the dramatic present; she is part of the story, the overall narrative, but not apart of the plot, the sequence or presented actions. Evelyn is an absent character.

Along the same line, the absent character cannot appear in a flashback. This character cannot be presented, even in the domain of memory. For example, in Wendy Wasserstein's *Uncommon Women and Others* (1979), a group of women from a prestigious women's college has a reunion. One member of the group is conspicuously absent; nevertheless, when the play flashes back in time, this character is present in an embodied form and speaks for herself. She is not an absent character because she speaks for herself and affirms her presence (Rosefeldt: 4).

Nonetheless, although cannot physically be presented into the plot, the absent character must be dealt with even if it was through metonymic substitutions, iconic representations, psychological displacements, or uncanny doubles. (Rosefeldt: 2002,p.10). In Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1890), a father's gun is associated with the father and becomes a metonymic representation of the father or a metonymic substitution for him.

The ever present picture of Tom Wingfield's absent father in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), however, is a clear representation of the father and his world. Tom's father never appears; yet he is frequently mentioned by Tom, his mother and his sister and is significant both to the plot and the thematic structure of the play.

Furthermore, most absent characters are not only liminal figures but also figures moving toward presence. In a world out of his or her control, the absent character may be...dead like the father in August Strindberg's *The Pelican*(1970)

or alive like the father in Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1888), asupernatural being like God the Father in Peter Shaffer

Equus(1973) and John Pielmeier's *Agnes of God*(1982) or an animal like the runaway dog in William Inge's *Come Back, Little Sheba*(1950).The character may be imaginary like the child in Edward Albee's *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*(1962)or the skeletal remains of a once-live child as those found in Sam Shepard's *Bured Child*(1979).Or even amysteriouslike Mr.Godot in *Waiting for Godot* (1954). (Rosefeldt: 5).

Thus so various and diverse are the types of the absent characters. Considerably, so clearly and closely connected with absence is that of the absent father. Alex Pirani claims that it is the " father's business to be absent: away hunting, earning living, functioning in the wider world." (Cross: 6). He is free from "body ties" and detached from maternal concerns".

The mother, on the other hand, displays the physical presence of motherhood for maternity" as Sigmund Freud notes, "is proved by evidence of the senses". So, the female's absence unleashes a chain of desire that can never be satisfied. Along the same line however, feminism as a movement focused upon what is absent rather than what is present, reflecting concerns with the

silencing and marginalization in a particular culture, a culture organized in favour of men. (Guerin: 222).

Unsurprisingly, the moment absence replaced presence; the absent female becomes a focal character in her absence. Because she exists only in the margins of the dramatic present, she becomes an influential outside force who determines the trajectory of other characters who are absorbed with recreating her presence. Thus the absent female is a liminal figure, halfway between being missing and present, life and death, past and present, the "what was" and "the never will be", a presence that is always being deferred.

From a psychological point of view, the female subject, for both Freud and Lacan, is different from the male. But unlike Freud, Lacan theorizes that: "the female difference is seen in the mirror stage (the reflected image presents an autonomous body image that the subject assumes to be his)" (Hall: 8). However, nowhere is this strategy better demonstrated than in a drama where the female doesn't even have a voice of her own due to her absence.

Following the same line of thinking, not only is fiction haunted by recreating the female's presence, but it wagers its very status and existence on the question of the absent female. For the male's desire to perceive himself as whole and complete promotes him to search for an "other" present being or absent to create the sense of psychic completion for him.

In practice, O'Neill's choice of psychoanalytic theory to explore the female psychic enables him to create female figures of outstanding power and complexity and to explore feminine interiority with extraordinary insights.

II. Between Absence and Presence: The Female's Position and Possession in Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*

Jim Tyron in *The Moon for the Misbegotten*, said "there is no present or future -- only the past happening over and over again"(Jr.:41). Nowhere this impression reaches its highest than in *The Iceman Cometh* simply because the stage is filled with repetitions. In 1939 O'Neill himself looks back to 1912 only to encounter characters who themselves look further back. Yet in a curious way, these undesired but irrepressible repetitions are all hovering around offstage females. As if unable to seize a moment to inhabit a present, without being haunted by these absent females, they transformed their lives "into narrative where it can be recast as possibility" (Bigsby: 23).

The need of O'Neill's women for their men, on the other hand, was so great. It seems that O'Neill understands the female role well. Trudy Drucker quoted him as saying, "The role a woman should play is that of sacrifice to her man" (Ibid: 198). That may be why his imagination produces so many women who have no other desires than to do just that. It may also be why so many of his men felt threatened and controlled by the women they need so much.

In other words, he portrayed many oppressed women, but his idea of an exploited woman's point of view was different. His women tended to be completely fulfilled by their relationship with men. They were not concerned with any individual achievements. In *Desire under the Elms* (1924), however, O'Neill dramatizes a couple who reestablish "their love so that they need to rely on nothing outward" (Hall: 19). O'Neill focused on female representation even further in *Strange Interlude* (1928), calling it his "woman play"(Ibid.).

More importantly, if *Strange Interlude* is his "woman play", in *The Iceman Cometh* O'Neill's representation of women is the means by which the play and the male character become dramatic and interesting:

what I've tried to write is a play where at the end you feel you know the souls of the seventeen men and women who appear- and women who don't appear- as well as if you'd read a play about each of them.(Bigsby: 16).

By highlighting the absence of "women who don't appear" and yet demonstrating the importance of the feminine via stereotypical female memories, as well as the prostitutes on stage, *Iceman* aptly illustrates O'Neill's rare insight into the female figures which, though absent/ are of remarkable power and complexity.

Overtly, it would appear that the icemen uphold their illusions so well that they do not need the presence of the feminine. At essence, the absent women are crucial to the perpetuation of these illusions especially for people who, as Michael Manheim notes, "These people are closest to one another when most comforted by their illusions and farthest from one another when they are most insecure about their illusions"(Hall: 27).

From a feminist perspective, the play is extremely compelling. Through the male characters' manipulation of the offstage female, O'Neill clearly shows how men create feminine fantasies in order to exist. The absent character of Harry Hope's long-dead wife, Bessie quickly establishes this process and its benefits. Wistfully avoiding Hoe's anger after his drunken slumber, his colleagues invoke Bessie's name: "It was one of those nights when memory brought poor old Bessie back to you" (O'Neill, *The Iceman Cometh*, 68)1. (Subsequent reference will

be to this edition and will be cited by page number). Hope responds with a melodramatic flourish:

Yes, that's right, boys. I remember now. I could almost see her in every room just as she used to be -- and it's twenty years since she-- (His throat and eyes fill up. A suitable sentimental hush falls on the room) (Ibid.)

Really, by Harry's repletion of the myth of Bessie, he can manipulate his memory of her in order to support his present pipe dreams and this very process illustrates the advantages of an absent female. Ironically, so overcome with pain, Hope the grieving husband gains a sense of identity by playing his lack of the lost "Madonna". Consequently, this lack allows him not to take any responsibility for his actions. Hickey, attuned to Hope's sentimental denial of his resentment, unmasks him: "She was always on your neck," he prods, "making you have ambition and go out and do things, when all you wanted was to get drunk in peace". (117)

In this case, Harry's state of sloth together with his melodramatic narrative, help dispelling Bessie's feminine threat and support him with comic relief.

This relief is exactly the same in form for all the women who don't appear in the play. Simply, they do not cause any disturbance in the harmonic balance of masculine illusions and the dualistic perceptions of female illusions that underlie and sustain these fantasies. Ironically, all Hope's pipe-dreamers can see the folly of then other fellow's but non of their own.

Outstandingly, O'Neill refused to have *Iceman* produced at the outset of World War II because he felt its focus on pipe dreams would be inappropriate for the American war effort. However, in an interview he gave during the rehearsals of the Guild production of *Iceman* in 1946, O'Neill implicitly linked pipe dreams to what one might now label the concept of ideology

(the American Pipe Dream): "This American Dream stuff gives me a pain,..., if it exists, as well tell the whole world, why don't we make it work on small *Hamlet* of the United States?" (Pfister: 102). O'Neill underplays the social reasons for why these fallen pipe-dreamers have no wish to go out.

Theodore Hickman's arrival represents the therapeutic means of freeing the illusory equilibrium of Harry Hope's much more drastically. In many ways, this arrival does serve as an effective dramatic device to bring truth about identity and gender. He advised his barroom" boys and girls": "I know from my experience it's bitter medicine, facing yourself in the mirror with old false whiskers off" (80). Hickey realizes that he who unmask others hold power over others. He pretends to believe they can turn their gaze inward and unmask their fictional defenses though in fact he knows they cannot. The effect of these revelations is disastrous. For through his interactions with the other characters, the play exposes the illusory nature of the men's narratives and perceptions of female characters.

Similarly, the play demonstrates that the male characters, motivated by the need for personal power, raise illusory feminine characters through their memories. In this way, Ann C. Hall argues that "all the men are "icemen" who ice over the threat that femininity poses in order to make mirrors of their female counterparts" (Hall: 33).

As Hickey's long-winded confession illustrates, he has not entirely removed his misconceptions of femininity from his own life. During this speech Hickey describes Evelyn as a Madonna, the archetypal selfless, loving and forgiving wife and mother. In reality, the audience never knows whether or not she ever truly forgives his trespasses. She is, after all, seen only through Hickey's eyes, and it is convenient for him to believe in her happiness (Cross: 5).

What's more, Evelyn's Madonna role offers no place for female sexuality. Hickey wants both Madonna and prostitute embodied in the same woman. He even mentioned that he wished that Evelyn could commit adultery and be more like those women he paid to laugh at his jokes. Such a desire, however, shatters his illusions about himself: "I got so I'd curse myself for a lousy bastard every time I saw myself in the mirror" (203).

The aggression Hickey channeled inward was also directed outward at Evelyn. Throughout the course of his confession, however, Hickey becomes more confused by his ideology of femininity. He initially tells the roomers that he killed Evelyn for her own good to put her out of her misery and thereby to transform her into a Madonna or a saint. He, of course, inadvertently tells too much:

I remember I stood by the bed and suddenly I had to laugh. I couldn't help it, and I knew Evelyn would forgive me. I remember I heard myself speaking to her, as if it was something I'd always wanted to say: "Well you know what you can do with your pipe dream now you damned bitch!" (207).

Evelyn, too, has a pipe dream. She wants him to live up to her expectations of him. No matter which gender role she played a Madonna or a whore. She is damned if she does, damned if she didn't. Hickey justifies his actions by defining Evelyn as a whore who has desires of her own.

Following his outburst, the new version of Evelyn is something Hickey cannot accept, and he retreats like the other dreamers, to his original image of his absent female: "No! That's a lie! I never said -- ! Good God, I couldn't have said that! If I did, I'd gone insane! Why I loved Evelyn better than anything in life" (207). A life of insanity, For Hickey, is better than his Madonna illusions being stripped away. Tellingly, he prefers a life where he loses himself, or rather, his perception of himself.

Larry Slade is the one exception to this process. He is doomed to see "both sides of the question"(33). At the opening of the play, Larry is content with his "grandstand" existence, yet,

like the others his physical position inside the group signifies his reliance on the community of dreamers to perpetuate his illusion. Larry also has a woman in his past who has not lived up to his expectations. And like the other men, he seeks refuge from this female threat through the comfort of the saloon. But significantly, unlike the other men, however, Larry does not cast Rosa Parritt into any of the socially constructed feminine roles.

Rosa is a political activist, a sexual being, and a parent. In all three roles she rejects traditional femininity and is, in turn, rejected by her son Parritt. Speaking to Larry the anarchist Judas, Parritt comments, "To hear her go on sometimes, you'd think she was the Movement." (32). Immediately recognizing the hostility of this comment, Larry "puzzled and repelled" (Ibid.) tells Parritt, "That's a hell of a way for you to talk, after what happened to her!" (34). Unsurprisingly, Parritt betrayed his mother to the law of her revolutionary ardor. "I love mother Larry" (40), he protests at first, but later Parritt confesses that he betrayed her because he "hated her" (134). Resentful and furious at his mother's devotion to the movement, her "free" lovers together with her rejection of the sentimental norm of "mother", Parritt retaliated by symbolically killing her.

But given Larry's comments about his absent female throughout the play, in no way one can believe that he casts her in such a role. Instead, his response to Parritt defends Rosa's rights to live her life as she chooses and condemns Parritt's attempts to legislate her behavior. And what is Larry's encouragement of Parritt to commit suicide but as his own perception of Rosa as an ideal; a Madonna of the movement whom he must protect in order to achieve a sense of autonomy.

Eventually, Larry remains in the bar but is now in the "grandstand," removed from the dreamers. Admittedly, he does not entirely divorce himself from the illusory world by leaving

the bar, but he now inhabits it differently than he did at the play's outset. The play, however, does not codify the results of Larry's decision into a thematic product. He simply sits near a window, but he does not look at it. Such a gesture, albeit subtle, "reflects Larry's rejection of the looking glass" (Hall: 35). Hence, O'Neill violates the traditional expectations regarding closure and completeness thereby creating a gap in the theatrical and literary expectations, perhaps in the hopes that we, too, will recognize the effects of existence with the absent or the present female.

Conclusion

As the breach between the personal and political liberation took shape, O'Neill was securing his reputation as America's greatest playwright. Admittedly, O'Neill's dramatic career was evolutionary as well as monolithic, for his plays don't owe their power and finality to O'Neill having broken new grounds or discovered new themes as much to his having finally gained complete mastery over the same elements that appear in less felicitous ways in other dramatist's plays.

O'Neill's rare insight, one can say, planted the seed. But when we come to examine the mature reasons for O'Neill's use of the principle of the absent character, we find series of motivations: his dislike of traditional feminism, his detestation of acting "tricks", his desire for an impersonal art, and his graving for abstraction.

What is really at issue is the depiction of the absent female as being the focus of attention and central to the dramatic action. Unlike Beckett or Pinter, O'Neill's absent females are not missing but in a position between absence and presence. In other words, absence implied residual presence. Though absent, they are not weak or dependent and they are never reduced to formula, a thesis, or an authorial deviation. In their complexity and in their tragic freedom there is born a new beauty, a beauty of something emerges from its opponent.

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