

Taoism in Eugene O'Neill's Plays

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ABSTRACT

Eugene O'Neill, father of American play, is a world-renowned playwright. In the 20th century, with the rapid development of capitalist industrialization, the westerners were reduced to the spiritual wasteland. Writers, including O'Neill, threw their eyes to the mystic Eastern world and tried to find ways to resolve the crisis in society and conflicts in mind. Among all the eastern philosophies, Taoism has become a focus of O'Neill. Basic Taoist principles, ranging from Revolving and Returning, Pipe Dream, to Unity with Nature, get fully presentation in his three typical plays. The reason why O'Neill is fascinated by Oriental thoughts, especially Taoism, can be understood from not only contemporary social background but also personal experiences. Taoism is a philosophy full of complexity and cannot be thoroughly understood by O'Neill, despite the deep insights and great artistry in his plays. Meanwhile, conflicts and integration between eastern and western culture are also clearly reflected, which will help readers recognize O'Neill from a brand-new perspective and realize the unique position of eastern culture in the process of global cultural communication.

Keywords: *Eugene O'Neill, Taoism, play*

1. INTRODUCTION

Eugene O'Neill was the founder of American play, who had won four Pulitzer Prizes and became the Nobel Laureate in Literature in 1936. He was the only playwright winning the Prize. American drama prevailed in 1920s and was equal to novel, drawing, and music owing to his persistence and contribution. Harold Bloom said, "there was no vital American drama before O'Neill" [1]. Eugene O'Neill was inherited to European masters such as Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov. More than fifty plays were left to the world, including fifteen classic plays ranging from *Beyond the Horizon* to *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Comprehensive and multiple researches have been carried out on O'Neill and his plays, with researchers put special emphasis on the mature expressionism, images and atmosphere while others seize the similarities between O'Neill and his characters. Domestically in China, researches on Eugene O'Neill ranks second following William Shakespeare and can be comparable to Ibsen and Chekhov, but few focuses on the Taoism, a philosophy full of wisdom and full reflection of eastern ways of thinking. The basic Taoist ideas such as Revolving and Returning, Pipe Dream and Unity with Nature are well manifested through three plays of O'Neill of his different stages.

2. REVOLVING AND RETURNING

The thought of Revolving describes that everything is in a circle and will be back to the original point, which was reflected obviously in *Beyond the Horizon*, where a road appeared at the start of the first scene as well as at the end of the drama. In the span of five years, it commenced in the sunset from the very beginning and developed into night, dawn, sunrise and noon as time went by. Besides, the four seasons evolved from spring, summer, and the late fall. All were related to the idea of Revolving around time and the destiny of protagonists.

Humans are fortune's fool. The mismatch between dream and reality also show the idea of Revolving. In the first act, Robert was dreaming of being a sailor, answering the call of nature and fled from the farm house where he was locked so many years to the free horizon. However, he ended in giving up his dream of being a sailor as well as the sea-his dream place and staying here lifelong obediently for his lover Ruth by colossal accident although he had no interest and could not deal well with the farm. Three years later, the sufferings had reminded him of the free sea and places *Beyond the Horizon*. However, he relinquished his dream again for Mary, his little daughter. His original dream was failed to come through till the death of Robert on account of the serious

lung disease. It was apparently doomed that Robert jumped the window of the farm house where he was locked. Seeing the sunrise, looking forward to the horizon and imaging what it was beyond the horizon, he ended his life and returned to his original dream.

Marco Millions, a complicated play including three acts besides the prologue and epilogue, spanned across twenty-three years, O'Neill's psychological attachment to China. Different characters with various backgrounds, multiple faiths and kinds of ideas to life coexisted. In the play, Marco Polo headed for the East from the West and returned the West finally while Kukachin was in an opposite way from Cathay leaving the East, wasting two years to Persia and came back home after her death. It seemed that they were all back to where they were from. It was a circle. When Marco Polo said, "There's no place like home, Your Majesty! I'm sure even a King in his palace appreciates that" [4] It seemed that they were all back to where they were from in the whole play. "So, little Kukachin-so, Little Flower-you have come back-they could not keep you-you were too homesick-you wanted to return-to gladden my last days" [4], Kublai said after her death. Princess Kukachin died but love awoke and her soul was into another circle. The play started with the argument of three people holding different faiths in the prologue and echoed in the discussion about life and death of four priests-a Confucian, a Taoist, a Buddhist and a Moslem. O'Neill was inclined to explore something more.

The detailed description of one-day life in a family of four goes to the play *Long Day's Journey into Night*, which reflected the love, hatred, jealousy, suspicion and complaint among each other. To Mary, the past and the reality were tightly intertwined and the past was a sweet memory as well as a utopia to escape the cruel reality. The play dawned in the morning, actually in the midnight, presenting a common and warm family. However, as the plot developed, the mystery of the family consisting of four different people with secrets was nakedly presented. The second act was in the noon and then evening and returned to midnight at last. The whole process was a circle with time flowing, in other words, its start was the end and its end was another start. Mary said, "The past is the present, isn't it? It's the future, too.[3]" All had something in common with the idea of *Revolving and Returning* in Taoism, which cannot be ignored or regarded as a coincidence.

3. PIPE DREAM

Pipe Dream is referred to as the condition that life is like a dream and it is repeatedly mentioned in the play *The Iceman Cometh*[5]. As to *Beyond the Horizon*, the horizon is an embodiment of the dream that Robert once had, a place he longed for but could not reach. It is also a symbol of the painful reality Robert had experienced. The great contrast reflected the tragic of Robert. In Act I,

when referring to beloved books, alluring horizon, mysterious East and call of nature, Robert was so excited. In contrast, it was miserable when Robert stumbled to his feet desperately overlooking the far from the top of the hill, leaving the world with regret and pity in the end. His pipe dream was too terminated.

In *Marco Millions*, Princess Kukachin fell in love with Marco, who was said to just aim at money rather than love, but Kukachin believed Marco was different and was a true man who had done everything to lift the reputation of Kublai Khan. She caught sight of Marco treating her dog and playing with children of slaves and overheard his sighs and compliments for the beauty of nature. Marco was "a strange, mysterious dream [4]" for her. Nevertheless, Marco made no response to her love and got married with his first love after returning home. Feeling desperate, she died with her love and was lost in the dream. It was obvious that the love, hatred, fame and wealth in the play were a dream. Noise coming, lights on, he found himself again and plunged into the luxurious reality.

Mary in *Long Day's Journey into Night* had two dreams, to be a beautiful nun or a concert pianist. Mother Elizabeth told her that if she really wanted to be a nun, she should give herself a test. Going out to party, dancing and enjoying herself, she could come back to Mother if she still had the wish one or two years later. However, she was in love with James Tyrone, an actor, in spring. She went around and lived in cheap hotels with him after marriage and was addicted to drugs unfortunately when Edmund was born and could not get rid of it. Her dream of a nun collapsed and she could only go back to the sweet past with the help of drugs. Her beautiful, long fingers became crippled due to continuous poison; the piano was deserted and her precious wedding dress was forgotten in the attic. At the end of the last act, Mary played the piano and stepped down with wedding dress in her arms, shy look on her face and two pigtales on her breasts. She returned to the past-the dream again. It was similar to the Chinese story of Chuang Chou and butterfly and come into a state where he could hardly distinguish if he was Chuang Chou in the dream of a butterfly or a butterfly in his dream.

4. UNITY WITH NATURE

Unity with Nature can be defined as follows: man should follow the natural laws and course of nature and be in harmony with the nature. "Tao models itself after nature" was an important thought of Lao Tsu, which was exemplified in the play *Beyond the Horizon* as well. It was evident that the two brothers looked quite different: It was evident that Robert was a fragile bookworm featuring "delicate and refined, leaning to weakness in the mouth and chin[2]" while Andrew was "an opposite type to Robert-husky, sun-bronzed, handsome in a large-featured, manly fashion-a son of the soil, intelligent in a

shrewd way, but with nothing of the intellectual about him.[2]” The two brothers held different attitude to the farm: Andrew regarded dirt as “good clean earth[2]” while Robert brimmed with detestation. Robert had no interest in and a gift for farming, whereas Andrew seemed to be born in this way and did was the right hand of his father. They both knew what was the fittest for the two without the joke of destiny or their choice. “The draw of sex and the power of jealousy impel both brothers to enact a role reversal that ends, fatalistically, in love lost for Ruth.[6]” As a consequence, Robert who longed for the sea and the outer world, bowed to the ground all day; Andrew left his hoe and lifted the sail. The two were running against their own nature and incurred a series of disasters. Eventually, the farmland of Robert developed into a wasteland and Andrew lost all his money for speculation.

Princess Kukachin had heard of various evils of Marco from kinds of people including her dear grandfather. However, Marco had as much soul and heart as her. Remembering every strength of Marco, she followed her heart with love leading the way. Kukachin was determined to devote all herself to love despite of her marriage alliance and ignorance of Marco. Therefore, she could announce, “I loved and died. Now I am love, and live. And living, have forgotten. And loving, can forgive.[4]” It was obvious that Kukachin had been in a state of Unity with Nature and acquired immortal.

The young Tyrone was a handsome and gifted actor. Greed as Tyrone is, he cherished every dollar for his poverty and sufferings when being young. Tyrone had been acting the same character for many years so that he could earn money as much as possible. Nevertheless, his talent was wasted and Mary became an addict on account of his stingy with money leading to the pain and desperation of the whole family. Warm and sentiment appeared only when he was drunk. Only in this occasion, could he achieve the unity with nature and universe and be prone to meditation. It was the autobiographic style that appealed audience most. O’Neill put his own family experience into the Tyrone and made Edmund another himself, which was not only an invisible wealth for scholars specializing in the plays of O’Neill and people who loved O’Neill but a priceless treasure for the world.

Taoism had a great influence on Eugene O’Neill and was also reflected in his plays. But it seemed that sometimes he did not have a thorough understanding of Taoism. For example, Wu Wei was not to do nothing and let it go but to act according to the advantage of situation to achieve goals. In *Marco Millions*, Chu-Yin said, “Let him develop according to his own inclination and give him also every opportunity for true growth if he so desires. And let us observe him. At least, if he cannot learn, we shall.[4]” Personal interpretation of Taoism of O’Neill spread everywhere, thus mistakes appeared in some way. And in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, the

Tyrone did nothing but blamed each other for the sufferings. It was hard for the western and puzzled for Chinese to understand Taoist ideas to some degree. As a matter of fact, O’Neill was inclined to express various themes and thoughts, about life and death, about love and desire, about religion and so forth. However, he was a stranger to the land and merely knew China and Taoism from literary works. There was no wonder that *Marco Millions* could not hold a candle to the literary value of his first-class works.

5. O’NEILL AND TAOISM

Tao is of vital importance in Chinese and Ancient Oriental philosophies. It is a general idea of how people recognize and observe the world covering everything human beings has known or not. Taoism originated from War-states period in ancient China when social wealth accumulated wildly and nature was distorted by numberless wars. Therefore, people were indulged in finding a way to soft pains. Taoism appeared. Tao was the final philosophy, the truth and the original thing. Tao is the rule for everything.

Tao Te Ching and Chuang Tsu are both complicated Chinese ancient philosophies, conveying thoughts of Lao Tsu and Chuang Tsu and universal wisdom of Chinese. Tao Te Ching refers to cosmos, nature, world and social life. Lao Tsu believes man should undue desire for the reason that people breaking away from fame, desire and material and follow nature is the precondition for us to live a peaceful and simple life. Tao is returning. Things are dependent but opposite and will flow to the opposite when they are in extremes. ‘Yin and Yang’ is another essential notion of Taoism. Yin and Yang represent two sides flowing all the time in which Yin is dark, passive, perceptual as well as intuitive, motionless and related to the ground while Yang is bright, rational, aggressive, active and related to the heaven. Unity with Nature is also an important idea in Taoism. Man is a small dirt in the big world of the universe. Man and nature have something in common and man should follow the natural laws aiming to achieve the harmony between man and nature. Different opinions about Wu Wei appear. On the one hand, some scholars believe it is an escape from conflicts and do nothing; on the other hand, it means following nature and Tao in actual actions, in other words, man is a part of Tao and should follow Tao in their decisions outside and dedicates to the development and peace of the inside.

The reason why Eugene O’Neill was fascinated by Taoism, could be divided into two parts: social background and personal reasons. Socially, with the rapid development of industrialization in Western, the material had an unprecedented abundant while spiritual world was reduced to a wasteland. Many philosophers threw their eyes to the mystic Far East aiming to save the spiritual

crisis spreading in their homeland. O'Neill was one of them.

Personally, O'Neill enrolled in a Catholic boarding school at the very early age where the nuns and priests were very strict. He felt lonely but pious to God and tried to find love and care from God and prayed for mother getting rid of the addiction of morphine at the birth of O'Neill. However, nothing happened. Feeling despair for mother, God and the world, he abandoned Catholicism and decided to find an outlet in replacement of his lost faith. Virginia Floyd once said that in the period when O'Neill sought a replacement for his lost faith, he turned to and found a meaning for existence in Lao Tsu.

O'Neill knew about Oriental thoughts through works of European romantic thinkers and American Transcendentalists and he worshiped Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, August Strindberg and Henrik Johan Ibsen. Among all the oriental thoughts, Taoism was charming to O'Neill. In 1920s, O'Neill began to have a systematic learning on oriental thoughts. He read Tao Te Ching translated by James Legge as well as works on Chinese poetry and arts and books about Chinese history and religious in the writing of Shi Huang Ti in his play. Carlotta, his third wife, was fascinated by Chinese culture and remained good friendship with ethnic Chinese living in America. In 1937, O'Neill moved into "Tao House" in California. Mai-Mai sze and Lin Yutang bestowed books about Chinese thoughts including *My Country and My People* written by Lin Yutang which described Chinese culture especially Taoism thoroughly and *The Complete Writings of Lao Tse and Chuang Tse* translated by James Legge and *Lao-tze's Tao and Wu Wei* written by Dwight Goddard. In a word, Taoism influenced Eugene O'Neill both in literary creation and personal life.

6. CONCLUSION

Taoism had a great influence on Eugene O'Neill but it seemed that sometimes he did not have a thorough understanding of Taoism. For example, 'Wu Wei' was not to do nothing and let it go but to act according to the advantage of situation to achieve goals. Personal interpretation of Taoism of O'Neill spread everywhere, thus mistakes appeared in some way. It was hard for the western and puzzled for Chinese to understand Taoist ideas to some degree. As a matter of fact, O'Neill was inclined to express various themes and thoughts, about life and death, about love and desire, about religion and so forth. However, he was a stranger to the land and merely knew China and Taoism from literary works.

Throughout the literary career of O'Neill, Taoism has penetrated into his mind instead of staying at the surface level for the reason that he treats Orientalism and Western thoughts objectively without cultural bias. In his plays, Taoism, not only the treasure of oriental culture but world

culture, has already transcended the limits of religion and country.

Researches on the plays of O'Neill, especially Taoism in his plays, have a vital importance and practical significance for Chinese drama and literature. With the rapid development of globalization and frequent communication between oriental culture and western culture, we must have an organic combination of the two. Swarms of scholars have been studying the plays of O'Neill, especially Taoism in his plays in recent years and have been bearing fruits. It is a good way to shed new light on introducing Chinese traditional culture to the world and be of assistance to achieve great harmony in culture.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The main work finished by authors are that they explore possible Taoist ideas in Eugene O'Neill's Plays, or at least the ideas that agree with Taoism, so that readers could understand a O'Neill from a quite different perspective.

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