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An Existentialist Stance on Change, Personal, Social and Psychosocial, in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*

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Introduction

Change is permanent. In the plays of Eugene O'Neill change is brought by external forces as well as internal psychological processes. All the characters in his play *Long Day's Journey into Night* are in a constant state of flux, facing undefeatable threats and problems on an ordinary basis. The paper aims to appreciate and analyze O'Neill's concern with change, which is a reflection on how man appears to be relatively unconscious to these theatrical facts, and struggles to attain a sense of stability and constancy. O'Neill is also concerned with the personal/subjective change and its traumatic affects on the personas in the plays especially his late play *Long Day's Journey into Night*. The paper also deals with the resistant towards change, wherein the popular notion of change as a renowned valuable asset in modern society becomes associated with the tragic instead of the favorable notions of progress and improvement.

The most general notion of change is merely a difference in the things. Kant argues that "alteration can be perceived only in substances", meaning alteration can be understood as the change of states of a substance. He believes "permanence is thus a necessary condition under



which alone appearances are determinable as things or objects in a possible experience”.

[A187/B230]

Man endeavor at the fundamental biological stage to preserve a steady and unvarying inner state – Homeostasis (Cannon, 1935). This necessity is reflected at the individual and social level as stability is thought of as an important element for security and safety (Maslow, 1970). Several pessimistic responses towards change are generated due to the diminished ability to control and increased uncertainty (Fox, 1998). Resistance to change is an unconstructive and harmful attitude which pervades life unnoticed but change is a fundamental component of modern life, the resistance to change is an impediment to personal, interpersonal and social. The approach to resist change is bound to fail, only tolerance of change and accepting it provides peace. Change is also linked with uncertainty. Uncertainty can be defined as the individual's lack of ability to foresee happenings, actions or workings of the environment precisely (Milliken, 1987). Insecurity undermines stability, a safety requirement (Maslow, 1970). An intrinsic and innate need is felt to try to avoid, remove or at least manage the uncertainty in the lives (Van den Bos, 2001), though Landau, Greenberg and Kosloff (2010) point to numerous cases in which people make preference that increase rather than decrease uncertainty.

In this context, the study analyses the treatment of the attitude towards change in O'Neill's plays with reference to *Long Day's Journey in to Night*. Though much attention has been given to the theme of time and past in different critical studies on O'Neill's memorable play, what has not been sufficiently appreciated and properly analyzed is how far it portrays responses to change and the trauma associated with it. In the first place the paper analyses that in line with modern concern with change, O'Neill is concerned with the



personal/subjective, social and psychosocial domains. Secondly the resistance to change has traumatic effects and the personas conduct in the play *Long Day's Journey into Night* is an illustration of trauma that afflicts man.

Studies have shown that these responses are caused by psychosocial changes. The lack of the resources which could help survive the stark reality of change such as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and perceived control (Seligman, 1975), makes change appears as a challenge. When all the resources are exhausted, change appears more dangerous and takes the form of a threat and the stress response is intensified (Blascovich & Mendes, 2000). The Buddhists believe change is permanent and suffering is caused when people ignore the reality of impermanence. They desire everything to continue being the way it is so the change becomes associated with loss and suffering. The Buddhist tradition contends that only if we liberate ourselves from our flawed and destructive illusion of permanence, and accept that quite ironically impermanence is the only real thing we can hold on to, will we be able to confront death without fear.

The focal point of the paper is change, which is linked to the human existential plight and forms a process natural. *Long Day's Journey into Night* shows the physiological reactions to change that take place in the personas. New situations after situations laden with ambiguity and changeability elicit a response which is exquisitely portrayed by the playwright. These physiological responses, however, depend on the appraisal of the situation, triggered due to lack of ability to cope with the changes and to deal with them. The philosophical contemplation of existence and impermanence is synchronized with psychological attempts to understand the transient nature human kind.



Change in O'Neill is integral to his themes and is at the centre of personas' consciousness. O'Neill's own experience arises from change, personal loss and subjective experiences. Change in his own case elicited a traumatized response from him, forsaking his ancestral catholic faith (James E. Robinson, 1995 & Edward L. Shaughnessy, 2000), his suicide attempts (James E. Robinson, 1995), prostitution, and trying to hit bottom (Arthur and Barbara Gelb, 155) show how he himself reacted to change in life. Stephen A. Black (1994) finds associations between changes including the loss of entire family (brother, father and mother), and the plays written by O'Neill. However, he argues that O'Neill's final response was acceptance of loss/ change and his resistance to grief which finally led towards accepting his losses (2).

O'Neill dramatizes the terrible changes that take place in day long journey into night in the lives of the four Tyrone. The play starts on a happy note where the family is content. The permanence of impermanence is portrayed as happiness changes into stress. All characters show their responses to change, visible in their feelings, language, recollection and actions. The trauma caused by personal, interpersonal and social change is clearly visible. Each character shows different response and traumatic reaction to change. The urge for permanence or fascination with fixity in the play imparts a psychotic look to the play. O'Neil notes a change in surroundings. No sunlight enters the room and a faint haziness in the air, the fog, parallels changes in the setting as well as psychological state of the characters. John Henry Raleigh (1993) notes there permeates a sense of "not belonging, a kind of cosmic loneliness" (206).

Tyrone comments on change in Mary as he perceives she has "far gone in the past already, when it's only the beginning of the afternoon" (86). He makes a request to Mary to



accept change “for God sake,” (87), and, “let our dead baby rest in peace?”(87). Tyrone cannot refute that change has tormented their lives, and will continue to do so. The changes Mary experienced after her marriage with actor Tyrone and baby Edmund’s demise can ever be forgotten. For them change is associated with pain, disease and death. Change acts as a reminder of the inevitability of death and the impermanent state of being. Each and every change is a continuous “small death” and represents a reminder that of the futility in trying to hold on to this world as "changes...are the pulse of death, the heartbeat of death" (Rinpoche; 1992 pp. 46).

She hates changes, “I’ve never felt at home in the theatre (102). She hates uncertainties involved with changes including travelling with her actor husband and living in dirty hotels. Mary refers to these changes: “I became terrified. I imagined all sorts of horrible accidents. (113). Mary responds to change to “ugly hotel rooms” as she asserts she became quite used to it (113). She confesses to James she longs for change, “Oh, I’m so sick and tired of pretending this is a home! You never have wanted one never since the day were we married! You should have remained a bachelor and lived in second rate hotels and entertained your friends in barrooms! (67).

Later in the same act she regrets change again “for me it’s always been so lonely as a dirty room in one night stand hotel... I know from experience what a home is like. I gave up the one to marry you, my father’s home” (72) she perceives this change drastic. Her response to change is more heightened by the terrible changes in the life of the family, specially the birth and death of babies. In her obsessed state of mind she holds changes responsible for her traumatized state. She tells Tyrone, “But bearing Edmund was the last straw. I was so sick afterwards, and that ignorant of quack of the cheap hotel doctor—all he knew was to reduce



pain. (87). She regrets why she changed her aims, “I forgot all about becoming a nun or a concert pianist. All I wanted was to be his wife.”(105). She regrets how he changed into a drunkard disappointing her, “But I must confess, James, although I could not help loving you.” (113). She wants no change and wants to hold on to the things as they were as symbolized by her wedding gown, “Oh, how I loved that gown! It was so beautiful! Where is it now, I wonder? I used to take it out from time to time when I was lonely, but it always made me cry, so finally as long while ago—“(115), she changes the place she keeps the gown so often only to forget where, in which trunk it is.

In the last Act desire to change, to be a nun, takes on a morbid control over her. She wants to be a pianist or a Nun. She is unable to figure out whether any change can help her, “What is it I’m looking for? (172). She says, “Something I miss terribly. It can’t be altogether lost” (173). “I remember when I had it I was never neither lonely nor afraid. I can’t have lost it forever; I would die if I thought that. Because then there would be no hope (173). Her hope for another change is to become a pianist, but aging has left its marks “But something horrible has happened to my hands. The fingers have gotten so stiff— (171)”.

Mary uses morphine to forget change and uncertainties linked with change. Apart from Mary’s traumatized reactions to change, resistance to change and desire for change, the play dramatizes different traumatized reactions of other personas to different factors that are related to change from different perspectives. Tyrone recalls Mary’s desire for a drastic change by quitting this life in Act II as, “I hope you’ll lay in a good stock ahead so we’ll never have another night like the one when you screamed for it, and ran out of the house in your nightdress half crazy, to try and throw yourself off the dock”(86). The final scene implies the persistent desire for change in the life of these miserable Tyrones.



Jamie and Edmund are traumatized by change. Edmund is no less a victim of change, his worsening health (tuberculosis), his mother's changing back to drugs, and changed family situation cause stress that result in an unreasonable state of anxiety and fear. His desire for forgetting change is clearly discernible, "Be always drunken. Nothing else matters: That is the only question. If you would not feel the horrible burden of Time weighing on your shoulders and crushing you to the earth, be drunken continually..." (132). For C.W.E. Bigsby O'Neill's characters as caught in the decline, he regards "a theatre of entropy" (49).

Change is perceived as an existential threat as well as an existential remedy. Edmund's desire for change is eloquently revealed in his statement: "It was a great mistake, my being born a man; I would have been much more successful as a seagull or a fish. As it is, I will always be a stranger who never feels at home who does not really want and is not really wanted, who can never belong, who must always be in little love with death (154)". Edmund accepts change from darkness to light, but even this is a reminder of the final change, the final journey to death. Change poses as a fundamental human problem. Change is allegedly a threat as it is allied with time, change is a transition from a youth to old age accompanied with the understanding and acute awareness that that one is coming closer to death. The idea that change signifies death or that death is a form of change is a major pillar of Socratic philosophy (Vlastos, 1971).

The car is a lemon that James picked up used a symbol long journeys and change. Mary's wedding dress and James souvenir, a piece of paper printed with praise from famous actor Edwin Booth of James's performance of Othello, remind them of change that has taken its toll. As such it is the cognitive, physiological and psychosocial states of the persona which determine how they react to change. They demonstrate several types of responses to various



types of change, displaying more aversive towards some changes revealing the psychological setup which influences their reception or resistance to change.

Both sons, Jamie and Edmund react to change that goes against their likening. O'Neill's plays dramatize change both the desire for and fear of it as traumatized experience that destroy life. The Title of the play, "*Long Day's Journey into Night*" shows change, which is recurrent and a routine. Change is existentially threatening, and leads the protagonists to display either resistance to change or a dire need for change. Day and Night and the cyclic changes, as represented by the progress of day to night, are one of the central symbols of Long Day's Journey. The Tyrone's are caught in a similar cycle of change. They attack, they feel terrible, they make an apology, and they say something hurtful, they feel terrible; they make an apology, even the moods change.

Although the concern with change is not unvarying and some find change more existentially intimidating than others, the fact remains that change elicits greater concerns about death than a condition with no change. Although stagnation signifies death and decay, the plays show how changes are perceived as perils. The plays become threatening reminders on how swiftly the sands of time run leaving behind drained hourglass of existence, a token of the loss of youth and vitality. The plays also reveal the intense desire for permanence and ability to transcend the ephemeral nature of the material existence. The distressed responses may differ, but always assume psychotic urge for permanence that impede harmonious integration with the self and the others. These responses are basically post modern in nature. O'Neill demonstrates desire for permanence against the unvarying certainty of change in life. These instincts are post-modernistic in nature. The study concludes that Eugene O'Neill does not provide any approaches for dealing with the trauma caused by the impermanence of life



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and his plays are merely an illustration of ordeals and suffering of mankind faced with the stark reality of change.



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