

**EUGENE O'NEILL'S USE OF INTERIOR MONOLOGUE IN
*STRANGE INTERLUDE***

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Abstract

There is a consensus of perceptions that O'Neill as an artist developed over the years and that he experimented with a broad range of techniques in his long dramatic career. One of his remarkable experimentations in the middle part of his dramatic career pertains to the use of interior monologue technique in *Strange Interlude*. It is important as the technique had already been used by such prominent stream of consciousness writers as Virginia Woolf in her fiction. The technique, however, serves more to highlight limitations of the thoughts and their unusual fixed pattern. Human consciousness in normal condition is characterized by a consistent flow of thoughts. Besides, the thought processes of all the principal characters reflect a diseased pattern that disrupts their normal thinking and keeps it confined to what may be called zones of reflections. It is unusual that all the principal figures have similar zone of reflection that moves around a particular person, mood or desire without any recognizable variation and development in the nature of reflection in the whole play. Then these reflections are repeated with a teasing persistency that assumes a mechanical format for easy predictability of the readers. Thus an impression of stasis in thoughts imposes itself on these thinking patterns with negative and non cathartic impact on the readers' thoughts, sensibilities and imagination.

Key words: O'Neill's Modern drama, interior monologue, *strange interlude*

1. Introduction

R. Humphrey (1968) in his analysis of the stream of consciousness novel, defines *interior monologue* as: "the technique used in fiction for representing the psychic content and processes of character, partly or entirely unuttered, just as these processes exist at various levels of conscious control before they are formulated for deliberate speech".

S. J. O'Neill argues that "the technique is concerned with the portrayal of character through the content of the mind and also with the processes or devices for simulating the stream of thought" (1968: 2). He divides it into three categories: direct, first-person; indirect, third-person; and combination of first and third person. In the first category, he writes, "explicit author control is absent, and the monologue is thought through in

the solitude of the subject's psyche" (1968: 2). The speaker is alone in this situation and the monologue is interior "because it represents the actual texture of the psychic state by simulating its incoherence and fluidity. Freely associated thoughts flow through the mind and the portrayal of this flow is one of the primary concerns"(O'Neill 1968: 2). The second category of the monologue on the other hand makes provision for the intervention of the writer between the subject and the reader by presenting thoughts as if they were coming directly from the consciousness of the subject.

In the field of drama two different conventions of aside and soliloquy were used, particularly in Renaissance drama to reveal human consciousness and the flow of thoughts in a variety of situations.

The establishment and maintenance of the conventions governing soliloquies did not require the distribution of a document in the theatre at each performance explaining the conventions to playgoers. The conventions were established and maintained simply because they operated explicitly so often that playgoers became extremely familiar with their operation. They were assumed to be in operation unless explicitly overridden.

Shakespeare exploited the dramatic potential of these conventions throughout his career in a wide variety of situations in all genres and for a wide variety of particular dramatic purposes (J. Hirsch 2005: 119-198).

Critics, however, are divided on the exact nature and magnitude of these conventions and their importance in overall dramatic form. Asides as Szondi (1965) explains are mere "passing suspension of dialogue" and have "no tendency to destroy dialogue". They may suspend the dialogue, but in themselves they strengthen "the dialogic stream" (Szondi 1965) and despite their presence in dramatic form over the years they can not disprove the primacy of dialoguing as a recognized principle of dramatic form.

In Hirsh's (2005) opinion, the use of these conventions in Shakespeare's dramatic art, however, was regular part of dramaturgy and they represent speeches by characters rather than their unspoken thoughts. And he describes the Shakespearean Soliloquy as a representation of speech rather than their unspoken thoughts, and therefore part of the dialogic patten and not additional to it.

A. Newell (1965) in his *The Soliloquies in 'Hamlet': The Structural Design* takes the twelve soliloquies in the play their dramatic contexts as the key to the play's meaning. In Newell's reading of "To be or not to be" soliloquy shows Hamlet at his most 'rational, dispassionate, contemplative'. It is something of an 'academic exercise', 'cast in an intensely intellectual mode of discourse" (85). Even the absence of soliloquies is analyzed as a part of the plays over all structure. The final chapter of the book, 'Wills and Fates: Intimations of Providence', sees the absence of soliloquies in the last movement of the play as integral to the overall design. Shakespeare is now

concerned with the workings of providence. Whereas soliloquies tend to preoccupy one with the inner state of a character, 'a providential design directs one to the notion of a universal outer process' (85).

2. O'Neill's use of interior monologue

There is a consensus of perceptions that O'Neill as an artist developed over the years and that he experimented with a broad range of techniques in his long dramatic career [10-13]. One of his remarkable experimentations in the middle part of his dramatic career pertains to the use of interior monologue technique in *Strange Interlude*. It is important as the technique had already been used by such prominent stream of consciousness writers as Virginia Woolf in her fiction. B. Mandl (2004) describes his *Strange Interlude* as an ideal play for the use of the technique. Being a play of thoughts it is preoccupied with "record of the atoms as they fall on the mind in the order in which they fall" (1). Here as Mandl (2004) writes he "interwove his characteristically comprehensive stage directions and dramatic dialogue with soliloquies in a major effort to represent thought as process" (1). O'Neill also "distinguishes" argues Mandl (2004) "effectively between the various consciousnesses of his characters in the play, crafting each inner self with as much distinctiveness as he does his characters social speech or behavior. Each consciousness has its characteristics, proprietary and knowledge"(1).

The technique, however, serves more to highlight limitations of the thoughts and their unusual fixed pattern. Human consciousness in normal condition is characterized by a consistent flow of thoughts. This is what the modern exponent of interior monologue like Virginia Woolf has demonstrated in her fiction. In drama, as referred above, the best reflection of dynamic mind and consciousness could be identified in Shakespearean tragedy that depicts a dynamic thinking pattern of the protagonists thinking in response to any compelling factor or deed done knowingly or in ignorance. Besides, the thought processes of all the principal characters reflect a diseased pattern that disrupts their normal thinking and keeps it confined to what may be called zones of reflections. It is unusual that all the principal figures have similar zone of reflection that moves around a particular person, mood or desire without any recognizable variation and development in the nature of reflection in the whole play. Marsden's thinking on Professor Leed's library, "He hasn't added one book in years ..." (*Strange Interlude* 1982: 5) in fact represents the range of thinking pattern of all the principal figures in the play. The very next moment, he is fond reflecting on his personal failure, "I won't go to Europe again... couldn't write a line there..." (*Strange Interlude*: 148), and later in Act seven, he clearly comes out with thoughts on personal failure, "I've been a timid bachelor of arts, not an artist!". Then these reflections are repeated with

mechanical format reflecting a static mind and thoughts with negative and non-cathartic impact on the readers' thoughts and sensibilities. The readers need to feel the level of inner torture through their imaginative involvement in the whole dramatic process and dramatic action. They need constant sparks emanating from the protagonist's dynamic response to a situation to develop association with him/her. Their static conditions and responses on the other hand do restrain the readers; imaginative capabilities and strains their sensibilities to create impact that are contrary to cathartic effect. Then these reflections are repeated with a teasing persistency that assumes a mechanical format for easy predictability of the readers. Thus an impression of stasis in thoughts manifests itself on these thinking patterns with negative impact on the readers' sensibilities, and imagination. It is also very significant that their thinking processes go along with characteristically negative, depressed, and irritable states of mind. O'Neill consistently uses such adjectives and phrases as "*agitated*", "*guiltily*", "*sneeringly*", "*resentfully*" "*bitterly*" "*thinking in agony*" "*bitingly*" "*in strange agony*" (Strange Interlude, 33, 35, 36, 37, 38) and so on about all the personas thought and reflection. Marsden's words, "the devil . . . what beastly incidents our memories insist on cherishing! . . . the ugly and disgusting . . . the beautiful things we have to keep diaries to remember! . . ." (Strange Interlude: 40) represent these moods as the reader goes through the play.

Zones of reflection of each of the main male character predominantly move around voluptuous Nina Leeds with similar intensity. Marsden is initially found reflecting on sexuality and disgusting teenage sexual experience with a fat, short-legged, thick-ankled, lumpy Italian girl. But the reflection also reveals his Oedipal neurosis in depressive remembrance of the deceased mother and bitter self-condemnatory thoughts. He terms the encounter as betrayal to the mother who is sobbingly remembered. But he gets back to the remembrance of sexual encounter with a feeling, "Ugh! . . . Always that memory! . . . why can't I ever forget? . . . as sickeningly. Clear as if it were yesterday . . . prep school. . . Easter vacation . . . fatty Boggs and Jack Frazer . . . that house of a cheap vice . . . one dollar! . . . why did I go?" (Strange Interlude: 6).

His self-disgusting thoughts continue to crop up in his mind and reflections in this part. In such reflections as, "What Charlie has done? . . . nothing . . . and never will . . ." (Strange Interlude: 13) he reveals his pernicious neurosis and neurasthenia. But from Act two onwards his thoughts with temporary remembrance of the mother revolve around voluptuous Nina with hyper-desire for her possession and sensuous attachment that refuses to settle down or undergo any degree of variation. Occasionally oedipal longings and loss merge into each other to show him thinking of mother and Nina simultaneously: she's [Nina] hard . . . like a

whore . . . tearing your heart with dirty fingers nails! . . . My Nina I'll scream out the truth about every woman! No kinder at heart than dollar torts! . . .”, and instantly he is found thinking, “forgive me, Mother! . . . I did not mean at all” (Strange Interlude: 40) But, principally it is Nina who occupies his zone of reflection. It in fact stretches back to her very childhood when she would sit on his knees Some times the scent of her hair and skin . . . like a dreamy drug . . . dreamy! . . . there's the rub! . . . all dreams with me! . . my sex life among the phantoms! . . .” (Strange Interlude: 97), and as the play closes, Marsden remains preoccupied in the same mood and desire, “Rest, dear Nina. (*then tenderly*) It has been a long day. Why don't you sleep now - as you used to, remember? - for a little while?”, and Nina's words “Thank you father . . . dear old Charlie?” Marsden recoils with pain, (*reacting automatically and winching with pain—thinking mechanically*) God damn dear old . . .

Darrel likewise suffers from the same malaise in thought and feelings. He remains submerged in thinking of Nina from particular sensuous perspectives with utmost desire of her body possession for sexual orgasm: Christ! . . . Touch of her skin! . . . Her nakedness! . . . those afternoons in her arms! Happiness! (Strange Interlude 105) reflect this intense preoccupation. Inability to procure her body for sexual gratification makes him bitter, “. . . her body is a trap! . . . I'm caught in it! . . . she touches my hand, her eyes get in me!, I lose my will! . . (Strange Interlude 105). B. Mandl (1995) has also referred to this paralysis in Darrel's thoughts:

There is a gap between Darrell's first scientific speech, in which he had advocated Nina's mating with a healthy male (treating people like guinea pigs, or trying to do so), and his current thoughts. His hedonist speech signals the end of what had been a more or less feigned indifference. The initial reasons for their meetings have long since been forgotten. What prevails now is the remembrance of a physical union in which they were able to reach a state of happiness. Love is not mentioned. Darrell only remembers the union of their bodies and carnal pleasure without guilt or shame. Nina's nakedness symbolizes the success of their union.

Evan's zonal reflection is marred by the same figure of Nina. Early in the play before he is married to Nina, he is found thinking of what would be the possible nature of his relation with Nina if they get married: “. . . Ned is my best friend . . . doing all he can to help me with Nina . . he thinks she'll marry me in the end . . . God, if she only would! . . . I wouldn't expect her to love me at first . . . be happy only to take care of her . . . cook breakfast . . . bring it up to her in bed . . tuck the pillow behind her . . . comb her hair for her . . I'd be happy just to kiss her hair! . . .” (Strange Interlude: 31). This reflection unlike that of Darrell reveals a contrary personality and mindset. Quite unlike Darrel's robust reflection of a full sexual contact with Nina,

Evans is found timid and overawed by Nina personality and stature. It also reflects neurasthenic lack of sexual energy and strength to live with full realization of robust sexual relation with her after their marriage.

Nina herself depicts another instance of constrained psychic conditions. Her thoughts and their constrained nature have been analyzed in detail in terms of traumatized existence and post traumatic stress disorder elsewhere (Karim 2010). The readers are made aware of this possession from the very beginning. Only she has to unravel it in her dialogue and asides. This psychic fixity and the consequent cramped dialogue and speeches only ventilating these repeat itself in the play.

Other aspects of the use of interior monologues are closely related to constrained reflections in the characters. It appears unusual at the outset that reflections seem to represent the obvious choice to all the characters in the play as each of them slips uninterruptedly into her thoughts. The dramatist has to interfuse dialogue and monologue to highlight this tendency among his characters. As the play progresses the uninterrupted flow of the thoughts assume mechanical pattern in the form of asides/monologues and readers develop easy predictability of what could be the subject of thoughts. This mechanical patten deprives the play of its imaginative strength and also leaves the readers dry and unresponsive to the plight and pain that each of them undergoes. Secondly the use of interior monologues establishes a concordance between the spoken and the unspoken in the play. As the thoughts are predominantly replete with agonized, irritable, bitter reflection, dialogues as well as the monologues reflect the same. It makes interior monologue as a regular part of O'Neill's dramaturgy and not something which is additional to the dialogue pattern.

3. Conclusion

It is concluded here that the technique of Interior monologue realistically unearths a deep psychopathological (neurasthenic and neurotic) malaise in the personas personality and behavior. His use of technique also vastly differs from the stream of conscious technique as propounded by its illustrious proponents. It denies what William James and other stream-of-consciousness writers upheld that "the self in our stream of consciousness changes continuously as it moves forward in time even as we retain a sense that the self remains the same while our existence continues" (Damasio A. qtd. in Mandl, B. 2004).

Far from projecting human consciousness as a process, O'Neill's use of technique highlights a mental paralysis that governs the thought processes and subsequent expressions. In fact, it points out to serious and severe limitations of the thought process. It also links all the principal characters together as far as the subject matter of thought processes is concerned. Now

as drama is about interaction with the audiences/readers and communicating the experiences with the readers/audience, the effect on the readers in this case could hardly be aesthetically pleasurable, cathartic and therapeutic. In fact use of interior monologue technique creates typically un-cathartic psychic strain and depressiveness as the readers go along repetitive and strained monologic patterns in the whole play.

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