

The Benign Maternal Power in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill

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Abstract

In the American literature of the 19th century, woman's inauspicious destiny remained linked to her relationship with men because the oppressive patriarchal system had remained almost unchanged. In a context characterized with such frame of mind, a woman's position was conceptualized and defined in terms of her traditional role as a wife, a daughter, or a mother, who had to remain under men's shadow.

However, voices of protest against this unequal relationship were beginning to be heard and they were to become, especially with the advent of the suffragist movement of the early twentieth century, louder than ever. With the socio-cultural changes witnessed in the relatively liberal climate of the time, women's aspirations for an independent identity were being reflected in poetry, fiction and drama.

In drama, in particular, one may trace the considerable attention given to woman's attempts to actualize her identity back to the realistic plays of dramatists, such as Susan Keating Glaspell (1876-1948) and Rachel Crothers (1878-1958). In these writings, early echoes of women's yearning for a separate, independent identity were beginning to be heard. However, such voices were to become, later in the first half of the century, perspicuous, particularly in the plays of major modern American playwrights, of whom Eugene O'Neill stands out.

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This paper examines women's maternal roles in O'Neill's plays, especially A Moon for the Misbegotten, and analyses how these roles contribute to women's selfhood realization.

Introduction

Before the end of the nineteenth century, American women's suffrage pioneer, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, stressed in an address titled *Solitude of Self*, that "as an individual, [woman] must rely on herself. No matter how much women prefer to lean, to be protected and supported, nor how much men desire to have them do so, they must make the voyage of life alone" and they have to recognize the "solitude of self."¹

This seems to have been very much in the foreground when woman writers, at the turn of the century, realized the significance of their suffragist project. In her plays, Susan Keating Glaspell, for example, emerges as a strong feminist. Her plays, including *Women's Honor* (1918), *Bernice* (1919), *Inheritors* (1921), and *The Verge* (1922), explored relationships between men and women, focusing in particular on the roles which women played, or were forced to play, in society.

Similarly, Rachel Grothers's plays, such as *Nora* (1903), *The Three of Us* (1906), *A Little Journey* (1918), *He and She* (1920), *A Lady's Virtue* (1925), *Venus* (1927), *As Husbands Go* (1931), and *When Ladies Meet* (1932), often dealt with the problems

¹ This address was delivered by Mrs. Stanton before the Committee of the Judiciary of the United States Congress on Monday, January 18, 1892. For more details, visit <http://womenshistory.about.com/od/stantonelizabeth/a/solitude.htm> to read the article written by Jone Johnson Lewis.

that encountered women of her time. Themes of double standards, divorce, and Freudianism dominated these plays.

Since then, women characters have been portrayed – to a certain extent – as "sentient beings,"¹ who were, physically and psychologically, conscious of their status both as individuals and in their familial relationships. Issues concerning women's position in a patriarchy and man-woman relationships have, thus, frequently been the subject-matter of many playwrights, among whom is Eugene O'Neill, the major focus of this research.

O'Neill often presented women who were self-reliant and whose idea of self was not defined solely through male-female relationships. Rather, they were presented as independent and integrated individuals in the process of attaining selfhood. This, it seems, reveals that his own attitudes vis-à-vis the various women in his personal life had a profound influence on his conception of women characters.² He, thus, presented women protagonists who evolve themselves, and subsequently draw attention to the question of their selfhood.

1 While speaking of Bernard Shaw in her essay, "Power and Powerlessness: On Power and the Literary Text," Barbara Bellow Watson acknowledges that there is a shift from woman as object to the woman as subject, from woman imagined as a phenomenon of the outside world – in Simone de Beauvoir's terminology, 'the Other' – to woman as a sentient being (Watson 114).

2 The marriage between O'Neill and Agnes Boulton was based on their mutual understanding that each would grant the partner equal rights, as an individual, to an independent life, "with certain of the stylish ideas of the Bohemian 1920s in mind, ideas about free love and about marriage as a nonbinding agreement between free souls" (*Selected Letters of Eugene O'Neill*, ed. and introduced by Travis Bogard and Jackson R. Bryer, New York: Limelight Editions, 2004, 4).

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This study aims at analyzing the ways in which the female protagonists in some of O'Neill plays refuse to remain marginal beings; they use their gender identities (as mothers) to come out of man's shadow and achieve an identity of their own. The study will, in particular, highlight the protagonists' awakening to their maternal position, which functions as a powerful instrument for salvaging their lost, or temporarily dormant, innate self. It will also highlight how some female protagonists confront the darkness within themselves and/or around them and attempt to sublimate it by means of maternal feelings, among other things, and, finally, attain a comprehensive vision of life.

Motherhood as a Sense of Completeness

Some radical feminists see patriarchy as the primary cause of the oppression of women; they conceive of a separate woman's culture through which women define women. However, some other feminists concern themselves with the simple position which stipulates that women and men should have equal rights. These feminists are less interested in examining the culture within which those rights are granted or in asking whether equal rights alone place women competitively within a male-oriented world.

In this context, I do believe that the predominant position of the playwright under study is identifiable with what I may call 'liberal feminism', especially as his plays, almost all, present women protagonists who move beyond male-oriented culture.

This has originated, it seems to me, in the writings of the early decades of the twentieth century. In 1917, American writer Ellen Kay, in *The Renaissance of Motherhood*, suggested that in women, the maternal instinct was apparent from early childhood to death, and that mother love was the finest and purest emotion in the

world (qtd by Banner 90). In this way, Kay links motherhood to a natural desire in woman to bear a child. To her, maternal love, from which the altruistic principle in human society springs, is divine, uncreated, and eternal. Her assertion that motherhood brings about both self-sacrifice and self realization relates motherhood to the issue of women's selfhood.

This stand comes in the context of a contention of biosocial theorists, such as Niles Newton and Alice Rossi, who propose that the split between maternity and sexuality is connected to male dominance in Western society. Alice Rossi, while disputing the idea of motherhood as being a social construct, attributes the feeling of motherhood to "innate physiological factors" (Rossi 99). Rossi underscores here the importance of integrating female sexuality and maternity, as this will be in the best interest of mother and children and the culture in which they live. Other feminists, including Patricia Miller and Martha Fowlkes, also argue that motherhood is the essence of the female's sexuality. They focus on women's sexuality as an entity in the service of reproduction (Miller and Fowlkes 789). Besides, the frequency with which women have chosen to bear children, despite being able to avoid conceiving them, further reinforces the contention of the liberal feminist thinkers that motherhood is a natural instinct, which enables women to achieve a sense of completeness.

However, radical feminists have taken umbrage at such assertions. To them, motherhood is a socio-cultural artifact rather than a biological fact. They view female gender roles as too constricting to enable women to achieve their selfhood. As Hester Eisenstein points out, the radical feminists, foremost among them Shulamith Firestone, base their arguments on the psychology of gender. Firestone, who militates against the dominating form of motherhood that encourages male dominance over women, believes

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that motherhood and the family in their current forms would have to be abolished in order for women to be liberated (a prerequisite for their self-realization). She and other radical feminists maintain that biological sex and social gender were separable concepts and argue that the limitations placed upon women by their 'natural' inclinations towards domesticity and the role of wife and mother were dictated by a biologically based psychology (Eisenstein 69). They aver that motherhood forces women to sacrifice themselves and their individuality. They also consider the concept of woman's natural instinct for motherhood a patriarchal trap to perpetuate oppressing women.

There is, however, a middle ground held by Adrienne Rich and Betty Friedan. They are critical of Firestone's extreme radicalism as much as they are critical of motherhood in its present form.¹

Nevertheless, in the mosaic of varied attitudes towards motherhood and woman's innate maternal consciousness, there is a covert recognition among many women thinkers of what Erik Erikson refers to as the concept that a woman is "never-not-a-woman" (Erikson 290). Dramatist Tina Howe, for example, draws attention to women's realistic but ambivalent attitude towards motherhood: "If you have children, you're certainly homebound at the beginning, but if you don't have children, there is always this suspicion that you're missing something important" (Howe 227). In

1 Rich criticizes Firestone's radical eagerness to move on to genetic technology to achieve artificial motherhood because, as she holds this stand, Firestone "fails to explore the relationship between maternity and sensuality, [and between] pain and female alienation" (180).

this statement, Howe recalls Erikson's contention about motherhood being at the centre of woman's fulfillment and despair.¹

Eugene O'Neill: Motherhood as a Creator

Although she concedes that motherhood involves suffering and deprivation, feminist poet Adrienne Rich recognizes that motherhood contains within itself the potential for great creativity and joy.² In this context comes the portrayal of Martha Jayson in Eugene O'Neill's *The First Man*. In this play, O'Neill acknowledges the 'creator' in woman. When Curt Jayson wants Martha to undergo an abortion, she cries out that just as he loves his work because it is a part of him, he must love the creator in her. She desires to "complete myself with the thing nearest my heart" (584). She further goes beyond that to attack his utter selfishness: "It's my entire fault. I've spoiled you by giving up my life so completely to yours. You've forgotten I've one" (588).

Mother, the creator in Martha, nonetheless, remains subject to her husband's wishes, a matter which O'Neill underscores. He realizes that woman's reproductive capacity has become "integrated into the system of male political and economic power over women," a system that Rich wishes to dismantle (Rich 33). To do so, to free motherhood from male control, is to "release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision... and conscious intelligence, as any other difficult, but freely chosen work" (Rich 280).

1 "Clinical observation suggests that in female experience 'inner space' is at the centre of despair even as it is at the very centre of potential fulfillment. Emptiness is a female form of perdition, but [it is a] standard experience for all women" (Erikson 278).

2 For more details, see Rich, *Of Women Born*, pp. 156-255.

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But many feminists, especially women, have considered the exclusive reproductive capacity part of one integrated experience of motherhood in its two facets: motherhood as an 'experience' and motherhood as an 'institution'. They believe that motherhood as an experience is both a powerful psychosomatic phenomenon, and a physically painful one, carrying with it a socio-cultural dimension. Perhaps, therefore, Betty Friedan advocates making motherhood a positive and an enriching experience. In her opinion, motherhood gives women a unique sense of social value that is desperately needed in public life,¹ a view which is reiterated by Ann Ferguson, who calls mothering "a psychological asset" (Ferguson 106). It is woman's role as a mother that distinguishes the masculine and feminine senses of self from each other: "the masculine sense of self is separate," while "the feminine sense of self remains connected to others in the world" (Chodorow 7).

Other assertions come to highlight women's procreative capacity and underline the significance of mothering to their identity, as "an integrated female identity" evolves through woman's bearing and caring of her "offspring" (Erikson 267). In this context, many writers believe that the capacity and desire to be a mother becomes critical to female identity and personality, and the lack of this capacity causes despair: anatomy is not plainly destiny, but "anatomy, history, and personality are our combined destiny" (Erikson 265). Thus, unlike the radical feminists, Eric Erikson, Adrienne Rich, Betty Friedan and Tina Howe view motherhood more realistically and variously place it in the context of socio-cultural influences and female biology. In general, then, a strong case has been made for empathy, desire for bearing children,

1 This aspect of Betty Friedan's views on motherhood is highlighted by Margaret A. Simons in "Motherhood, Feminism, and Identity," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 351.

nurturance, and caring as the principal attributes of a woman's personality, achieving which lends to women a sense of identity, a sense of their selfhood.

This is clear with Nina Leeds in O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*. This wife, in her marriage to Sam Evans, wishes to achieve "salvation through motherhood" (Sheaffer 341). Her seeking of motherhood comes to the fore after she has given herself to the crippled soldiers as a penance. On learning that the child conceived with her husband, Sam Evans, will be an insane child, Nina undergoes an abortion, and persuades Edmund Darrell, Sam Evans's friend, to help her bear a healthy child, a plan in which she is actively supported by her mother-in-law.

At one level, Nina Leeds, thus, personifies and adumbrates independent women who, as Alison Jaggar puts it, own their bodies and are not only able to say a "no" but also are empowered to say a "yes" in none exploitative relationships with a man (Jaggar qtd in Tong 130). Nina Leeds, nevertheless, remains steeped in the life of "immanence," which, according to Simone de Beauvoir, designates being an object, a "life of subjection to given conditions," as contrasted with "transcendence," which stands for the person's "freely chosen" definition of her/his own nature (Beauvoir xxviii). In view of this, we understand how Nina's peak experience, as a matriarch, remains reified in the varied female gender roles. This is clearly revealed in her statement in the famous scene later in the play:

My three men!... I feel their desires converge in me!...
to form one complete beautiful male desire which I absorb...
and am whole...they dissolve in me, their life is my life...

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I am pregnant with the three!... husband!...
lover!...father!... and the fourth man!...little Gordon!...
he is mine too!...
That makes it perfect.

The Redemptive power of maternal Love

Modern American drama has focused on the very strong urge in women characters to bear children and on their commitment to rearing (mothering) them despite the fact that bearing a child is a physically and psychosomatically painful experience. In *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, Eugene O'Neill portrays women who, through maternity and maternal attitude, attain a more complete and comprehensive vision of their own selves and of life.

Maternal attitudes, be they considered as a psychosomatic phenomenon or a socio-cultural construct, usually equip women characters with a more positive and altruistic vision of life. In this context, female identity has been seen as "typically less fixed, less unitary, and more flexible than male individuality" (Gardiner 352-3). This can be attributed to the fact that maternal attitudes invariably develop in women the qualities of nurturance and empathy, which presuppose and also denote acceptance of the totality of the person nurtured and empathized with. Feminine consciousness, thus, is an essentially humanistic consciousness emerging from the feminine tendency to cherish, to nourish, and to preserve.

This is conspicuous, more specifically, in O'Neill's *A Moon for the Misbegotten*.

After her mother dies in child birth, Josie comes to occupy her mother's position in the family, and extends her protective maternal love and care to her brothers. Nevertheless, her maternal

caring does not remain confined to her brothers alone, the last of whom leaves home with her active help in order to escape their "slave driving father" (862). Besides, Josie's case highlights mother-daughter relationship, which Carol Christ and Nancy Chodorow¹ speak of as central and highly significant. Josie, in fact, inherits certain traits of her character from her mother, and this, in turn, "broadens and deepens her understanding of life" and enables her to have an "insight" into life (Christ 60). After the departure of her brothers, the focus of her care and affection shifts to her "lover," Jim Tyrone, the owner of the farm where she lives with her father. In the course of the play, Josie's mother-image takes ascendancy over her man-woman relationship with Jim Tyrone.

Jim, 30, a blustery drunkard and a womanizer, visits the Hogans frequently, apparently to find the human contact which he cannot get from the tarts he sleeps with most nights. But the Hogans, as tenants, feel insecure on the farm, apprehensive lest Jim Tyrone should, at some time, under the influence of liquor, sell it to their neighbouring millionaire, Harder, in violation of his promise to sell it to them at a cheaper price. This apprehension is, in fact, exaggerated and exploited, as Josie later realizes, by Phil Hogan, her father, in order to persuade Josie to trick Jim into a marriage, an act which would provide father and daughter a secure stay on the farm.

1 Carol Christ, speaking of the relationship between mother and daughter as central to the "formation of woman's image of self," notes that "exploring it forces a woman to plumb the deepest levels of her experience" (Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, 63). Moreover, it is woman's role as a mother which, as Nancy Chodorow says, distinguishes the masculine and feminine senses of self from each other. Chodorow concludes that "the masculine sense of self is separate," while "the feminine sense of self remains connected to others in the world" (Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, 169).

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Jim, who has been feeling guilty about his misdemeanours, and desolate since the death of his mother, desires a woman on whose breast he may rest his head and lighten his guilty self. Earlier in the play, Jim's strong urge for a mother figure is vocalized in the meaningful, though ostensibly innocent remark: "Mother me, Josie. I love it" (891). In response, Josie, by holding his head on her maternal breast, provides him the solace which he needs. Instead of his old "nutty idea" of getting "in bed with you" (909), he now wishes to make this night something different from his nights with prostitutes (910). On her part, she responds to his announced plan with a "passionate, possessive, tenderness" (909), and he finds the company of Josie the best because she is "clean and fine and warm and strong and kind" (915).

On the other hand, Jim, although initially unsure whether or not Josie has a beautiful soul, gradually comes to love her "in his own fashion," he claims. The night is different for Josie too. She gives him a night different from all others, with a dawn that won't creep "grayly over too many dirty window panes, but will wake in the sky like a promise of God's peace in the soul's dark sadness" (933), as she puts it.

Taking this into consideration, one may say that, similar to what Alma does for John in Tennessee Williams's *Summer and Smoke*, Josie plays the role of a 'resurrector' to Jim. Through understanding, empathy, and love, she enables Jim to purge himself of his sense of guilt. Assuring him that love can make a difference to his life, she exhorts him to stop "mourning over the past" (919). On her part, Josie too reveals her real virgin self to him, and admits her love for him and that she herself wants him physically. Jim, however, conscious of his own corrupting influence, is not looking for physical love, and would not like to defile her virginal purity: "Believe me, kid, when I poison them they stay poisoned!" (926).

Finding the dejected Josie initially unresponsive to his need for a maternal breast, he bids her a goodbye and turns to leave. Though hurt and sad, she overcomes the disappointment of her ungratified love. She recognizes his need for a confession transcends her own need and "responds to his appeal" (927).

If this is the high point of self-abnegation in Josie's life, this, simultaneously, is also the point of her self-transcendence. She runs to him with "fierce possessive, maternal tenderness" (927), pulls him around, and kisses him. Here, O'Neill emphasizes overwhelming maternal instinct and understanding in Josie: "there is a passion in her kiss, but it is tender, protective, maternal passion, which he responds to with an instant grateful yielding" (927, stage directions). She prompts Jim to unburden himself of his past. On her part, she wishes to be excused for her earlier "selfishness, thinking only of myself" (927). She realizes, "if there is one thing I owe you tonight, after all my lying and scheming, it is to give you the love you need, and it'll be my pride and joy... for I have all kinds of love for you ... and maybe this is the greatest of all ... because it cost so much" (927).

Jim realizes that listening to his confession will only sadden her, but finding Josie "a glutton for punishment" (928), he goes on to make that confession. In a scene reminiscent of the Hannah-Shannon encounter in Tennessee Williams's *The Night of the Iguana*, Josie and Jim spend the moonlit night together. The realization of an inescapable inner self, ever pursuing the guilty mind, comes to him. Importantly, it has to be observed here that it is Josie who enables him to come face to face with his depraved self and, possibly, to get rid of it through confession.

Besides, Josie may have been initially horrified by his grisly confession, but she understands his utter loneliness and thus, finally, "her love and protective_compassion return" (932). She understands

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him; "he doesn't want to hear the drunken laughter of a speakeasy, but he wants to hear "the sound of yourself [Jim] crying your heart's repentance against her [his mother's] breast" (933), a role which Josie now assumes. Looking up at the sky, Josie feels the presence of Jim Tyrone's mother, Mary Tyrone, or the Virgin Mary in the moonlight, "her soul wrapped in it like a silver mantle" (933), which, Josie imagines, forgives both of them and whose blessing lies on him. Josie holds Jim's head on her breast, "His face has the... exhausted deathlike repose," and the two "make a strangely tragic picture in the wan dawn light - -this big sorrowful woman hugging a haggard -faced, middle aged drunkard against her breast, as if he were a sick child" (935), which clearly hints at a *Pieta* image. Moreover, their pose together is strikingly similar to Alma and John's pose in *Summer and Smoke*, before Alma discovers herself in her sexuality.

Interestingly, Jim discovers in Josie the woman who is different from the ones he has had sex with. He declines to have sex with her because he wouldn't like to "poison" her virginal purity.

Josie's maternal influence enables her "lover" to come to terms with her own life and also sustains him through his "break-ups." However, she realizes her own self differently, by perpetuation of maternal feeling when, at the end of play, she maternally wishes an early end to the tortured life of 'her child!' Jim. Her final words remind us of her earlier attitude when, while he sleeps on her breast, she hates to "bring you back to life, Jim darling. If you could have died in your sleep, that's what you would have liked, isn't it?" (939).

Josie extends to Jim what Sara Ruddick, a feminist thinker, calls "benign maternal power."¹ This enables Jim "to confess and be forgiven and find peace for a night" (937). Josie herself, like Hannah in Tennessee Williams's in *The Night of the Iguana*, is drained emotionally and her face shows, not sorrow, but "tiredness and sleepiness" (937). She herself has evolved and undergone a metamorphosis and is, presently, "a wreck entirely," and will "never be the same again" (940).

The opportunity given to Jim to evolve builds upon the generally recognized conception that men in a tortured mental state have often found solace in the warm maternal lap of their mother, wife, or mistress. In *The Father* by O'Neill's literary mentor August Strindberg, as in O'Neill's own *More Stately Mansions* (1962), there is a suggestion that both the problems, with the wife and those related to the mother, can be solved on a maternal breast (Rothenberg 107). At the end of *The Father*, in a passage that is strikingly similar to the ending of O'Neill's *More Stately Mansions*, the dejected Captain says to the nurse: "Let me put my head on your knees!. Ah, that feels warm! Lean over me so I can feel your breast! ... Oh, it is sweet to fall asleep on a woman's breast, be it a mother's or a lover's! But sweetest of all-a mother's" (163).

In *More Stately Mansions*, Simon struggles to receive maternal care from his mother, Deborah, care which is not

1 In her article, "Maternal Thinking," *Feminist Studies*, 6.2 (Summer 1980), Sara Ruddick speaks of mothering as a positive trait of woman's psyche: loving, competent well-being is an important element in our [my] memories of our mothers and mothering. We must bear these memories in mind if we are to understand that neither the world's misogyny nor our own related psychic drama have totally prevented us from acquiring an image of benign maternal power. (345)

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forthcoming. Deborah ultimately rejects Simon, who is, paradoxically, enfolded in the maternal arms of his wife, Sara. Sara, however, adopts the role of his mother again when in the end she says, with a fierce, passionate possessive tenderness (according to stage directions), "Yes, I'll be your mother, too, now, and your peace and happiness and all you'll ever need in life! Come!" (198). Importantly, the stage directions are almost identical in both *A Moon for the Misbegotten* and *More Stately Mansions*, especially at the point of the assertion of the maternal instinct in the cases of the women protagonists, Josie and Sara.

Conclusion

Modern American drama has attempted to show that there has been a discernible change in attitudes of the male playwrights towards their women characters. There are many plays in which the action revolves around strong, central women characters whose sense of identity has provided a wide spectrum for study, ranging from the one based on female sexuality to the other which is based on inner strength born out of suffering. These two ends of the spectrum are spanned by women protagonists whose identity is based on their struggle for more egalitarian heterosexual relationships that have developed under the influence of the twentieth century socio-cultural forces.

The current study has revealed the playwrights' understanding of and empathy with female sensibility, and women's own concern for personal identity in relation to the feminine and the feminist mystiques, as the two have evolved during the twentieth century America. If, occasionally, the playwrights have cast women in the feminine mystique, they do not necessarily approve of it.

Besides, they have also projected women's revolt against conformism.

To these playwrights too, as it is to the feminists and the feminist playwrights, women's bodies do not remain passive repositories of beauty and innocence or aesthetic relief for the eyes moulded in the vogue of the feminine mystique alone. Rather, women assert and discover their selfhood through the body. Besides, more often than not, female sexuality gets related to women's procreative potential. Thus, in maternity many of the women protagonists appear to experience a sense of self.

The conflict between the woman's quest for selfhood and the demands of marriage as an institution is sharply focused. If women refuse to become uncomplaining dolls in the house, they do not also slam the door behind them and relinquish their family responsibilities, even if the burden of sustaining the institution of family is to be borne singly. If Victorian women used "maternal virtues to justify their participation in public sphere," one may claim that "contemporary American women have used it to console themselves for the undue burdens they continue to bear in the private one" (Kaminer 33).

This achievement has been possible due to efforts of playwrights who managed to portray women with varied degrees of 'awakened consciousness'. Women protagonists, in O'Neill's plays for example, emerge consciously liberated in spirit; their goal in life is not so much to find a man, as to be able to support themselves economically and emotionally.

In such a scenario, the sense of selfhood which may be long lasting and actually cohering of the self can be achieved neither in the dominating patriarchal culture, nor fully in the woman-defined one, but in a culture wherein both men and women enable each

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other to evolve. Women, thus, should move beyond the polarization between 'familial' and individualistic ideologies (Friedan, *The Second Stage* 209).

What O'Neill concerns himself with is not women's rights, but women's struggle for an identity or selfhood which is not a problem for women alone but an aspect of universal aspirations of any human society. If he focuses again and again on women's struggle for freedom from the serfdom in the patriarchal system, he does so because, in the changing social milieu, that is an important issue, and that is what precisely distinguishes him from many feminist writers.

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