



SPACE AND IDENTITY IN EUGENE O'NEILL'S ANNA CHRISTIE

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ABSTRACT

Landscape play significant role and is an integral part of the creative consciousness of an artist. It becomes a signifier of one's identity. The portrayal of landscape runs as a crucial concern through diverse cultures. There are various connotations attached to landscape in different cultures. Along with differences, there are also similarities which bind the people into an experiential community. Experiences and interaction with the landscape, therefore, can be viewed as personal or individual as well as collective.

INTRODUCTION

Modes of geographical perceptions and literary representations, explore the interaction of nature and culture in literary contexts. Shared memories, shared heritage, language, location and landscape play a major role in the construction of the 'self'. The familial, social and cultural histories exhibit associations with the landscape in all genres of literature. Writings explore landscape both on the physical and the plane of the spirit. The importance of the pastoral, the contrasts between the city and the country, the sea and the land, the hills, and the rivers, and the places of worship have been explored from the neo-classical to the picturesque and Romantic ideas of the sublime to the 19th and the varied styles of the 20th century. Ever since Raymond Williams' seminal study *The Country and the City*, literary critics have become increasingly conscious of the way landscape is represented. This has gained popularity with the spatial and environmental turns of the 1990's and the rapid growth of eco criticism.



Eugene O'Neill, the great Nobel Prize winning twentieth century American Dramatist, wrote *Anna Christie* in 1920. He shaped the course of American drama in its most significant developmental period between the two world wars. His plays are explorations of man's tragic dilemmas, and offer possibilities of analysis from several critical standpoints. The paper attempts to explore Anna's search for identity and kinship with the sea, which has played a decisive role in the lives of her ancestors, thus emphasizing her affinity with her family past. In the first version of *Anna Christie* entitled *Chris Christopherson*, O'Neill had given the leading role to the father, i.e., Chris. But, subsequently he felt the need of a shift in emphasis, from Chris to Anna. In a letter to George Jean Nathan, he indicates the need for this shift: From the middle of the third act I feel the play ought to be dominated by the woman's psychology. And I have a conviction that in dumb people of her sort, unable to voice strong strange feelings, the emotions can find outlet only through the language and gestures of the heroics in the novels and movies they are familiar with- that is, that in moments of great stress, life copies melodrama.

The plot of the play centres round the conflict of Chris Christopherson, the captain of the coal barge, and his daughter Anna. Chris has purposely sent Anna to live with her cousins inland in Minnesota. He doesn't want her to be entangled with the sea, which he thinks of as "de ole devil" (*Plays*, III, 21) an evil force. The irony lies here, for although Chris thinks she is safe on the land, she is actually seduced by one of her cousins unknown to Chris. Consequently, she drifts into prostitution. Her father wants her to marry someone on land, ignorant as he is of the happenings with Anna on the land. The action of the play begins with Anna's visit to Chris, her father, for the first time in New York. He lives as captain of the coal barge on the shore. He himself tries to keep away from the sea.

Chris holds the sea responsible for all his hardships. He feels that he neglected his wife and children just because the sea had been exercising an evil influence on him. When Anna starts living with her father on the coal barge, her experience is totally different. She is at peace amidst the waters, and feels that the sea has purified her, made her feel virginal again, and has wiped out all the dirt and filth of land with which she was overlaid. When her father questions her, "You don't like to live on farm, Anna?" her response disappoints him. She says, "I'd rather have one drop of ocean than all the farms in the world! Honest! And you wouldn't like a farm, neither. Here's where you belong". To her father's utter dismay, Anna loves the sea and the fog. Here in lies the operation of the collective unconscious. The influence of the family past on Anna is brought out dramatically through the 'sea'. She feels that she is closely bound to the sea, a fascination which so far had remained confined to her unconscious, now raises itself to the level of consciousness and directs her future course of action. The sea which had been in the blood of the Christophersons is part of the structure of her collective unconscious. When questioned, Chris tells Anna about the family: All men in

DR. VINOD KUMAR BAIRWA

2P a g e



our village on coast, Sweden, go to sea. Ain't nutting else for dem to do. My fa'der die on board ship in Indian ocean. He's buried at sea. Ay don't never know him only little bit. Den my tree bro'der, older'n me, dey go on ships. Den Ay go, too. Den my mo'der shi's left all 'lone. Two my bro'der dey gat lost on fishing boat same like your bro'ders vas drowned. My oder bro'der, he save money, give up sea, den he die home in bed.

The feeling of being in the sea and fog before, although Anna had never been there before, is the operation of the family past within her. She has inherited the love for sea from her ancestors and so finds here self closely bound to those members who served as sailors on the sea. Anna's thinking is very similar to Jones in *The Emperor Jones* when he feels that he has been to the altar of God before. He says: "Seems like I know dat tree an'dem stones an' de rives. I remember-seems like I been heah before" (*Plays*, III, 200).

Anna further asks her father: But why d'you s'pose I feel so -SO - like I'd found something I'd missed and been looking for-'s if this was the right place for me to fit in? And I seem to have forgot - everything that's happened - like it didn't matter no more. And I feel clean, somehow - like you feel just after you've took a bath - And I feel happy for once... happier than I ever been anywhere before.

Her observations pertaining to the sea reveal the strong influence of family past on her, giving shape to her thoughts and guiding her actions. Jung's observation explains this phenomenon. He says that the "form of the world into which the individual is born is already inborn in him as a virtual image." The virtual image becomes a concrete perception or idea by identifying itself with objects in the world that correspond to the image. In Anna's case, the sea which was "already inborn" in her assumes the concrete shape of the "virtual image". The sea is the link that binds Mat Burke and Anna. Mat Burke is a child of the sea. Since his childhood he has been "shoveling a million tons of coal in the stokehole's of the ships". Mat may be viewed as a "personification of the sea", (Bogard, 161) bringing Chris's conception of the sea as evil to a crucial test. He is a strong man and has an instinctive liking for the sea. Anna responds to this force in him as she does to the sea. He also goes to her with an instant recognition of the same strength and cleanliness.

Throughout the play there is a conflict of opposed attitudes to sea. Chris sees the sea as the "ole devil" and cannot belong to it, while Anna looks upon the sea as gentle and redemptive. Chris refuses to be possessed by the sea, but Anna finds peace and happiness and, in her fascination for it, feels bound to it. Despite the differences of religion - Mat is a Catholic, Anna a Lutheran - they are united because they trust the divinity to which they belong. For them to belong to one another is to belong to the sea and in this they find happiness. Anna is conscious of the fact that by marrying Mat Burke she is likely to lead a lonely life, yet she remains firm in her decision to marry him. She willingly submits to her fate which her

DR. VINOD KUMAR BAIRWA

3P a g e



unconscious has determined for her. She tells Mat, "... as for me being alone, that runs in the family and I'll get used to it". So far as Anna is concerned, Chris's view of the sea as an evil force is proved wrong for he doesn't find contentment. Looking out into the night, Chris says, "Fog, fog' fog, all bloody time. You can't see where you were going, no. only dat ole davil, sea - she knows".

Travis Bogard observes: Anna Christie remains a story of love finding its way over parental and societal opposition, a fact which, in this context, testifies to the benevolence of the sea." What O'Neill underscores in the play is that men are united by a quality in their blood with a vital force that is their origin and their end. "Taking many forms, called by many names... this force gives men their identity and integrity, and it is the source of their power. To belong to it completely is to know what happiness and peace is, and once man has sensed the possibility of such unity, belonging becomes the end of his questing." Mat and Anna, in the play, trust the divinity to which they belong and, therefore, find happiness. But sometimes men refuse to submit to their fate and fight against it. "They seek identity in separation, in nay-saying, in flight from their source, and they make their lives disastrous because they attempt to live against the lines that the impulses in their blood have charted.

The sea conveys a sense of belonging and identity to Anna but is questioned by the other characters in the play. The contradictory ideas are grounded in the text of the play, which are discernible even in diverse cultures in the contemporary times. The paradoxical viewpoints leave the question of identity inconclusive and open further debate and argument.

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