



Eugene O'Neill's *Beyond the Horizon* as a Tragedy of Misplaced Ambition

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Abstract

Beyond the Horizon deals with O'Neill's sense of special relationship between man and his environment. The play is often interpreted as a tragedy of misplaced ambition. It depicts the tragic story of Robert Mayo, the true tragic protagonist, who loses his relationship with environment. Owing to this loss he is unable to belong to his circumstances, leading to a sense of alienation and estrangement throughout his life. *Beyond the Horizon* presents the tragedy of a man who has a wanderlust for a sea-life and the far spaces, but who, by force of wanton circumstances and the bondage of a romance that soon burns itself out, is struck to his farms of a few unyielding acres, chained to a task for which he is not fitted, withheld from a task for which he was born. The present paper presents this enigmatic predicament of the central protagonist.

Keywords: Man and environment, misplaced ambition, romance, suffering of isolation, etc.

Commenting on the vision of O'Neill in *Beyond the Horizon* Arthur and Barbara Gelb remark: "O'Neill expressed for the first time on a large scale his philosophy of 'hopeless hope', painting with sweep and grandeur the tragic theme that was soon to distinguish him from all American playwrights who had come before" (334). It deals with his sense of special relationship between man and his

environment. The play is often interpreted as a tragedy of misplaced ambition. It depicts the tragic story of Robert Mayo, the true tragic protagonist who has lost his relationship with environment. Owing to this loss he is unable to belong to his circumstances, consequently suffering from a sense of isolation throughout his life. *Beyond the Horizon* rehearses the tragedy of a man whose body and mind need the open

road and the far spaces, but who, by force of wanton circumstance and the bondage of a romance that soon burns itself out, is imprisoned within the hill-walled boundaries of a few unyielding acres, chained to a task for which he is not fitted, withheld from a task for which he was born. The play unfolds the tragedy of a young farm-born dreamer, Robert Mayo, whose romantic mind and frail body long for the open sea, the swarming ports of the mysterious East and the beckoning world beyond the line of hills which shut in the acres of his home. By disposition Robert is destined for a wanderer's life, but fate tethers him to this little hill-cupped farm and watches coolly the misery and decay this means for his entire house. We meet him first at the crossroads of his life and see him take the wrong turn. To him, on the night before he is to set sail for a three years' cruise around the world, comes love in the form of a neighbour's daughter, Ruth, the fiancé of his elder brother, Andrew Mayo. Blinded by the flame kindled in that moment of her confession, he easily forgoes all thought of the world *Beyond the Horizon*, plans to settle at once on the farm with his jubilant bride, and watches serenely enough while his heart-wrenched brother, Andrew, sets

forth on the cruise that was to have been his—the bluff, unromantic brother who, irony of ironies, is a true son of the soil, born to do nothing but work its fields and sure to wither if uprooted.

Then we follow through the years the decay of that household—the tragedy of the misfit. We see the waning of love, the birth of disappointment, the corrosion of poverty and spite and disease. We watch the romance burn itself out to an ugly cinder. We see the woman grow drab and dull and sullen, and we see the man, wasted by the consumption that in another life might have been avoided, crawl at last out of the hated house to die on the road he should have travelled, straining his eyes toward the hills he never crossed, his last words pronouncing a message of warning from one who had not lived in harmony with what he was.

The accompanying and minor tragedy is that of the brother, Andrew, a sturdy, generous, earth bound fellow, born to till those very acres, and sure to go wrong if he ever left the clean earth and the work amid things of his own creation. It is this brother whom fate and his own character drive out in the lonely open. The measured tread of Fate can be heard among the

overtones of this remarkable tragedy. Joseph Wood Krutch rightly observes about O'Neill plays, "O'Neill turns a play, which might have been merely ironic into an indictment not only of chance or fate but of that whole universe which sets itself up against man's desire and conquers them"(75-96).

For Robert Mayo the hills surrounding the Mayo farm are a physical symptom of the restrictions, the limitedness, and the monotony of farm life itself. Beyond them lies adventure and romance, so he thinks. Those hills finally turn into prison house, as both his marriage and his farm go to wreck and, finally, to ruin. One can easily notice the deteriorating state of affairs from the healthy existence of the small independent farmer, of which we have caught a glimpse in Act I when the elder Mayo is still alive and vigorous, to the last watery dawn of Act III, Scene I, of that bleak October morning which faintly illuminates the last remnants of what had been once a primary force in American history. The farmhouse is sunk in a poverty and neglect so profound that it no longer is ashamed or even conscious of itself. The curtains are torn and dirty; dust is everywhere, blotches of dampness disfigure the wall-paper; the faded carpet shows trails

leading to the kitchen and outer doors. Spilt food, unwashed dishes, an unblackened stove, a shadeless lamp, all these constitute the setting for the human wreckage, the dying, consumptive Robert Mayo, and his deathly pale, listless, aged wife. The aging of the people is evidenced not only by the mere graying at the temples and the change of clothes, it is rather evidenced by the slow changing of character and the steady deterioration of the souls. O'Neill paints his canvas with what Henley called 'the exquisite chromatics of decay'.

The opening and closing scenes of the play are symbolic. The play opens at sunset, which symbolizes darkness in the life of the protagonist as he loses his true self. Throughout his life he is after illusions resulting in his disintegrated personality. As Clifford Leech has commented, "The movement of the play is from spring to fall in term of season and from sunset to sunrise in terms of the time of day. The former suggests a movement from growth to decline, while later works conversely" (113). The play ends at the time of sunrise. This setting offers an elusive hope for freedom in death and perhaps also the state in which Robert finds his true identity. The most important symbol used in the play is

the title of the play *Beyond the Horizon*. It symbolizes Robert's dream of going beyond the horizon which he realizes only after his death. Throughout his life he is shut out from the wonder and beauty, which calls to him from beyond the horizon.

Doris V. Falk has discussed *Beyond the Horizon* as a psychological tragedy in which the three principal characters are engaged in the search for self. She says:

Robert is another searcher for self, as, unconsciously, as his wife, Ruth, and his brother, Andrew. The play is like a fugue, developing with variations the theme of the suspension of life between opposites. We feel the balancing pull not only between reality and idealism, but also between the earthy and the spiritual, joy and sorrow, love and hate, hope and despair. The opposites are symbolized not only in the action of the play, but -also in the division of the acts into alternate indoor and outdoor scenes. Of these divisions O'Neill said in a magazine interview: 'In *Beyond the Horizon* there are three acts of two scenes each. One scene is out of doors, showing the horizon, suggesting the man's desire and dream. The other is indoors, the horizon gone, suggesting what has come between him and

his dream. In that way I tried to get rhythm, the alternation of longing and of loss.' (37)

The structure of the play emphasizes the conflict of the two opposing ideals of adventure and security and of the two brothers who embody them. Each act consists of two scenes: one, on the top of a hill looking toward the horizon; the other, in the sitting room of a farmhouse. In the first act, Robert, on the hill top, proclaims his dream of "the beauty of the far off and the unknown" (20), and then he descends to the farmhouse to announce that he is marrying Ruth and remaining on the farm. In the second act, Robert and Ruth act out their frustrations in the farmhouse; then on the hill top Andrew tells Robert about his disillusioning adventures in the "East you used to rave about"(80). In the final act Robert learns in the farmhouse of the hopelessness of his disease, but he escapes to the hill to die with his dream. On the surface, Robert is the pure dreamer defeated by practical problems, on the other hand, Andrew is a gross materialist, who is unable to dream. But actually, Robert is vanquished by the delusive quality of his own dreams. When he abandons his dream of the sea for marriage and security on the farm, he rationalizes: "You see I've found a bigger

dream" (41). He substitutes a deluded dream of love for his true dream of adventure which is true to his instinctive nature. And Andrew, in turn, tries to apply his business-like practicality to life at sea, but he fails partially because he too is infected by a false dream of easy profits. Their failures are therefore caused—not by the impracticality of the one, and the materialism of the other—but by the failure of each to recognize his true nature.

The dialogue between Ruth and Robert is very illuminating to illustrate the foggy state of mind of the protagonist while setting his ambition of life. When Ruth asks Robert his actual reason of going on a sea-voyage, Robert replies:

ROBERT—*[Moodily]* I doubt if you'll understand. It's difficult to explain, even to myself. It's more an instinctive longing that won't stand dissection. Either you feel it, or you don't. The cause of it all is in the blood and the bone, I guess, not in the brain, although imagination plays a large part in it. I can remember being conscious of it first when I was only a kid—you haven't forgotten what a sickly specimen I was then, in those days, have you? Well, in those days, when Ma was fixing meals, she used to get

me out of the way by pushing my chair to the west window and telling me to look out and be quiet.... *[Musingly]* So I used to stare out over the fields to the hills, out there—*[He points to the horizon]* and somehow after a time I'd forget any pain I was in, and start dreaming. I knew the sea was over beyond those hills,—the folks had told me—and I used to wonder what the sea was like, and try to form a picture of it in my mind. *[With a smile]* There was all the mystery in the world to me then about that—far-off sea—and there still is! It called to me then just as it does now. *[After a slight pause]* And other times my eyes would follow this road, winding off into the distance, toward the hills, as if it, too, was searching for the sea. And I'd promise myself that when I grew up and was strong, I'd follow that road, and it and I would find the sea together. *[With a smile]* You see, my making this trip is only keeping that promise of long ago. (25)

All this speech of Robert clearly indicates the prevailing influence of the childhood fantasy on his formative decision of going on a long sea-voyage. His physical invalidism as a child also amounts to his escapism to the world of fantasy. The chief flaw of his character lies in the fact of

grounding his decisions of real life on the premise of fantasy world. This blunder confuses his whole understanding of life and gives the impression that his mood regarding the entire business of thing is very uncertain. In spite of being an educated person in a family of farmers he ultimately proves himself to be a puny character with a lack of initiative. His listlessness and evasiveness about the responsibility of his own choices gradually reduce him to the status of an unpredictable and unreliable person. It was his own choice to abandon his dream of the sea-life and to marry Ruth on the rationalization, 'You see I've found a bigger dream'. Even this very rationalization by Robert confirms the fact that he can only grope for a dream and cannot have any affiliation with real life. Had he made the first choice of his life, i.e., going on the sea voyage, he would probably have proved himself another complete failure. Andrew, on the other hand, proves himself a man of courage and resilience. Heart-wrenched by his younger brother's sudden change of decision to marry Ruth, Andrew sets forth on the cruise that was to have been Robert's. Though, he is a true son of the soil, born to do nothing but work its fields, he reconciles himself to the new circumstances for the

sake of his brother and Ruth. He faces all the hardships of the sea life on his voyage but still proves himself a helping hand to his family. Like Robert he also commits mistakes but never runs away from his responsibilities of the consequences. He also finds himself misfit in his new job as a sailor but sneaks his opportunities to exert his efforts even among most trying situations. Despite the dominating influence of deterministic and fatalistic forces in his life he does not leave any opportunity to exercise his individual conscious will. There is an evolution of self in his journey of life. O'Neill uses him as a foil to Robert and emphasizes the relevance of exerting the individual conscious will despite the adversities of deterministic forces.

Thus, from the above analysis it becomes quite clear that Robert falls a victim of misplaced ambition not because he fails to accomplish his wanderlust for a sea life, which he always desired and later rejected in favour of a greater dream of a romantic love life, but because he fails to root his ambition on the real ground of actual reality.

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