

"Before Breakfast" by Eugene O'Neill: The Saga of an Unhappy Wife

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Abstract:

O'Neill is a well known American dramatist who won four Pulitzer Prizes and also one Noble Prize for literature. He took the drama very seriously and wrote on a variety of subjects and themes depicting the problems of the family relationships, the marginalized sections of society, the addictions, repression, the revenge and so on. The present research paper focuses on the play "Before Breakfast" by O'Neill which is a story of a tortured relationship of a married couple where the wife suffers mainly because of the indifferent and irresponsible behaviour of the husband when the family is marred by poverty also. The play portrays Mrs. Rowland as the victimized wife who passes through various psychological stages when it is about her relationship with her husband Alfred. Sometimes, she is sad, fearful and irritated; sometimes she is revengeful and happy; sometimes she is frustrated and hopeless, at other times, she is bold and capable. The play is all about her unhappy journey with her husband.

Keywords: Drama, family, suffering, psychology, despair

A famous American playwright, Eugene O'Neill is known for introducing psychological and social realism to American theatre. American theatre mainly consisted of melodrama and farce. It was O'Neill who took the drama seriously as an aesthetic and intellectual form. He is one of those American playwrights who thought of focusing on the characters marginalized by society. Most of his plays present drunkenness, tortured relationships, repressed desires and revenge etc. "Guilt, fury, despair, and the symmetrical need for pity, forgiveness, contrition: these are O'Neill's great themes." [Churchwell: 30 March,2012]

"Before Breakfast" a monodrama by Eugene O'Neill is the story of an incompatible couple Mrs. Rowland and Alfred. The play presents Alfred as the character who does not speak throughout the play. Mrs. Rowland therefore remains the only speaker from beginning till the end. When we think of a drama, the playwright is very careful about the setting of the stage and the opening scene is of vital importance as it provides the clue to the upcoming scenes, situations and characters. The present play's setting is important to understand the same. As mentioned by the writer, the scene is shot at "a small room serving both as kitchen and dining room"[Neill:1921]. There is a mention of "several potted plants...dying of neglect" [Neill:1921]. The description of a man's and a woman's clothing hung on pegs is interesting to understand that the residents of the house are one man and one woman only. The earlier descriptions make the reader understand that there is a paucity of space in the house and the dying and neglected plants can be interpreted as either that the couple is living a life of hardships or they are so busy or overworked that they are not able to take care of the plants. The place is Christopher Street, New York City and the time is eight thirty a.m., the perfect time to denote the situation 'before breakfast'.

Mrs. Rowland enters the scene yawning and she is introduced to the readers as a lady of medium height wearing a "formless blue dress shabby and worn" [Neill:1921]. Being in "early twenties" but looking "much older" [Neill:1921] is sufficient to present her before us as a young girl who seems to have suffered

much in so short a life span. Morning is the time which is supposed to be the best time of a day when a person is full of energy. But Mrs. Rowland is shown having a headache and feeling low. She calls her husband but there is no reply despite her repeated calls. She goes near the room to check if Alfred is really sleeping. Confirmed about his sleep, she comes back and takes out a bottle of gin from the closet. The way she hiding does this all, trying her best not to let the utensils clutter is an ample description to present before the readers the different sets of behaviour and action prescribed by society for men and women. She needs alcohol to get reenergized as her overworked life with an irresponsible husband (as we understand later in the play) leaves no energy and hope for her to remain active and energetic. The scene is a perfect pointer to tell us that consuming alcohol is not allowed to women in house and Alfred objects when she takes “a little something to keep up (my) her spirits” [Neill:1921]. She drinks though and puts things back in the same secretive way as she had taken them out. The immediate effect of alcohol is that she becomes energetic and looks at the bedroom door with “a hard ,vindictive smile” [Neill:1921]. The word ‘vindictive’ in itself is a clear indication that she is frustrated in her relationship for certain reasons. It shows her anguish. She calls her husband again but still there is no reply. Then she looks for something in the pockets of his coat and in the inner pocket she finds a letter. The letter possesses its own significance and is revelation of Alfred’s character. She recognizes the writer by handwriting and her expression of hatred and rage changes to that of “triumphant malignity” [Neill:1921]. This is again important to understand her psychology as a victimized wife. The writer of the letter is a girl named Helen who Alfred is involved with those days. Instead of getting angry at Helen’s letter, she is finally happy with a “cruel smile on her lips” [Neill:1921] as she understands that Helen too will be sailing in the same boat with her, as yet another victim of Alfred.

Calling her husband once again in a louder tone, she speaks angrily of his laziness and frustratingly goes on mentioning the life situations they are in. Their poverty speaks in her words when she mentions that Alfred has pawned their last valuable thing also. She mentions how she has to take care of everything in the house before she goes to work and how the husband remains idle just roaming around with ‘good for nothing’ artists. The rent of their house is due. They don’t have money to pay and Alfred is not able to get any job as according to the wife, he doesn’t even look for it. He remains busy writing poetry and stories which have no buyers. She emphasizes on how she herself fends for the family saving them from starving to death. Tired of owning all the responsibilities, she wants Alfred to realize his responsibility and arrange money in some manner. Out of rage, she even offers him the option to “beg, borrow or steal” [Neill:1921]. But then she immediately makes it clear that Alfred is incapable of even that as she says to him, “You’re too proud to beg, and you’ve borrowed the limit, and you haven’t the nerve to steal.”[Neill:1921]

Alfred is shown to be completely irresponsible and careless. Mrs. Rowland insists that he should shave and dress neatly and look at least halfway decent if he wants to go to someone asking for a job. She gives him some hot water to get clean and ready. Alfred is a drunkard and he drinks so much that his hands tremble when he accepts the bowl of water. Seeing everything in a mess around Alfred’s room, Mrs. Rowland again questions the approach of Alfred towards her and the household. Then she switches to the incompatibility of their marriage taunting Alfred to be “the Harvard graduate, the poet, the catch of the town” [Neill:1921] which he was at the time of their marriage. She reminds Alfred of his millionaire father who died owing money to everyone around and Alfred’s ignoring attitude towards her as she is a grocer’s daughter. She however is happy to announce that her father is honest and does not owe money to anyone which is more than enough for a person to live respectfully. She talks of their still born child also and says that it happened for some good as otherwise Alfred would have ignored the child also.

Mrs. Rowland is representative of any other woman in the society who suffers in marriage due to various reasons as the incompatibility between the couple, the pretentious attitude of society and the patriarchal mindset also where man is never at fault despite being completely irresponsible and indifferent towards the family. Besides being a wife, she is a woman, a human being also who too has some wishes, desires and

ambitions in life. But she is doomed to take care of the family where the drunkard husband does nothing but pawning the valuables. Despite her ill health and poor working conditions, she has to work. The story then takes a different move suddenly as Alfred gets a cut while shaving which irritates Mrs. Rowland further and in angst she again begins speaking and asks a lot of questions from Alfred about their life, about his inefficiency and inability to do anything or own any responsibility, about his relationship and affair with Helen. She makes it clear to him that she will not divorce him if he demands so for the sake of marrying Helen who is pregnant with his child. Despite suffering a lot, she is not ready to end the marriage with Alfred as she is confident that she has done nothing wrong and therefore, she possesses the right to take the decision and importantly she does not want to end it mainly to stop Alfred from enjoying his life with Helen. This mindset of a wife is peculiar to understand. Despite the despair, she is determined to carry on with the relationship. Her hopeless situations force her to become revengeful and she is not ready to allow others to be happy at the cost of her grief and frustration. Although all her hopes of leading a happy and contented life with her husband are crushed, yet she wants to go on. The story then takes an unexpected turn and the readers come to know via the behaviour, words and body language of Mrs. Rowland that Alfred has committed suicide. So Mrs. Rowland is there left again as a victim of his cowardice. He did nothing for his wife when he was alive and then he proves himself to be a 'good for nothing' fellow when he embraces death himself. Alfred is neither seen nor heard in the play. Yet he remains a powerful presence around whom the whole saga of Mrs. Rowland revolves.

The play narrates a tale of despair, disappointment, anger and frustration. Despite containing very little action, the play is charged with conflict. It proves O'Neill's conviction that tragedy is not always about the fall of great men from dizzy heights. It can also happen to ordinary people. "Before Breakfast" is the saga of a young, faithful and responsible wife whose life situations make her only a victim and a sufferer despite all goodness in her. Her despair, frustration and agony become all pervasive in the play leaving the readers too in sadness.

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