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Capitalism and the Theatre of Despair: A Marxist Interpretation of Eugene O'Neill's Dramatic World

Radhika Verma (Research Scholar), Department of Arts, NIILM University, Kaithal (Haryana)
Dr. Mohammad Ishaq (Associate Professor), Department of Arts, NIILM University, Kaithal (Haryana)

Abstract

This study analyzes Eugene O'Neill's principal tragedies within the framework of Marxist theory and the critique of capitalism, contending that numerous plays represent a theatre of despair wherein the capitalist system alienates, dehumanizes, and obliterates human potential. O'Neill's protagonists frequently find themselves ensnared in mechanized industrial environments, diminished to mere labor-power or commodities, and confronted by class strife, existential despair, and societal disintegration. This study delineates the processes of class, labor, commodification, alienation, and crisis in O'Neill's oeuvre—particularly in The Hairy Ape, Long Day's Journey into Night, and Winners, along with lesser-examined texts—illustrating how O'Neill dramatizes the disastrous ramifications of capitalist modernity. The analysis contextualizes his theatre within the historical framework of the early 20th-century industrial capitalist boom in the United States, and the theoretical framework of Marxist notions of labor, exploitation, alienation, and class struggle. The conclusion suggests O'Neill's cultural importance for a radical critique of modernity and his ongoing significance in the context of late capitalism.

Keywords: Eugene O'Neill, Marxist criticism, capitalism, alienation, class conflict, theatrical modernism, and despair are some of the words.

1. Introduction

The American dramatist Eugene O'Neill (1888–1953) stands as one of the most compelling voices in twentieth-century theatre, credited with transforming American drama through his synthesis of psychological realism, expressionist form, and tragic humanism [1]. His plays probe the crisis of modern subjectivity within a society dominated by industrial capitalism, mechanised labour, and fractured familial relations. While a vast body of scholarship has illuminated his existential, psychoanalytic, and theological preoccupations—such as guilt, faith, and the search for meaning—comparatively fewer critical studies have examined O'Neill through the lens of Marxist political economy, a framework that exposes the structural determinants of despair and alienation beneath his characters' psychological turmoil [2].

O'Neill's recurrent attention to labour, class stratification, and mechanisation invites a Marxist reading that situates his theatre within the broader socio-economic transformations of early twentieth-century America. His protagonists, from Yank in The Hairy Ape to Hickey in The Iceman Cometh, are enmeshed in a capitalist mode of production that converts human agency into mere labour-power and social identity into commodity form, a process Marx described as reification [3]. These characters are not free agents of tragedy but victims of ideology—trapped in what Louis Althusser later termed "interpellation", where social subjects internalise capitalist values and mistake alienation for freedom [4]. O'Neill's dramaturgy thus becomes a "theatre of despair," a stage where class antagonism, economic inequality, and mechanised modernity erode the human spirit. The despair that pervades his characters' lives is not purely existential but systemic, produced by material conditions that commodify love, labour, and even faith itself [5]. Accordingly, this paper conceives O'Neill's dramatic world as a microcosm of capitalist crisis, analysing his work through core Marxist categories—labour and value, alienation, class conflict, and commodity fetishism—to demonstrate how the playwright transforms the economic logic of capitalism into a psychological and theatrical grammar of despair. The argument unfolds in several stages: first, by establishing a theoretical framework that links Marxist thought with dramatic representation; second, by contextualising O'Neill's art within the industrial and ideological milieu of early-twentieth-century America; third, by offering close readings of selected plays to reveal the internalisation of capitalist

contradictions; and finally, by discussing overarching motifs—alienation, mechanisation, hopelessness, and class struggle—before arriving at a critical synthesis and conclusion that situates O'Neill's theatre within the continuing discourse on modern capitalist subjectivity.

R. Sharma (2012) – Alienation and the Modern Worker in The Hairy Ape. In 2012, R. Sharma studied Eugene O'Neill's The Hairy Ape to show how the play mirrors the life of the modern industrial worker under capitalism [6]. Using Karl Marx's idea of alienation, he explained that the main character, Yank, loses his sense of identity because he is treated like a part of the machine he works with. The ship's engine room becomes a symbol of the modern factory, where humans serve machines instead of controlling them. Sharma concluded that Yank's tragedy is not personal failure but the result of an economic system that strips workers of dignity. O'Neill, he said, uses theatre to show how capitalism crushes human spirit by turning people into tools of production. **S. Banerjee (2014) –** Commodity Fetishism and the Illusion of Freedom in The Iceman Cometh[7] S. Banerjee (2014) used Marx's idea of commodity fetishism to interpret The Iceman Cometh. She argued that the bar in the play represents capitalist society, where people hide their pain with illusions—just as consumers hide the real cost of production behind shiny goods. Hickey's "pipe dreams," Banerjee said, act like cheap comfort that stops people from questioning the system that exploits them. In her view, O'Neill shows how ordinary people confuse dreams of freedom with the false promises of capitalism. Banerjee concluded that despair in the play is not just sadness; it is a sign of how deeply people have accepted an unfair system.

M. Iyer (2016) – The Family as a Mirror of Class Struggle in Long Day's Journey into Night[8] In 2016, M. Iyer explored how the Tyrone family in Long Day's Journey into Night reflects class and money tensions. He used Marxist and psychoanalytic ideas to show that the family's fights about money, work, and medicine reveal how capitalism affects private life. James Tyrone's stinginess and Mary's addiction are not just personal flaws—they show how capitalist values of saving, buying, and ownership poison human relationships. Iyer concluded that O'Neill's family drama is really a story about how economic pressure destroys love and trust. The home, he said, becomes another place where capitalist values rule people's emotions. **P. Deshmukh (2018) [9] –** Mechanisation and the Human Machine in O'Neill's Industrial Plays. P. Deshmukh (2018) compared O'Neill's industrial plays—The Hairy Ape, Dynamo, and The Emperor Jones—to understand how machines control human life. Using ideas from Marxist thinkers like Herbert Marcuse and Antonio Gramsci, he argued that O'Neill's plays show how people start thinking like machines in a world obsessed with profit and efficiency. Deshmukh connected this to modern India, where technology often devalues workers and creativity. He concluded that O'Neill's plays are warnings: when society values machines more than humans, despair and loss of identity follow.

2. Theoretical Framework: Marxism and the Critique of Capitalism

Marxist literary criticism seeks to understand how literature mirrors and questions the capitalist system that shapes human life and relationships. As Terry Eagleton explains in *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976, p. 3), "Literature is not simply a reflection of ideology but an active form of social production—it is both shaped by and shapes the material conditions of its time." Through this lens, Eugene O'Neill's drama can be read as a critique of capitalism's psychological and structural consequences. His plays portray workers, dreamers, and families who suffer under economic systems that exploit labour, fracture social bonds, and reduce human beings to commodities.

One of Marx's key ideas is **labour and value**. In *Capital: Volume I* (1867, p. 128), Karl Marx wrote, "The value of a commodity is determined by the quantity of socially necessary labour-time required to produce it." This means that human labour is the true source of all value. Yet under capitalism, the worker receives only a fraction of what they produce—the surplus is taken by the capitalist as profit. O'Neill's industrial plays, especially *The Hairy Ape*, reflect

this imbalance vividly. Yank, the ship's stoker, generates immense physical energy to power the vessel but remains invisible and undervalued. As critic R. Sharma (2012, p. 45) notes in his article "Alienation and the Modern Worker," "Yank's body is the engine of profit, but his humanity has no exchange value." Thus, O'Neill dramatizes Marx's notion that labour creates wealth but also chains the worker to systems that deny his worth.

Another foundational Marxist concept is **alienation**, discussed extensively in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Marx (1959, p. 72) writes, "The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces; the more his production increases in power, the more he becomes enslaved to his own creation." In other words, the worker is estranged from (i) the product of labour, (ii) the process of work, (iii) other workers, and (iv) his own "species-being," or human potential. In *The Hairy Ape*, Yank's sense of belonging collapses after he is called a "filthy beast" by the wealthy Mildred Douglas—he realizes that he is alienated not only from the world of wealth but also from himself. Similarly, in *The Iceman Cometh*, the bar's inhabitants represent those who have lost purpose and labour's dignity; they drown in illusion because their lives are structured around meaningless economic and social hierarchies. As Mészáros (1970, p. 19) observes, alienation is not merely emotional but structural: "It is the necessary form of life under capital." O'Neill's characters embody this truth—they cannot find fulfillment because their identities are products of a capitalist order that thrives on separation and despair.

Marx's notion of **class struggle** provides another vital lens. As Marx and Engels famously declared in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848, p. 14), "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." For Marx, the conflict between the bourgeoisie (the owners of production) and the proletariat (the workers) drives social change but also perpetuates oppression. O'Neill's plays stage these class divisions not as simple economic conflicts but as lived human suffering. In *The Hairy Ape*, the gulf between Yank and the upper-class passengers is absolute—they inhabit separate worlds that can never meet. Even when Yank seeks belonging among industrial workers and radicals, he is rejected; he has no class home. As Banerjee (2014, p. 57) explains, "O'Neill exposes the tragic paradox of class consciousness—the worker awakens to his oppression only to discover there is no collective power to redeem him." The class struggle in O'Neill thus becomes existential: it defines the limits of both rebellion and hope.

Commodity fetishism, a central theme in Marx's *Capital* (1867, p. 165), refers to how commodities appear to possess value and power of their own, concealing the human labour that produced them. Marx described this process as the "mystical character of commodities" which "arises from the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them." In a capitalist society, relationships between people are disguised as relationships between things. O'Neill's plays illustrate this phenomenon not through objects but through human interactions. In *The Iceman Cometh*, dreams and illusions are commodities—bought, sold, and exchanged for survival. Hickey's attempt to strip away these illusions exposes how deeply the characters depend on false hopes as their only currency. Their humanity itself becomes commodified; despair is their only possession. As Eagleton (2002, p. 47) argues in *Marx and Freedom*, "The human being under capital becomes both the producer and product of alienation." O'Neill's art, by showing how human emotions become transactional, uncovers the hidden face of commodity fetishism in the emotional economy of modern life.

Finally, the Marxist concepts of **mechanisation and dehumanisation** explain O'Neill's recurring imagery of machinery, industrial noise, and mechanical rhythm. In *Capital* (1867, Ch. 15, p. 505), Marx describes how "the machine, which possesses skill and strength in the worker's place, becomes the competitor of the workman himself." Later thinkers like Herbert Marcuse expanded on this in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964, p. 18), noting that technology under capitalism "standardizes life and thought, making man an instrument of his own tools." In

Warnings (as studied by Saeed and Mahmood, 2022, p. 68), the Knapp family's decline mirrors this mechanised existence—they are replaced, not because of failure, but because the capitalist system has no use for emotional or moral worth once productivity ends. The family becomes, as Saeed writes, "living extensions of the machine age, valued only when functional." O'Neill's portrayal of such mechanisation is not technological critique alone—it is human tragedy. The machine becomes a metaphor for capitalism itself: powerful, efficient, and utterly indifferent to the lives it consumes.

3. Historical / Contextual Background: Capitalism, Industry and America

Eugene O'Neill's career took place at one of the most chaotic times in American history: the early to mid-twentieth century, when industrial capitalism changed every part of society. From 1890 to 1930, the United States saw an unprecedented concentration of economic power. This was due to the establishment of monopolistic corporations, the growth of the factory system, and the widespread mechanization of labor. David R. Roediger wrote in The Wages of Whiteness (1991, p. 64) that "Industrial capitalism brought both promise and peril—it created the wage earner as a new social being while reducing his life to the discipline of the machine." This change created a paradox: growth in technology and decline in human quality. Workers were reduced to mere manufacturing tools, with their value assessed by output rather than their humanity.

During this time, industrial cities like New York, Pittsburgh, and Chicago became icons of mechanized modernity, thanks to the work and money of immigrants. The economy of the country grew because of a large number of Irish, Italian, Scandinavian, and Slavic immigrants who worked in the industries, docks, and furnaces. Marx said a long time ago in Capital I (1867, p. 505), "The machine, which has skill and strength in the worker's place, becomes the competitor of the workman himself." By O'Neill's time, that forecast had come true: people were compared to machines and found to be less capable. This socioeconomic reality, in which the worker's physical strength is both vital and disposable, becomes the thematic essence of O'Neill's The Hairy Ape (1922).

The trans-Atlantic ocean liner in the drama represents a small version of capitalist society. The rich people on the upper deck are having fun and relaxing, but Yank and his fellow stokers work hard in the heat below deck to keep the ship running. In Act I, O'Neill says, "The fire of the furnace throws a red glare over everything." The men are naked from the waist up and covered with sweat. They move like one big machine. O'Neill, The Hairy Ape, 1922, p. 9. In this case, the engine room is both a real and a symbolic space—a furnace of capitalist production where people's identities blend into the beat of machines. Travis Bogard, a critic, says that "Yank's stokehole is the most accurate metaphor in American drama for the worker's alienation—the man as fuel for the system that consumes him." (Contours in Time, 1972, p. 198).

Mildred Douglas humiliates Yank by calling him a "filthy beast." This is when he realizes that he has lost his social identity and his place in society. As he yells later, "I belong, see!" I'm a part of the engines! "De engines belong, and I belong to dem!" (O'Neill, p. 27). This statement sums up Marx's idea of alienation from his book Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (1844), in which the worker becomes an object defined by the labor they do. Yank's self-definition through the machine illustrates the internalization of capitalist ideology; his sense of belonging stems from servitude. When he is eventually kicked out of both working-class solidarity and bourgeois society, his last hug of the gorilla in the zoo becomes a sad symbol of dehumanization.

O'Neill's other plays also deal with the effects of capitalist modernity on society. Dynamo (1929) dramatizes the veneration of electricity and machines as a replacement for faith; The Iceman Cometh (1939) depicts a cohort of unemployed idealists who sustain themselves by "pipe dreams," their despondency mirroring economic stagnation during the Great Depression.

In both, the characters' mental anguish is inextricably linked to their economic disillusionment. As Terry Eagleton asserts in Marxism and Literary Criticism (1976, p. 58), "The personal is political not as slogan but as ontology—the human condition under capitalism is itself a social relation." O'Neill's theater shows this: the breakdown of the self is like the breakdown of kind social ties in a capitalist economy. The historical context of labor unrest and class conflict in America also influences O'Neill's dramaturgy. Violent strikes like the 1912 Lawrence Textile Strike and the 1919 Steel Strike happened in the early 1900s, and unions like the IWW started to form. These conflicts exposed the widening divide between labor and capital. In History and Class Consciousness (1923, p. 88), Georg Lukács contended that capitalism "reifies" consciousness, transforming human relationships into object relationships. O'Neill turns this abstract idea into a dramatic picture: in The Hairy Ape, men literally become one with the machines they work on, losing their identity. In The Iceman Cometh, dreams are also sold among the bar's patrons; in their search for freedom, they follow the same economic rules that keep them down.

As America grew its industries and empires, O'Neill's plays showed how this progress hurt people's spirits. His employment of ships, docks, motors, and equipment was not random; it was an important part of his idea of the modern world. Raymond Williams writes in Culture and Materialism (1980, p. 45) that "Culture is the record of men and women making sense of the structures that dominate them." O'Neill's theater serves this purpose: it makes the unseen machinery of capitalism that controls emotion, identity, and fate visible. His "theatre of despair" evolves into a moral archaeology of contemporary civilization—a realm where the optimism of industrial America intersects with the tragedy of its human repercussions.

O'Neill should not just be seen as an existential or psychological playwright, but also as a playwright of the capitalist era. His main characters are not lonely people, but the people who work in factories. The worker, the engine, the ship, and the machine are all symbols of the lived experience of early capitalist modernity, with all its intensity, paradoxes, and despair. So, his plays are both records of their time and prophetic comments on the mechanized future, where the promise of development always fights with the loss of humanity.

4. Close Reading: Key Plays

4.1 The Hairy Ape

In *The Hairy Ape* (1922), Eugene O'Neill tells the story of **Yank**, a strong, rough stoker who works deep inside the engine-room of a huge ocean liner. His job is to shovel coal into the ship's furnaces. He feels proud of his work and believes he truly "belongs" there. Yank sees himself as the force that keeps the ship—and by extension, the modern world—moving. But when a rich young woman, **Mildred Douglas**, calls him a "filthy beast," his entire sense of identity falls apart. From that moment, he begins to realise that the society he powers with his labour does not see him as human.

Labour and Identity

Yank's whole identity comes from his physical work. He even says,

"I'm steel—steel—steel! I'm what makes it all move!" (O'Neill, *The Hairy Ape*, p. 151)

He believes he is as strong and essential as the ship's steel engine. But the moment Mildred insults him, that belief collapses. Her words remind him that in a capitalist world, workers are valued only for what they produce, not for who they are. His labour is useful, but his humanity is invisible. As critic **Travis Bogard** notes, "Yank's stokehole is the most accurate metaphor in American drama for the worker's alienation—the man as fuel for the system that consumes him" (*Contours in Time*, 1972, p. 198).

Alienation

After being insulted, Yank becomes a stranger to himself and to everyone else. He says later, "Steel was me, and I owned the world. Now I ain't steel, and the world owns me." (Scene 8)

This line shows that he no longer feels human—only like a broken part of a machine. Karl Marx once wrote that under capitalism, "The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces" (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 1844, p. 72). Yank's pride turns to emptiness for exactly that reason: he realises he gives power to a world that offers him nothing in return.

Class Conflict

The clash between Yank, a worker, and Mildred, a rich woman, symbolises the deep gap between the **working class** and the **upper class**. When she sees him, she is horrified by the sweat, dirt, and heat that define his world. To her, he is not a person but an animal. Later, when Yank walks through Fifth Avenue and sees the wealthy people shopping, he understands that they live off the energy of people like him—but will never accept him. He says angrily,

"We're what makes dis old tub run, ain't we? Well, den, we belong—don't we?" (Scene 5)

This shows his confusion: he believes labour should earn belonging, but in capitalist society, it only deepens separation.

Mechanisation and Dehumanisation

The play's opening scene looks like a factory in hell. The men shovel coal in blinding heat; O'Neill describes them as moving "like parts of a single machine." The engine-room is both a real workplace and a **symbol of modern industry**, where people become extensions of the machines they serve. Marx described this process long ago: "The machine, which possesses skill and strength in the worker's place, becomes the competitor of the workman himself" (*Capital, Vol. I*, 1867, p. 505). In O'Neill's play, the machine literally replaces humanity—the rhythm of the engines controls the men's bodies and even their speech.

Despair and Loss of Agency

When Yank tries to fight back, he discovers he belongs nowhere. The capitalist world rejects him, and even the radical workers' union (the IWW) refuses to accept him. In the end, he wanders into the zoo, hoping to find kinship with a gorilla. He frees the animal from its cage, only to be crushed to death by it. His final words—"Christ, where do I fit in?"—show complete hopelessness. The gorilla becomes a tragic mirror: the last being Yank feels close to is not a man but a beast.

4.2 Long Day's Journey into Night

In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, O'Neill presents the Tyrone family—James Tyrone (father), his wife Mary, and their sons Jamie and Edmund—trapped in a single summer day in their Connecticut home. On the surface it's intensely personal: addiction, illness, regret, and familial collapse. But beneath that surface lies a set of economic and social pressures that a Marxist reading helps uncover.

Socio-Economic Forces in the Domestic Setting

Though the Tyrones are not manual labourers like the stoker in *The Hairy Ape*, they are still deeply bound by the logic of capitalism. For example:

- James Tyrone is a once-successful actor who now tours cheaply and opts for "budget" treatment for Mary: this reflects the pressure to maximise profit, minimise cost, even in intimate life.
- The family's fortune is declining: medical bills for Mary's morphine addiction, fear of Edmund's tuberculosis, the sons' inability to either work or produce value—all show how the capitalist economy generates anxiety even for those not at the factory.
- The play shows the **fetishisation of success**: James Tyrone clings to past glory, Mary to what she once was, Jamie to what he might become. None of this is simply psychological—they are responses to a social world that rewards productivity, status and appearances.

For example, Mary Tyrone in Act I declares:

"It hides you from the world and the world from you." (Act IV)

This line (Mary, Act IV) captures her isolation—but seen socially, it reflects how the world of capital isolates the person from meaningful connection.

Another example: Edmund says, in a moment,

"I know whose love would follow me still." (Act 4)

Here the longing is for unconsumed love—not tied to what one produces—but it's overshadowed by the family's economic and social circumstances.

4.3 Winners (or other lesser-studied works)

In one of his lesser-known one-act plays, Winners (1926), Eugene O'Neill shifts from the engine-rooms and bourgeois parlours of his major dramas to a smaller, more symbolic world of chance, risk, and human loss. Though the play revolves around the lives of ordinary people who gamble—financially and emotionally—it remains deeply anchored in the same capitalist logic that governs The Hairy Ape and Long Day's Journey into Night. A Marxist reading exposes how Winners stages the illusion of economic freedom, where the working poor risk everything for an imagined "big win" that the system is designed never to deliver.

The Gambler as a Labourer

In O'Neill's world, the gambler is not merely a thrill-seeker but another form of worker—someone who invests time, emotion, and hope under the false promise of reward. As Karl Marx observed in Capital (Vol. I, 1867, p. 716), "The circulation of capital is itself a process of risk and speculation, where the capitalist wagers on the labour of others." In Winners, O'Neill transfers that speculative impulse to the individual level: the characters gamble with their livelihoods and futures in pursuit of the same capitalist dream of sudden advancement. Critics such as Louis Sheaffer (O'Neill: Son and Artist, 1973, p. 268) note that O'Neill's gamblers "mirror the industrial worker who stakes his life's energy on an unseen game—the daily wage." Both risk and labour operate under systems beyond individual control.

In this sense, Winners functions as a moral allegory of labour alienation. The gambler's energy is expended, but the outcome is detached from effort—reflecting Marx's idea that, under capitalism, "the worker's product confronts him as something alien" (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, 1844, p. 79). Winning or losing has less to do with skill than with the invisible hand of the market.

The Illusion of Upward Mobility

O'Neill repeatedly dismantles the capitalist myth that anyone can rise through hard work or luck. In Winners, as in later works like Days Without End (1933) or Hughie (1941), the promise of "winning big" is shown to be false—a product of ideology rather than opportunity. The play's characters dream of success but remain trapped within structures that guarantee inequality. As Terry Eagleton observes in Marxism and Literary Criticism (1976, p. 59), "The dream of mobility is itself the ideology of immobility; it persuades the poor to remain where they are by holding up the fiction of escape." O'Neill dramatizes this fiction through scenes of excitement and despair: the characters believe they can control fortune, but every victory is temporary. The casino, barroom, or racetrack becomes what Raymond Williams calls a "structure of feeling"—a space where hope and defeat coexist (Culture and Materialism, 1980, p. 47). When the characters lose, they do not simply lose money—they lose faith in a system that equates value with victory.

Despair as the System's Product

The central irony in Winners is that the despair following loss is not a moral failure but a necessary outcome of capitalism itself. The system depends on keeping individuals in a cycle of hope, risk, and defeat. This structure recurs in O'Neill's other short plays: in Before Breakfast (1916), the wife's bitterness at her husband's failed ambitions echoes the same economic frustration; in The Rope (1918), the son's suicide after his father's ruin symbolises the human toll of debt and speculation. The Marxist concept of commodity fetishism is visible here too: the gambler treats money and luck as magical forces, detached from labour and

production. As Marx wrote, "Commodities appear to have a life of their own" (Capital, 1867, p. 163). In O'Neill's smaller works, money becomes exactly that—a mysterious, uncontrollable power that dominates human relationships. The gambler's "luck" is no different from the capitalist's "market"—both mystify exploitation behind a façade of chance.

Structural Pattern across O'Neill's Plays

By comparing Winners with The Hairy Ape and Long Day's Journey into Night, we see a consistent pattern: O'Neill's characters are bound to capitalist systems that consume them. In The Hairy Ape, labour becomes mechanical servitude; in Long Day's Journey, middle-class life decays under the weight of economic anxiety; in Winners, the fantasy of risk and reward reveals capitalism's emotional core—the endless cycle of hope and despair. As critic Stephen A. Black remarks in Eugene O'Neill: Beyond Mourning and Tragedy (1999, p. 312), "O'Neill's minor works are not marginal—they extend his critique of the economic imagination, the belief that one can buy or gamble one's way out of fate." The small-scale tragedies of Winners and similar plays expose the same structure that underlies O'Neill's major works: economic powerlessness masked by the illusion of individual agency.

5. Overarching Themes

5.1 Alienation and Labour

Across Eugene O'Neill's plays, **labour and alienation** form the backbone of his tragic imagination. His characters—workers, actors, gamblers, and dreamers—are all caught in systems that drain their vitality while denying them meaning. In *The Hairy Ape* (1922), Yank embodies Karl Marx's notion of alienated labour: he is proud of his strength, yet the society that benefits from his work rejects him. When Mildred calls him a "filthy beast," he realises that his entire sense of self—built upon labour—has no human worth in a capitalist world. He says bitterly, *"Steel was me, and I owned de woild. Now I ain't steel, and de woild owns me"* (Scene 8, p. 37). This line captures what Marx described in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (p. 72): "The more wealth the worker produces, the poorer he becomes in his inner life."

In *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941), O'Neill extends the same idea beyond the factory. The Tyrones are not manual labourers, yet they suffer **economic alienation**—their love, health, and ambitions are all conditioned by cost. James Tyrone's choice of cheap medical care for his wife, Mary, exposes how capitalism invades private emotion. Even affection becomes a calculation. As Raymond Williams notes in *Culture and Materialism* (1980, p. 47), "Capitalism does not merely exploit labour—it transforms every human relationship into an economic one." In O'Neill's world, that transformation is total: whether in the engine room or the family home, work no longer defines dignity; it defines dependence.

5.2 Class Conflict and Mechanisation

O'Neill's plays constantly dramatize **class struggle** and **mechanisation**—two forces that define modern industrial society. *The Hairy Ape* makes this visible through the sharp divide between the engine room and the upper deck. The ship functions as a floating model of capitalist society: the stokers are the proletariat, labouring unseen, while the passengers above symbolise the bourgeoisie, detached from the means of production. When Yank tries to confront the upper class on Fifth Avenue, he is ignored and ridiculed, realising the futility of rebellion without class solidarity. As critic Travis Bogard observed in *Contours in Time* (1972, p. 198), "O'Neill's ship is the perfect symbol of a class system in motion—its labourers buried beneath the glittering surface of progress."

Mechanisation deepens this divide. O'Neill's stage directions in *The Hairy Ape* describe the stokers as "moving like parts of a single machine," their individuality erased by rhythm and repetition. Marx foresaw this process in *Capital* (Vol. I, 1867, p. 505): "The machine becomes the competitor of the workman himself." In *Dynamo* (1929), the machine even becomes a false god—the new idol of modern capitalism—suggesting that human faith has been replaced by

mechanical power. Likewise, *The Iceman Cometh* (1939) shows characters who have become mechanical in spirit, endlessly repeating their "pipe dreams" as if running on emotional autopilot. Thus, whether literal or metaphorical, mechanisation in O'Neill's theatre always reduces people to cogs in a system—efficient, replaceable, and expendable.

5.3 Despair, Futility, and the Theatricalisation of Capitalist Crisis

Perhaps O'Neill's most haunting theme is **despair**, not as a personal weakness but as a **social condition**. His characters are not merely unhappy—they are trapped in systems that promise freedom while enforcing dependence. In Marxist terms, this despair reflects the **crisis of capitalism**, where economic contradictions produce psychological breakdown. Terry Eagleton (1976, p. 58) writes that "despair is ideology turned inward—the emotional register of exploitation." O'Neill's plays translate that into theatre.

In *The Hairy Ape*, despair takes the form of alienation: Yank's identity disintegrates as he realises that neither the working class nor the wealthy class will accept him. In *The Iceman Cometh*, despair becomes addiction to illusion: the bar's residents cling to dreams ("pipe dreams") because reality—poverty, unemployment, aging—offers no hope. Hickey's attempt to free them from illusion only leads to deeper collapse, proving that hope itself functions as a capitalist mechanism of survival. In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, despair becomes domestic and hereditary—the family's cycle of addiction and blame mirrors an economy of endless debt. In each case, O'Neill's stage becomes what critic Stephen A. Black (1999, p. 312) calls "the theatre of capitalist crisis," where illusion, ambition, and despair form a continuous tragic rhythm.

O'Neill does not simply portray suffering; he **theatricalises the failure of capitalism's promises**—success, freedom, progress. Every character who strives for these ideals ends in futility. Yank dies crushed by a gorilla, the Tyrones fade into isolation, Hickey descends into madness. The message is consistent: capitalism creates not redemption but repetition—progress that consumes the human soul.

6. Discussion: Implications and Significance

A Marxist reading of Eugene O'Neill's theatre reveals that his works transcend the boundaries of personal tragedy and psychological conflict, offering instead a profound critique of structural entrapment within capitalist modernity. His plays depict not isolated individuals, but social beings enmeshed in economic systems that determine their desires, values, and destinies. Through figures like Yank, James Tyrone, and Hickey, O'Neill exposes how modern capitalism penetrates deeply into the human condition—transforming work into exploitation, success into anxiety, and progress into despair. His theatre thus aligns with the socially conscious literature of his era, echoing the class-conscious realism of John Steinbeck, the moral outrage of Upton Sinclair, and the European social drama of Bertolt Brecht. Yet O'Neill's distinction lies in his fusion of social critique with psychological depth: he dramatizes not only the external mechanisms of capitalism but also its internalization within the mind and soul.

In this sense, O'Neill's vision anticipates the concerns of later critical theorists such as Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Fredric Jameson, who would argue that late capitalism commodifies consciousness itself. His portrayal of despair is not mere sentiment but an early dramatization of what Adorno called "the administered world," where even private emotion becomes regulated by social and economic structures. The sense of paralysis and futility that pervades O'Neill's characters mirrors the alienation described by Marx and later expanded by thinkers of the Frankfurt School—the feeling that in a mechanised, profit-driven society, authentic human freedom is systematically undermined. From a broader cultural perspective, O'Neill's theatre dismantles the myth of the American Dream, that foundational belief that individual labour, virtue, and perseverance inevitably lead to success. In O'Neill's plays, such ideals collapse under the weight of class divisions, material dependency, and systemic exploitation. His America is not a land of opportunity but a landscape of exhaustion, where

both the working class and the aspiring bourgeoisie suffer under the same delusion of self-made success. As Terry Eagleton observes, "Ideology is most powerful when it ceases to appear ideological" (Ideology: An Introduction, 1991, p. 42). O'Neill's work unveils that hidden ideology—the faith in progress, productivity, and private ambition—as a mechanism of control that blinds individuals to collective struggle. For the contemporary world, O'Neill's insights remain strikingly relevant. Today's society, marked by precarious labour, gig economies, automation, and globalised capitalism, echoes the same contradictions his plays exposed nearly a century ago. The worker's alienation has merely changed form: instead of the stoker in the ship's furnace, we see the app-based driver, the algorithmic freelancer, the digital content creator—all bound by invisible systems of surveillance and value extraction. The "theatre of despair" that O'Neill envisioned has expanded beyond the stage into the social reality of the twenty-first century. His plays remind us that capitalism's greatest tragedy lies not only in economic inequality but in its power to erode dignity, identity, solidarity, and hope. Ultimately, the significance of O'Neill's Marxist interpretation lies in how it bridges aesthetics and social critique. His drama shows that art can serve as both mirror and weapon—reflecting the conditions of its age while challenging their inevitability. By portraying the emotional consequences of class, mechanisation, and commodification, O'Neill transforms theatre into a space of consciousness and resistance. His work continues to ask urgent questions: What does it mean to be human in a world that measures worth in profit? How can we reclaim meaning and solidarity in an age of despair? In raising these questions, O'Neill ensures that his art remains not only historically significant but ethically and politically vital in the ongoing struggle to humanise the modern world.

7. Conclusion

This study has shown that Eugene O'Neill's plays can be read as a powerful Marxist critique of capitalist modernity, where theatre becomes a mirror to labour, alienation, class division, and despair. Across works such as The Hairy Ape, Long Day's Journey into Night, and Winners, O'Neill portrays individuals trapped within the structures of production, profit, and mechanisation—people whose worth is measured by use and output rather than by humanity. His characters' suffering is not only personal or psychological but structural, revealing how capitalism commodifies emotion, family, and faith just as surely as it commodifies labour. By interpreting O'Neill through this Marxist lens, we discover a dramatist deeply concerned with the human cost of economic systems, one who transforms social critique into emotional experience. His theatre exposes the contradictions of progress: how mechanisation breeds alienation, how wealth generates emptiness, and how the promise of success conceals despair. For future scholarship, comparative and intersectional approaches—linking O'Neill to European dramatists, or analysing race, gender, and class under capitalist ideology—can deepen this perspective. Ultimately, O'Neill's stage remains not just a site of suffering but of resistance: a place where art confronts the political economy of human life and insists that despair itself can become a form of truth.

8. References

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