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Problematizing “Whiteness Studies”: A Re-reading of O’Neill’s *Thirst*

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Abstract:

In her seminal book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison, among other concerns, strongly puts forward her argument against a coherent and unified “Americanness” that the White Americans claim to have shaped the American literary culture. Morrison is far from accepting such homogenized universal category called “American” and on the contrary maintains, that White Eurocentric attributes have always been “photographic negatives” of their constructed and fabricated “black” counterparts. Thus, “blackness” was a crucial factor that came to define “white” American identity. Morrison’s perspective therefore is to turn the gaze in order to make “whiteness” *visible*.

The present paper proposes to re-read Eugene O’Neill’s one Act play *Thirst* from the perspective of “Whiteness Studies” taking cue from some of the theoretical formulations of Toni Morrison and who has been a central figure in pioneering “whiteness studies” as an academic discipline. The paper would thereby try to underscore, how, under the veneer of “universality”, in so far as the theme of the play is concerned, the hegemonic racist bias lies hidden, and how, a reading of the play “against the grain” leads us to the “textual unconscious”.

Key words: “photographic negative”, “whiteness studies”, “textual unconscious”.

Explorations of Eugene O’Neill’s engagement with racism are not new in the critical parlance. In fact, O’Neill remains one of the most influential white writers who could comprehensively deal with “blackness” as a social, racial and ideological category and could accept the compelling and severe challenge of representing black characters in creative works of considerable literary merit worthily making room in the critical domain of Melville, Mark Twain, Conrad and Faulkner. He was the first mainstream American playwright to delineate black characters in dramatic roles and also to faithfully employ black actors in those roles. The path, however was not easy for him, as he could not uncritically succumb to the racial myths and stereotypes dominant then. Having created six plays to depict sixteen black characters over a twenty-six year period, O-Neill’s “Negro” had to “evolve”. Drawing attention to

this gradual metamorphosis in treatment of the idea of “blackness”, Peter J Gillet in his article “O’Neill and the Racial Myths” points out:

For in the period spanned for his five so called ‘negro plays’, from 1914 to 1924, anthropology and psychology tended to give weight to some of the myths in his work; moreover the last two of these five, *The Emperor Jones* and *All God’s Chilun Got Wings*, coincided with the early days of the “Harlem Renaissance” in which black writers themselves often treated the black man as a primitive. Despite this and herein, I believe, lies the interest of his treatment of the black American in these five plays and in *The Iceman Cometh* (1946) O’Neill met the various difficulties of presenting black characters with ever greater assurance, awareness and success. As we move from *Thirst* through *The Iceman* we can watch America’s most influential playwright more and more understanding blackness as part of the black man’s humanity, and in the process sloughing off the influence of the traditional American racial myths. (111)

Gillet’s analysis of O’Neill’s treatment of blackness, however, is limited in the sense that it overlooks how the “black” in almost majority of the plays of O’Neill serves as a parasitic agent to bolster and underscore “whiteness” and even when blackness comes to be understood as part of the black man’s “humanity”, white remains the unmarked and invisible human “norm” and universal standard. The present paper seeks to explore the “textual unconscious” of O’Neill’s play *Thirst* from the critical imperatives of a recent theoretical field of enquiry “Whiteness Studies”.

“Whiteness Studies” as a new emerging discipline that made inroads in the fields of culture-studies, history, anthropology, social sciences, literature and even popular culture came to flourish in the United States in the 1990s and gradually moved beyond its frontiers, with the call of critics and academicians to scrutinize, analyze and comprehend the meanings and ramifications embedded in the category called ‘white’. The obvious reason behind such discerning attention on ‘white’ and ‘whiteness’ was to posit a counter discursive threat to the attempts of critics in analyzing the ‘marginal’, studying the ‘black’ from racial perspectives, only to leave out discussions on the ‘centre’, as if, it never existed. The inherent and latent politics was always to camouflage the characteristics that define ‘whiteness’, and also to keep ‘whiteness’ outside the precincts and parameters of race and racial theorizations. The consequence was an inalienable association and proximity of ‘race’ with ‘black’ and ‘blackness’ giving way to ‘whiteness’ assuming the status of the ‘neutral’ ‘norm’. The aim of whiteness critics was to interrogate this ‘neutrality’ and ‘normativity’ and to challenge the very ‘centrality’ of white by naming, marking and rendering visible, the hitherto unnamed, unmarked and invisible category.

The impetus that spurred ‘Whiteness Studies’ as the new ground for interdisciplinary research was generated by Toni Morrison’s insightful study of ‘literary whiteness’,

Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1993), a condensed and pithy summation of her “Tanner Lectures on Human Values”, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature”, delivered by Morrison at the University of Michigan on October 7, 1988. In the field of history, ‘whiteness’ acquired considerable attention and proliferation, particularly in the US. Peter Kolchin in his article “Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America”, categorically mentions the actual point of concurrence of history and whiteness studies as disciplines. Kolchin states about the historians:

...their focus has been on the construction of whiteness - how diverse groups in the United States came to identify, and be identified by others, as white – and what that has meant for the social order. Starting from the now widely shared premise that race is a ideological or social contract rather than a biological fact, they have at least partially shifted attention from how Americans have looked at whites, and to whiteness as a central component of American’s racial ideology. In doing so they have already had a substantial impact in historians whose work does not fall fully within the rubric of whiteness studies but who have borrowed some of the field’s insights, concerns and language.(Kolchin 155)

Among the leading whiteness historians, David R. Roediger in *The Wages of Whiteness*, which Angela Woollacott believes to be ‘founded on his passionate commitment to radical politics and activism, specifically to the possibility of workers uniting across racial barriers’ (Woollacott18) portrays how white laborers in the antebellum United States came to understand themselves by a projection of their Other – the slaves and the blacks which raised them hierarchically at a superior stratum and enabled their employers to ideologically take them into confidence. Roediger’s study further influenced Noel Ignatiev who in his book *How the Irish Became White* (1995) explores the conditions that necessitated the Irishmen to ‘become’ white, gradually as they were initially projected by the Americans as a race occupying the curious intermediate position, if not the ‘black’ completely. In fact, Irishmen belonging to the poorer class gradually became greater adversaries to the existing negro population and always gave favourable consent on the question of continuing slavery than any other segment of the U S population; only to assert their own ‘whiteness’ and find an identity of their own. Matthew Frye Jacobson in *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, however, differs from Roediger’s deterministic approach towards ‘race’ and projects ‘the full complexity of whiteness in its vicissitudes’ (Jacobson 14) outlining stages of chronological progression in racial categorization. Peter Kolchin also includes Grace Elizabeth Hale’s book *Making Whiteness* as the one that pronounces the “American Studies” approach and ‘delineates the emergence of a Southern “culture of segregation” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’. The idea of ‘collective whiteness’

that the southern constructed in order to abate the post Civil War problems is a subject of exploration of Hale. Theodore W. Allen’s *The Invention of the White Race*, again emphasizes the ways by which ‘whiteness’ was constructed not as means to perpetrate social control, and how the myth of racial superiority was enforced in America. David Roediger reviewed Allen’s book as ‘a monumental study of the birth of racism in the American South which makes truly new and convincing points about one of the most critical problems in U. S history’ in “Times Literary Supplement”.

The concept of ‘whiteness’ has proliferated in the research avenues of anthropologists as well. John Hartigan Jr in “Establishing the fact of Whiteness” makes a detailed review of various ethnographic and anthropological studies as regards whiteness and concludes with a call for considering the very heterogeneity in the discourse of whiteness. Hartigan writes:

If whiteness stands, definitionally, as equivalent with homogenizing process in the workplace, at home, in neighbourhoods, and in public debates, then we should additionally have a means of designating the heterogeneous aspects of white racial identity that are not effortlessly processed into whiteness, that through ruptures of class decorums or other forms of social etiquette, undermine the unmarked status of some white. Lest whiteness and blackness become static version of the marxist superstructure / base paradigm –discrete, separate entities rather than constantly entangled registers – ethnographers must devise means to analyse how whites, as racial subjects are embroiled in predicaments where the meanings of race are unclear and shifting, subjects of discourses or local idioms that are fashioned in fast-changing sites.(Hartigan Jr 502)

In the well-researched articles, Hartigan refers to a range of critics and academicians engaged in the study of ‘whiteness’ - Harrison, Frankenberg, George Lipsitz, Daniel Legel , David Roediger among others. In another perceptive article, that narrates Hartigan’s fieldwork on the “white” in Detroit, he came to identify how whites articulated their notions about ‘race’ in general and the significance of being white, in particular. The passage from his article ““White devils” Talk Back: What Antiracists Can Learn from Whites in Detroit” is worth quoting:

Rather than simply reiterating my finding, this essay pursues two objectives in relation to my fieldwork in Detroit. The first is to discuss epistemological and methodological issues raised by applying an ethnographic perspective to the subject of whiteness; the second is to relate particular insights I garnered from observing white Detroiters grappling with the significance of race in their daily lives, within then

neighborhoods and the city at large. These two discussions derived from recognition that racial identities are locally constituted following place-specific dynamics that are informed by class position. (139)

In a study of whiteness from the legal and statutory standpoint, *White by Law: Legal Construction of Race*, Ian Haney Lopez argues for the centrality of law itself in the construction of race. Haney Lopez examines past cases in the United States that have shaped the contemporary notions of race, law and whiteness including two heard by the United States Supreme Court. He argues how the judgments and verdicts decided and articulated who was white enough to become American and the contrary.

Richard Dyer, who is a Professor of Film Studies at the University of Warwick, in his path breaking book *White* conflates some of the basic propositions and theorization of “Critical White Studies” to some Hollywood reels and himself, significantly adds to the body of discourses on Whiteness”. Chapter I of his book entitled “The Matter of Whiteness”, as Dyer himself argues, deals with the ‘political’ and methodological issues and some key concepts unpinning the analysis of the rest of the book’ (Dyer xix). It explores how Christianity, race and imperialism renders visible the very ‘white person’. He considers his own crucial positionality of being ‘white’ and states with almost an objective acumens:

As long as race is something only applied to non-white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people. (Dyer 1)

Dyer also refers to this synonymy of being ‘people’ or ‘just people’ with ‘whites’ and consideration of the colored as ‘less than being ‘just’ people (pun in the word just is quite discernable) as ‘endemic’ to the very white culture. Dyer also stresses the relation of ‘whiteness’ with its other-‘blackness’, in and through which it comes to be defined and articulated:

As others have found, it often seems that the only way to see the structures, tropes and perpetual habits of whiteness, to see past the illusion of infinite variety, to recognise white qua white, is when non-white people are also represented. My initial stab at the topic of whiteness approached it with three films which were centrally about white-black interactions, and my account above of how I may have got into thinking about the topic at all emphasizes the role of non-white people in my life. (Dyer 13)

What all the above approaches to the study of Whiteness more or less infer are -first, the invisibility and the constructed nature of whiteness, second, the normativity and the tendency of the “white” to remain neutral in respect of race, third, the place specific

attributes of whiteness, and fourth, its interdependence on its Other to manifest itself internally.

The intensive theorization of ‘whiteness’ in literature, however, was first made by Toni Morrison’s path breaking critical work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, which happens to be a supreme manifesto bearing the meanings and ramifications of American whiteness vis-à-vis American canonical literature. Morrison’s idea in *Playing in the Dark* came by way of her summation of her views expressed in Turner Lectures on Human Values delivered at the University of Michigan on October, 1998, entitled, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature”. Morrison in *Unspeakable Things Unspoken* (hereafter abbreviated as UTU) problematizes the very notion of the concept of ‘race’ stating that the exclusion of any discussions of ‘race’ in contemporary times is a political ploy of the whites to claim neutrality, as no voice in any discipline- academic, theological, historical or natural scene - paid heed to the insistence of the Afro-Americans that race is not a distinguishing factor in any human relationship. Morrison attempts in her lecture, to ‘address the ways in which presence of Afro-American literature and the awareness of its culture both resuscitate the study of literature in the United States and raise that study’s standards’ (“UTU” 126-27). She contextualizes the routes, debates on ‘canon’ have taken in Western literary criticism and by way of her argument refers to Milan Kundera’s strictly Eurocentric notion of canon as reflected in his *The Art of the Novel*. Kundera’s assertion was to that, novel being Europe’s creation ought to be judged in the contextual canvas of the history of European novel. Clearly enough, Kundera excludes American writers from the transcendent ‘idea of the novel’, an exclusion, that Morrison parallels with those of the Afro-American from the ‘transcendent idea of the American canon’. Morrison refers to Michael Bernal’s *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* and taking cue from his ideas regarding the ‘process’ of ‘fabrication’ of Ancient Greece and ‘motive’ behind it goes on to theorize on the appraisal of Afro-American presence in American literature. She reckons the wakefulness of scholars and academicians as regards three principle areas- first, re exploration of the American canon, particularly the founding nineteenth century work for unveiling the presence of the Afro-American who have shaped the choices, structure form and even the language of those literary pieces. Second, a development of a comprehensive theoretical framework for positing and accommodating Afro - American literature and third, a reexamination of contemporary and / or non- canonical literature for this presence. Morrison herself asserts, ‘I am always amazed by the resonances the structural gearshifts, and the uses to which Afro – American narratives, persona and idiom are put in *contemporary “white” literature*’ (UTU 136, emphasis mine). In other words, Morrison’s search (a search that she argues will come out of an extensive research) is for the ‘ghost in the machine’; she argues that

things which are invisible ‘are not necessarily “not there”’; that a void may be empty but not be a vacuum’. Morrison observes in “UTU”:

Looking at the scope of American literature, I can’t help thinking that the question should never have been “Why am I, an Afro-American, absent from it?” It is not a particularly interesting query anyway. The spectacularly interesting question is “What intellectual feats had to be performed by the author or his critic to erase me from a society seething with my presence and what effect has that performance had on the work?” What are the strategies of escape from knowledge? Of willful oblivion? (136)

As to why and how American writers chose ‘romance’ as a generic form to ventilate their aesthetic output, ten years after Tocqueville’s prediction in 1940, “Finding no stuff for the ideal in what is real and true, poets ‘would flee to imaginary regions’, Morrison wonders that where in romances is the shadow of the presence from which the text tries to escape. She calls for an exploration of the textual strategies and the novelistic inventions that serve to expunge the ‘shadow’. In U T U, Morrison, herself tries to read Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* ‘against the grain’ and concludes that among the several meanings of this complex, profound, heaving and disorderly text, the ‘unspeakable’ one has remained the ‘hidden course’, the ‘truth in the face of falsehood’. Morrison underscores the fact that canonical American Literature is begging for such attention from critics and researchers. In the third section of her lecture, Morrison deals with the ways in which works by Afro-Americans can respond to the ‘presence’, (just as non black works do) and she chooses some of her own fictional works in this regard. But the crux of Morrison’s argument in this article is as follows:

It only seems that the canon of American literature is “naturally” or “inevitably” “white”. In fact it is studiously so. In fact these absences of vital presences in Young American literature may be the insistent fruit of the scholarship rather than the text. Perhaps some of these writers, although under current house arrest, have much more to say than has been realized. Perhaps some were not so much transcending politics, or escaping blackness, as they were transforming it into intelligible, accessible, yet artistic modes of discourse. To ignore this possibility by never questioning the strategies of transformation is to disenfranchise the writer, diminish the text, and render the buck of the literature aesthetically and historically incoherent – an exorbitant price for cultural (white male) purity, and I believe, a spendthrift one. The reexamination of founding literature of the United States for the unspeakable unspoken may reveal those texts to have deeper and other meanings, deeper and other power, deeper and other significances. (UTU 140)

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison pronounces more empathetically her notions about African- Americanism in the United States, which she believes, has been central to the understanding of the American canon. The particular and distinctive ‘Americanness’ from where the characteristics of the national literature are believed to emanate, Morrison argues, is shaped by the ‘four hundred year old presence of, first Africans and then African American’. Morrison in the chapter entitled “Black Matters”, means by ‘Africanism’ both the notions of Africa as it existed in the USA and the Africa that was fabricated by the Eurocentric learning.

She added that the Africanism had overshadowed the literary imagination of the American white writers to an extent that one can discerningly discern ‘through a close look at literary “blackness”, the nature – even the cause - of literary “whiteness”:

What parts do the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction of what is loosely described as “American”? If such an enquiry ever comes to maturity, it may provide access to a deeper reading of American literature – a reading not completely available now, at least, I suspect, because of the studied indifference of most’ literary criticism to these matters. (*Playing in the Dark*, hereafter abbreviated as *PITD* 9)

Morrison clearly distinguishes between her perceptions of the American canon from the dual perspectives of a ‘reader’ and a ‘writer’. Whereas the former invites her to consider that ‘black people signified little or nothing in the imagination of white American writers’ and that blacks have a marginal impact on ‘the lives of the characters of the work as well as the creative imagination of the author’, the latter in turn led her to arrive at a point where:

I began to see how the literature I revered, the literature I loathed, behaved in its encounter with racial ideology. American literature could not help being shaped by that encounter.... (PITD 16)

In the second chapter of the book entitled “Romancing the Shadow”, Morrison theorizes on the factors that were instrumental in the generic development of American ‘romance’. He historically traces the reason behind the immigration of people from the Old World – of poverty, incarceration – of oppression, domination and religious persecution – and the new one with promises of freedom, liberation, individualism and opportunities. Morrison quite cogently sums up:

The desire for freedom is preceded by oppression, a yearning for God’s law is born of the detestation of human license and corruption, the glamour of riches is in thrall to poverty, hunger and debt. (PITD 35)

Gradually, in and through the succeeding centuries the literature produced by Young America became replete with fears, mysteries and doubts much to the astonishment of people, since the world of disorder, chaos and confusion that they wanted to fly from became reflected in their 'body of literature'. Morrison herself answers that this reflection is a kind of 'exploration of anxiety imported from the shadows of European culture'. 'Freedom' might be their most coveted experience, but what hovered in their consciousness was a lack of it. Their fear of solitude, boundaries, aggression and lack of 'civilization' was channelized through the romances they wrote, and, Morrison argues, that the fodder for all these ... was provided by an already existing Afro – American population. Morrison quite aptly pronounces in *PITD*:

Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the *not-free* but also, with the dramatic polarity created by the skin colour, the projection of the *not-me*. The result was a playground for imagination. What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalized external exploitation was an American Africanism – a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American. (38, emphasis mine)

Morrison, almost in a didactic vein calls for investigation of researchers regarding certain issues –first, the way in which a contemplation of the 'dark –abiding signing Africanist' presence enable white writers like Poe, Twain, Melville and Hawthorne to think about themselves. Second, how white writers self -consciously manipulate an Africanist idiom to establish their otherness and this way did either of estrangement of their dialogues, spelling words to the point of unintelligibility, reinforcing class distinctions etc. Third, how an Africanist narrative is manipulated as a means of establishing humanity, civilization, reason and other universal codes of behaviour. Such criticism will show how through that narrative, history is constructed by the whites at the cost of history-lessness and context-lessness for blacks.

O'Neill's *Thirst*, as Margaret Loftus Ranald puts in *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill* :

...portrays a raft as a microcosm, with its three unnamed shipwreck survivors of Dancer, Gentleman and West Indian Mulatto Sailor. While introducing the theme of woman as whore, along with inter-racial and class conflict, it also portrays the behavior of individuals pushed to their emotional and physical limits, even to proposed cannibalism, after the Dancer dances herself to death(Ranald 52-53).

As far as the main thematic thrust of the play is concerned, the play masterfully exposes the gradual moral degeneration and degradation of man, the unveiling of the façade of civilization,

the gradual onset of madness and the frenzied and almost bestial display of savagery and barbarism when man lives on the edge and death stares him at the face. The thematic fabric includes apart from thirst for water, the instinctual thirst for communication and companionship, thirst for life and survival. In fine it may be inferred that the theme is an universal one addressing general human attributes in dramatizing and sketching out the behavioral patterns of mankind under the worst of calamities- scorching sun, the threats of the devouring sharks whose fins are sometimes visible and the pitiless and merciless ambience of the boundless sea with the searing desperation of thirst. O’Neill, therefore was to address a theme that is universal- man’s deepest urge for camaraderie and survival being one of the most instinctual paraphernalia of human nature. The interest of the present paper is not to study this general praxeology and to study the characters through universalist parameters that homogenize differences but to have a sharp focus on the interracial politics manifest in this play by using “Whiteness Studies” as a theoretical tool. The paper therefore attempts to shift the critical gaze from the margin to the centre and to show how the fabricated blackness in the ideational level unmistakably articulates and vivifies “whiteness” in the text.

While the Sailor in O’Neill’s play continuously goes on “crooning” the Negro monotonous song the Gentleman and the Dancer are always engaged in pointing out the mystery and enigma associated with the Sailor:

GENTLEMAN: He is strange- that sailor. I do not know what to think of him.

DANCER: It is a strange song he sings.

GENTLEMAN: He doesn’t seem to want to speak to us.

DANCER: I have noticed that, too. When I asked him about that song he did not want to answer at all. (O’Neill 14)

Even all attempts at rationalizing the strangeness of the Sailor fail because it is the Sailor’s otherness that help them establish their own “sameness”. In other words the blackness of the Sailor and the attributes that define his blackness are constantly highlighted in order to build up companionship and amiability between the two white characters.

GENTLEMAN: I no longer fear him now that I am quite sane. It clears my brain to talk to you. We must talk to each other all the time.

DANCER: Yes, we must talk to each other. I do not dream when I talk to you.

GENTLEMAN: ... He is a poor Negro sailor- our companion in misfortune. God knows we are all in the same pitiful plight. We should not grow suspicious of one another.

DANCER: All the same, I am afraid of him. There is something in his eyes when he looks at me which makes me tremble. (O’Neill, 15)

Particularly the Dancer in this text seems to attest to Morrison’s argument in favour of the Afro-Americans being merely agents of contemplation on all that is intimidating. Morrison rightly observed that the slave population acted as surrogate selves for meditations on terrors of all

forms- the terror of European outcasts, their dread of failure, powerlessness, Nature without limits, natal loneliness, internal aggression, evil, sin, greed and the like.

Both the Gentleman and the Dancer obsessively nourish the idea that the Sailor is indeed self-centred and greedy to steal water and to hide it depriving the white characters:

SAILOR: Water! I want water! Give me some water and I will sing.

GENTLEMAN: We have no water fool! It is your fault we have none. Why did you drink all that was left in the cask while you thought we were asleep? I would not give you any even if we had some. You deserve to suffer you pig! If any one of the three of us has any water it is you who have hidden some of what you stole... (O'Neill 28)

Edward L. Slauchnessy in his essay "O'Neill's African and Irish Americans: stereotypes or 'faithful realism'?" thus very pertinently points out :

Emancipated de jure but never de facto, his African-American characters exist in conditions of effective subjugation. They are often forced to behave in ways that confirm the very stereotypes others hold of them. Condemned to live out his prophecy of doom, O'Neill's black exists in a state of resentment and fear, conditions which make him simultaneously suspect and pitiable.(149)

The us/ other binary in the play is strongly established by now and one comes to understand that the stereotypical images of the black Negro are vivified through the Gentleman's comments- "nigger", "fool", "rotten pig".

Morrison in the chapter entitled "Romancing the Shadow" of her book calls for a systematic study of the technical ways in which a black character is often used as a vehicle to enforce and establish the inventions and implications of "whiteness" and also placed her argument regarding an in-depth analysis analyze the strategic use of black characters to define the goals and enhance the qualities of white characters. In *Thirst* when even the Dancer's ploy to tempt the Sailor with the diamond necklace fails, she goes the extreme forward to offer him her body. Let us have a look at the relevant passage:

DANCER: (Putting her arm around his neck and half whispering in his ear) Do you not understand? I love you, Sailor! Noblemen and millionaires and all degrees of gentlemen have loved me, have fought for me. I have never loved any of them as I will love you. Look in my eyes Sailor, look in my eyes!(O'Neill 37)

And even then when the Sailor is still indifferent the Dancer's racial prejudice is prominently betrayed:

Oh, will you never understand? Are you so stupid that you do not know what I mean? Look! I am offering myself to you! I am kneeling before you- I who always had men kneel to me! I am offering my body to you- my body that men

have called so beautiful. I have promised to love you-a Negro Sailor- if you will give me one small drink of water. Is that not humiliation enough that you must keep me waiting so? (O’Neill 37-38)

When the Sailor retains the same answer the Dancer blurts out her extreme indignation , having debased herself so much so as to be “spurned like a wench of the streets”, that too by a Negro Sailor, a “black animal”, “a dirty slave”. She had always noble millionaires to attend her and now even when she voluntarily submits her body to the ignoble Sailor, the Sailor refuses. What must be pointed out here, is that the “blackness” of the Sailor is used as a trope to emphasise the literal as also metaphorical “whiteness” of the other characters be it the Dancer or the Gentleman or even the “noble” Dukes and Millionaires who used to attend the Dancer.

The racial prejudice finds its culmination at the end of the play where the Sailor is shown to behave in the most macabre and eerie vein when he decides to hack the Dancer’s flesh and drink her blood.

SAILOR : One of us had to die. It is lucky for us she is dead.

GENTLEMAN: What do you mean? What good can her death do us?

SAILOR: We will live now.(O’Neill 42)

The dramatist very meticulously mentions the next steps undertaken by the Sailor as he takes the Sailor’s knife from his heath, like an expert person who knows how to effectively use the weapon of murder sharpens it on the sole of his shoe, supplants his hitherto monotonous Negro song with a happy melodious one and finally points with his knife to the body of the Dancer. The Gentleman, now comprehending the Sailor’s motive bursts out in tones of anguished horror:

No! No! No! Good God, not that!(O’Neill 42)

Thwarting the Sailor’s motive the Gentleman somehow grasps the Dancer’s body pushing it into the water. Thus the Sailor here is shown to display cannibalism, a concept much in keeping with his primitivism and his “blackness” whereas the “white” Gentleman, even when he has already denigrated morally as a human being often using slangs or derogatory racist language here emerges out as somebody who has at least the last streak of humanity left in his character. This again is a politics. To say the white author O’Neill has a racist bias would indeed be stooping to conquer the thrust area of the present paper, but now that “the author is dead” the text is open for a reading against the grain. While discussing the whiteness project Morrison, in her book , observes:

We need to analyze the manipulation of the Africanist narrative as a means of meditation on one’s own humanity. ...analyze how that narrative is used for discourse on ethics, social and universal codes of behavior, and assertions about and definitions of civilization and reason .

Whiteness in this play, subtly though, is celebrated and blackness, more subtly dismissed specially when the Negro Sailor could think of cannibalism and the White Gentleman, could defiantly react thus. In his essay “O’Neill and the Racial Myths” Peter J. Gillett comments regarding this play:

If there any black people in the audience at the play’s first night at Provincetown in 1916 they might well have seen it as a stupid insult to themselves, a contribution to a set of dangerous stereotypes.

Thus, though literally the Gentleman, the Dancer and the Sailor were sailing in the same boat, Morrison’s “whiteness” lens clearly attests to the fact that metaphorically they were not. In fact the black Sailor in the boat could only mark the unmarked and render visible the invisible normative “whiteness”.

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