



## Between Labour and Capital: A Marxist Exploration of Social Hierarchy in Eugene O'Neill's Drama

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### Abstract

*The plays of Eugene O'Neill, often called the "father of modern American drama," have their origins in the economic and social tensions that plagued the United States in the early 1900s. The major plays of Eugene O'Neill, including *The Hairy Ape* (1922), *Anna Christie* (1921), and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), are analyzed through a Marxist critical lens in this paper. The plays shed light on the class struggle depicted in these works. Based on the work of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and subsequent Marxist literary critics like Georg Lukács and Raymond Williams, this study contends that O'Neill exposes economic exploitation, class alienation, and the American Dream's false promises through the use of dramatic form and characters. Based on the paper's findings, O'Neill's drama is a social critique of capitalist hierarchy in addition to a personal tragedy.*

**Keywords:** *Marxism, Eugene O'Neill, class struggle, alienation, capitalism, American drama*

### 1. Introduction

As the first American playwright to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) is a pivotal figure in contemporary American theater. Insightful examinations of human nature, tragic realism, and profound psychological depth are hallmarks of his plays. Few studies have looked at how O'Neill's characters' socioeconomic backgrounds impact their lives, in contrast to the abundance of literature on autobiographical influences, existential crises, and psychological conflicts. The impact of economic inequality, social stratification, and power structures on personal identity and interpersonal dynamics in his vivid universe can be better grasped through the lens of Marxism. Marxist literary theory, which emerged from the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, holds that literature mirrors society's economic and material conditions. This view holds that literary works are ideological products of their time, impacted by the social relations of the society in which they were created. Literature has the power to either uphold or question preexisting systems of class dominance, drawing on the interplay between a society's economic foundation and its political institutions, cultural values, and literary output. When analyzing literary works for representations of social inequality and power dynamics, concepts like class consciousness, ideology, alienation, class struggle, and exploitation are useful analytical tools.

U.S. industrialization, urbanization, and the expansion of capitalist economic systems were all on the rise in the 1800s and 1900s. The gap between the capitalist affluent and the working class widened as a result of these changes. Many Americans came to terms with the realities of industrial labor, unemployment, poverty, social instability, and economic exploitation. In his dramatic works, which he penned during this time of great social and economic upheaval, O'Neill vividly depicts people fighting forces that go beyond their own frailty or destiny. The economic systems in which he writes ensnare many of his characters, limiting their agency, limiting their opportunities, and defining who they are in society.

One of the most important factors in how characters evolve in O'Neill's plays is their socioeconomic status. As the story opens, Yank, a stoker on an ocean liner, thinks that his physical labor gives him a sense of purpose and identity. However, his encounter with the wealthy upper class reveals the inflexible social order that keeps him out, which causes him to become even more estranged and destructive. *Anna Christie* similarly depicts a woman's life as she is forced into prostitution by her poverty and lack of social opportunities; this highlights how economic hardship limits personal agency and reinforces gendered exploitation. James Tyrone's materialistic decisions add to the mental and emotional anguish endured by the whole Tyrone family in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and his fixation on saving money is a reflection of the long-term impacts of economic instability. These instances show that class is

more than just a backdrop in O'Neill's play; it's a driving factor in character motivation, interpersonal dynamics, and tragic consequences. Over and over again in O'Neill's dramatic universe, the struggle between capital and labor surfaces. The exploitation of human labor for profit, class distinctions, and the mental toll of economic disparity are all themes that emerge in his plays. In many of his stories, the privileged classes exert ideological and economic control, while working-class and immigrant characters play pivotal roles. In these confrontations, O'Neill reveals the hidden workings of capitalism that uphold social stratification and keep people in pain. In keeping with a major theme in Marxist thought, his protagonists frequently feel estrangement not just from the outside world but also from their own families, ambitions, and selves.

This study analyzes how Eugene O'Neill depicts social hierarchy in a number of his plays through the lens of Marxist literary criticism. It delves into the ways in which class awareness emerges via oppression, struggle, and conflict, as well as the ways in which labor and capital interact to impact his characters' lives. Economic inequality impacts identity development, family dynamics, social mobility, and personal tragedy, according to the research. Rather than relying only on psychological analysis, this study aims to show how O'Neill's dramatic vision critiques capitalist social structures and the inequalities they perpetuate through class dynamics.

In the end, this research contends that the plays chosen by O'Neill depict class as more than just a social category; it serves as a determining factor in human relationships, identity, and tragic fate. By taking a Marxist stance in analyzing his plays, we can learn more about how literature, ideology, and socioeconomic reality interact with one another, and we can see how O'Neill's works are still relevant to today's conversations about classism and social justice.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Marxist Literary Criticism

Among the many influential theoretical frameworks for investigating literature's social impact, Marxist literary criticism stands out. Literary texts cannot be understood apart from the material conditions and economic structures in which they are produced, according to this critical framework, which is based on the philosophical ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marxism perceives literary works not as autonomous artistic expressions but as cultural products that either reflect or challenge the prevailing ideology of a specific historical period. By adopting this stance, we can see how literature portrays and analyzes issues of social inequality, economic injustice, and class struggle. Karl Marx's historical materialism, which states that a society's political, legal, cultural, and intellectual institutions are determined by its economic organization, is the bedrock of Marxist criticism. Marx famously says, "The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life" in the Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859) (Marx, 1977, p. 20). That the material circumstances of life shape human consciousness rather than the other way around is the implication of this proposition. In addition to impacting people's economic lives, social classes, labor relations, and ownership of the means of production also shape their identities, beliefs, values, and aspirations. Thus, literature reflects the economic base's contradictions and power relations and serves as an ideological superstructure component.

Throughout history, the ideas of the ruling class have always been the most widely held and influential. This point was elaborated upon by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* (1846). Literature, religion, schools, and the arts all play a role in legitimizing prevailing ideologies, which in turn helps to sustain social hierarchies. On the other hand, literature can shed light on the oppressed and marginalized peoples' lived realities and the contradictions within capitalist society. Therefore, Marxist literary criticism delves deeper than just looking for economic themes in literature; it seeks to understand how class relations impact the shaping of narrative structure, character development, and ideological significance. Class struggle, which Marx saw as the engine that propelled historical progress, is a key concept in Marxist critique. The proletariat, who have no property other than their labor power and are compelled



to sell it for wages, is in direct opposition to the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production in a capitalist society. Disputes between social classes, exploitation, and social inequality all stem from this economic imbalance. Literary works often depict these conflicts in one of two ways: either through economic hardships or through familial ties, individual ambitions, and mental strains. Scholars can learn how literature deals with issues of power, inequality, and social justice by analyzing these depictions, which in turn reveal the ideological assumptions that underpin literary works.

In addition to the traditional base-superstructure model, Raymond Williams made a substantial contribution to Marxist literary theory by highlighting the dynamic interaction of society and culture. Culture, according to Williams's *Marxism and Literature* (1977), is not just a reflection of economic conditions but rather a dynamic arena where social meanings are constructed, negotiated, and debated. The term "structures of feeling," coined by him, describes the cultural norms and shared experiences that form during a certain era but never fully institutionalize or become ideological (Williams, 1977, p. 132). This idea is particularly pertinent to the plays of Eugene O'Neill because they depict the fears, doubts, and inner struggles felt by people in early 20th-century America as society shifted from a more traditional model to one based on industrial capitalism. The conflicts between long-held social norms and the ever-shifting economic landscape are reflected in his characters.

Georg Lukács's writings add to the Marxist canon of literary criticism by highlighting the connection between personal experience and social reality. The "totality" of social relations, not isolated personal experiences, is what makes great realist literature succeed, according to Lukács's 1937 *The Historical Novel* (Lukács, 1962, p. 43). Readers are able to comprehend the interdependence of individual anguish and societal systems through seeing characters as manifestations of economic and historical forces. Despite the intense psychological tone of many of Eugene O'Neill's plays, they always show how societal oppression, economic inequality, and classism are the root causes of individual conflicts. Thus, his dramatic realism reveals the structural factors that impact human life, going beyond individual tragedy.

Karl Marx's (1844) *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* developed the concept of alienation, which is one of the most influential in this study. According to Marx, there are four interrelated ways in which workers are alienated from capitalist production: from the goods they produce, from the act of labor itself, from other people, and from their own potential as human beings (Marx, 1844/1988, pp. 70-76). Under capitalism, working is more about staying alive than about reaching one's full potential; people are reduced to mere tools of the economic machine. Employees who feel alienated from their workplace often feel helpless and isolated, lose control over their work, and cut off from meaningful social relationships. To fully grasp the fantastical world of Eugene O'Neill, one must grasp the idea of alienation. Isolation from society and the economy is a common psychological problem among his protagonists. Yank comes to terms with the fact that he is socially isolated and economically helpless in a capitalist society as he progresses through *The Hairy Ape*, despite his brute strength and productive labor. Poverty limits the heroine's agency and forces her into exploitative situations that she cannot escape in *Anna Christie*. Just as *Long Day's Journey into Night* shows how social ambitions, material anxieties, and economic instability impact family relationships, emotional pain, and individual identity, so does the play. To further demonstrate Marx's claim that capitalist relations radically warp human existence, these characters experience alienation from both society and themselves.

This study examines how Eugene O'Neill's chosen plays deal with themes of alienation, classism, exploitation, capital, and labor through the lens of Marxist literary criticism. In doing so, it delves into the rise of class awareness within O'Neill's dramatic universe and how economic forces impact character growth, interpersonal dynamics, and horrible conclusions. This research endeavors to prove that O'Neill's plays serve as both psychological dramas and strong critiques of capitalist social structures by integrating the theoretical works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Raymond Williams, and Georg Lukács. By applying this theoretical



framework, the research shows how important O'Neill's writings are for comprehending the interplay among literature, ideology, economic injustice, and the never-ending fight for social justice.

### 3. Class Consciousness and Alienation in The Hairy Ape

Many consider *The Hairy Ape* (1922), a play by Eugene O'Neill, to be a powerful portrayal of class struggle and industrial capitalism in contemporary American theater. The play offers a scathing indictment of capitalist society via the eyes of its protagonist, Robert "Yank" Smith, and was written at a time when the United States was experiencing fast industrialization and growing economic inequality. O'Neill discloses the psychological, social, and economic repercussions of class oppression through the use of Expressionist dramatic techniques, going beyond realistic portrayal. *The Hairy Ape* shows, from a Marxist point of view, how capitalism production leads to isolation, the breakdown of social classes, and the imposition of false freedoms on the general populace. Yank is first seen in the play as a powerful stoker who works in the furnace room of a transatlantic luxury liner. He is very proud of his work and thinks he is vital to today's industrial society because of his strength. The fact that he keeps saying he "belongs" in the engine room shows how much he identifies with manual labor. But what Marxists call "false consciousness" is the foundation of this feeling of belonging. Yank rejects the idea that he is exploited by capitalism and instead thinks that his work gives him respect, power, and significance in society. As a result, he is blind to the fact that he is a member of the oppressed working class because his whole identity is built around the capitalist production process.

When the rich shipowner's daughter, Mildred Douglas, goes curiously down into the engine room, the plot twists and turns. She recoils in horror and slurs "filthy beast" at the sight of Yank covered in coal dust and working exhausting physical labor (O'Neill, 1988, p. 163). For Yank, this brief encounter changes everything about who he is and how he fits into the world. He now knows, for the first time, that no one pays attention to him or appreciates his work, even though he generates the energy that supports the wealthy's extravagant lifestyle. On the contrary, individuals in positions of economic and wealthiest power consider him to be beneath them. Mildred's response is a metaphor for the capitalist system's inflexible social hierarchy, which values workers solely for their labor and denies them social equality and dignity. This event marks the birth of class awareness, according to Marxist theory. According to Marx, workers first go through a state of false consciousness in which they accept capitalist ideology as inevitable and think their interests align with those of the ruling class. A consciousness of class oppression, however, can be aroused by witnessing exploitation and injustice. This difficult change is mirrored in Yank's increasing discontent following his meeting with Mildred. He starts to doubt his role in society and searches for a place to belong in a desperate manner. But, Yank's awakening is still deeply fragmented and unfinished, unlike Marx's revolutionary class consciousness. In the end, he finds himself trapped in despair instead of emancipation because he can't channel his anger into a societal consciousness about politics.

Yank becomes more and more isolated as the play goes by following him as he visits various social spaces. On Fifth Avenue, he challenges the trendy bourgeoisie, demanding that they be acknowledged for the hard work that allows them to live their privileged lives. On the contrary, he faces contempt, mockery, and ultimately a police arrest. His incarceration serves to solidify his estrangement from the general public. After that, Yank goes to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) for support, thinking that they speak for all workers. Surprisingly, not even the labor movement supports him, thinking he can't make a difference in the organized political struggle. The tragic protagonist in O'Neill's work is thus an outsider to both the capitalist elite and the organized working class. His total withdrawal from society exemplifies the terrible mental toll that capitalist alienation can take. To make sense of Yank's tragic fall, Marx's theory of alienation is a useful framework. In his 1844 work *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Karl Marx details four ways in which workers feel alienated from capitalism. First, when employees do not have legal title to or say over the final goods, they develop a sense of



disconnection from their labor. Yank doesn't get a cut of the profits made by the luxury liner he helps power across the Atlantic. In addition, when tasks are monotonous, mechanical, and dictated from above, employees lose interest in and connection to the work itself. Working as a mechanical part of an industrial machine rather than an artist or individual makes Yank feel like nothing more than a cog in the wheel. Third, workers experience social alienation as a result of capitalist competition, which breaks down social bonds and further divides people based on class. As the play progresses, Yank keeps running into the same problems: he can't connect with the bourgeoisie or the working class groups he meets. Last but not least, employees stop connecting with their full human potential and stop developing into fully realized people. This last and most severe kind of alienation is shown by Yank's progressive disillusionment with himself and his life's purpose. The play's symbolic ending heavily emphasizes these Marxist themes. Last but not least, Yank goes to the zoo to try to find a symbol of his real social status—a gorilla. His quest for belonging comes to a tragic end when, instead of finding companionship, he is murdered by the gorilla. Industrial capitalism dehumanizes workers by treating them like a primitive object valued solely for their physical strength, and the gorilla is a symbol of this trend. Because of this economic system's emphasis on labor while disregarding the humanity of the worker, Yank's death represents more than just an individual's failure; it also represents the collapse of human identity. "The tragedy of the worker who cannot find a place in a world built on his own labour" (Bloom, 2007, p. 44) is what Harold Bloom calls Yank.

To illustrate the capitalist social order, O'Neill also makes use of spatial symbolism. In stark contrast to the airy, opulent upper decks inhabited by the well-to-do, the stokers toil away in the dank, oppressive furnace room below deck. The bourgeoisie are shown in the highest physical and social position, while the proletariat are confined beneath them in this vertical arrangement, which symbolizes social stratification. Because of their underground location, the workers are essentially invisible to capitalist society, even though they are vital to economic production. Their existence goes unnoticed by the public, even though their labor ensures the comfort of the privileged class. The use of expressionist techniques in theater bolsters O'Neill's criticism of modern capitalism. Like a prison, the cramped engine room symbolizes the shackling nature of industrial labor. Capitalism turns people into tools of the industrial revolution, as seen in the stokers' synchronized, robotic speech patterns that echo the rhythms of machines. By depicting employees as ensnared in systems that limit their autonomy and uniqueness, these Expressionist devices reveal the degrading impacts of contemporary industrial society, argues Berlin (1982, p. 76).

The Hairy Ape becomes much more than just one person's psychological tragedy when seen through the prism of Marxist literary criticism. It delves deeply into issues of economic exploitation, class oppression, alienation, and capitalism's inability to acknowledge workers' humanity. The industrial working class, whose labor supports capitalism progress but also causes social exclusion, psychological fragmentation, and existential despair—a crisis that Yank's personal collapse represents. Thus, O'Neill shows that the struggle between capital and labor is fundamental to modern human experience by turning personal tragedy into a potent social critique.

#### 4. Economic Determinism and Gender in Anna Christie

The assertion advanced by Marxists that gender roles, sexual exploitation, and class position are all determined by economic conditions is ably demonstrated in O'Neill's Anna Christie (1921). Because she is a poor, uneducated, and unsupported woman, Anna Christie has no choice but to turn to prostitution as her only means of subsistence. Engels argued in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) that women's oppression stems from an economic factor: without the means of production, women are forced to sell their bodies as a commodity (Engels, 2004, p. 83). Her situation exemplifies this point.

As a barge captain, Chris Christopherson is one of Anna's dads. He's a working poor guy fighting for survival in this industrial economy that has rendered his skills practically useless.



He is a man molded by economic instability, not a villain. He has no moral obligation to support Anna; rather, he is a victim of a system that does not guarantee its employees a job. By showing how economic exploitation leaves lasting marks on people's lives, O'Neill avoids offering easy redemption or condemnation when Anna finally tells him and Mat Burke the truth about her past.

The play's setting, the sea, doubles as a metaphor for the economic and environmental indifference that rules the lives of the working class. In the same way that capitalism forces employees into jobs they did not want, O'Neill uses the sea as "a materialist symbol of determinism" (p.117), according to Timo Tiusanen (1968). Even when people make peace with one another, economic systems limit women's agency; the play's final scene purposefully leaves this question unanswered, with the men agreeing to Anna's future and she sitting silent.

## **5. Capital, Miserliness, and the Destruction of the Family in Long Day's Journey into Night**

Long Day's Journey into Night delves into the domestic ramifications of capitalism, in contrast to *The Hairy Ape* and *Anna Christie*, which depict industrial labor exploitation and gender oppression, respectively. The play shows how capitalist ideology impacts not just economic institutions and workplaces but also family relationships, emotional health, and personal identity; it was written between 1941 and 1942 and published posthumously in 1956. The tragic Tyrone family history shows how love, trust, and human values are supplanted by the need to accumulate and protect wealth, as shown by Eugene O'Neill. Using a Marxist lens, the play reveals how family members succumb to economic anxiety, insecurity, and emotional estrangement as a result of internalizing capitalist values.

The protagonist, James Tyrone, is a famous actor whose story exemplifies a fundamental paradox of capitalism. Tyrone, who was born into extreme poverty, battled mightily to establish a stable financial future for himself through his career in theater. But instead of letting his success fuel his pursuit of creative greatness and personal fulfillment, he becomes fixated on safeguarding his fortune. At the height of his acting career, Tyrone had the chance to showcase his extraordinary artistic talent and take on demanding dramatic parts that would have solidified his place in American theater history. Nevertheless, he forwent pursuing his artistic ambitions in order to secure financial stability by performing the same commercially successful play multiple times. The decision is portrayed by O'Neill as more than just a professional compromise; it is also evidence of how capitalist ideology prioritizes profit over creativity. Affluence supersedes cultural and personal development, and financial stability trumps creative accomplishment. Marxist critique sees this change as a manifestation of commodity fetishism, in which the pursuit of material gain comes to dominate all facets of human existence. Tyrone's preoccupation with economizing influences his actions in all aspects of his life, not just his work decisions. He has internalized capitalist values to such an extent that he is reluctant to spend money on household necessities, is always worried about cutting costs, and is extremely frugal. The author paints a picture of his actions not as a result of a flawed character but as the mental toll of living in constant fear of financial ruin. Tyrone may have escaped material poverty, but he is still emotionally bound by it. Because capitalist ideology constantly reinforces fear of future financial loss, his wealth does not offer true security. So, instead of using wealth to better one's family life, it becomes a goal in and of itself. The tragic tale of Mary Tyrone exemplifies the most disastrous outcome of Tyrone's economic mindset. Instead of seeking professional medical care after the birth of their younger son Edmund, James chooses to hire a cheap and inexperienced doctor. A lifelong addiction begins for Mary when her doctor writes an irresponsible prescription for morphine (O'Neill, 1989, p. 87). This episode shows, from a Marxist point of view, how choices made in the economy to save money cause actual human suffering. As a result of capitalist priorities that value profit over human welfare and cost above care, Mary's addiction is more than just a mental illness. So, even the most personal kinds of suffering can have their roots in larger economic systems, as O'Neill shows.



Mary's addiction represents more than just one kind of estrangement. She uses morphine to regress to her youth in order to cope with her feelings of emotional neglect, loneliness, and disappointment. She loses touch with reality, her loved ones, and herself as a result of her drug addiction. Marx defined alienation as the way in which oppressive social conditions cause individuals to become estranged from their true human nature. Patriarchal family dynamics and material insecurity cause a similar state of estrangement, which Mary experiences emotionally even though she does not engage in industrial labor directly. Her downfall is a tragic example of how capitalist ideology affects people's lives, not just those who work for a living but also their families and friends.

Jamie and Edmund Tyrone, who are the offspring of James Tyrone, carry on his economic ideology. Rather than the liberating kind of wealth, both of them inherited a crippling fear of failing and an air of insecurity. Despite his brilliance and natural ability, Jamie succumbs to alcoholism and lives aimlessly, never settling into a career. As he faces his illness, uncertainty, and emotional instability, Edmund, a sensitive and ambitious poet afflicted with tuberculosis, fights to forge a meaningful identity. According to Marxist theory, neither of the boys is able to reach his full intellectual and creative potential because he is estranged from society. They don't get independence or self-assurance, but rather worry, suppressed emotions, and mistrust. As long as the family's guiding principles are based on terror rather than human fulfillment, no amount of money can ensure their mental well-being. Paradoxically, James Tyrone personifies the American Dream in its capitalist form. Despite his dogged persistence and successful financial career, he remains unfulfilled in his creative pursuits and struggles to maintain harmony within his family. Rather, achieving financial success can lead to feelings of loneliness, distrust, and emotional deprivation. Michael Manheim (1982, p.98) notes that James Tyrone "embodies the contradiction of a man who has achieved the American Dream and found it hollow." Marx argues in his life that capitalist accumulation turns social interactions into economic calculations and distances individuals from real human relationships. Even after achieving material success, capitalist ideology can still shape consciousness, as Tyrone's inability to escape poverty shows.

Long Day's Journey into Night is set in a domestic environment, which adds credence to O'Neill's criticism of capitalism. The Tyrone family looks to be living comfortably and economically secure, in contrast to the working class neighborhoods, ships, and factories shown in many socially conscious plays. But behind this facade is a family that is emotionally isolated, filled with distrust, resentment, addiction, and guilt. The house takes on symbolic significance as a place where capitalist principles subtly control interpersonal dynamics. It is clear that material concerns have taken the place of emotional communication because conversations keep coming back to money, property, previous financial sacrifices, and economic worries. Thus, O'Neill proves that the family is not the only arena in which capitalism operates; it also influences economic institutions.

The struggle between utility and monetary worth is another key Marxist element of the play. In an ideal world, human relationships would be valued for what they are emotionally, but the Tyrone family consistently measures them by how much money they make. Financial considerations, not human need, consistently impact decisions about healthcare, housing, transportation, education, and daily living. Marx criticized capitalism for reducing human values to market values, and this trend of turning personal relationships into economic transactions is a reflection of that critique. Thus, O'Neill's tragedy reveals a larger societal condition where economic rationality reigns supreme over moral responsibility, going beyond the scope of a single dysfunctional family.

Both the material poverty and the psychological fallout of pursuing wealth immorally are the means by which Long Day's Journey into Night proves that capitalism annihilates families. Artistic ambition, marital trust, parental responsibility, and emotional intimacy are all eroded by James Tyrone's fixation on financial security. The hardships that Mary, Jamie, and Edmund endure are the result of a systemic ideological bias that prioritizes economic survival over



empathy and compassion. O'Neill provides a scathing Marxist critique of capitalist society through the Tyrone family's slow collapse, arguing that relationships naturally suffer when money is the main indicator of success. By doing so, the play shows how economic ideology can subtly shape—and eventually destroy—the most intimate aspects of human life, turning a private family tragedy into a larger critique on the social and emotional costs of capitalism.

## 6. The Critique of the American Dream

Long Day's Journey into Night, The Hairy Ape, and Anna Christie are all interconnected by Eugene O'Neill's enduring criticism of the American Dream. Everyone, no matter their family's socioeconomic status, can rise through the ranks of society by their own efforts and perseverance; this is the classic definition of the American Dream. This value has been held in high esteem for a long time as a fundamental principle of American culture. Marxists, on the other hand, see the American Dream more as a capitalist inequality-legitimizing ideological construct than as a universal opportunity. It pushes people to view their own successes and failures as entirely subjective, rather than systemic, obstacles. By drawing attention away from the underlying economic factors that contribute to inequality, Marxist thinkers contend, such ideology benefits the ruling class. According to Ralph Miliband (1969, p. 162), capitalist ideology encourages people to place the blame on themselves rather than on the systemic social and economic factors that contribute to poverty and unemployment. Accordingly, people persist in thinking that, despite the pervasiveness of class barriers within the capitalist social structure, they can overcome them through sheer force of will. This view makes pre-existing class relations more stable while undermining collective resistance.

Eugene O'Neill persistently casts doubt on this hopeful storyline by having his characters experience firsthand the futility of trying to change the world through their own actions alone. It is clear from his dramatic works that one's social status, economic standing, and other external factors limit one's opportunities for success, rather than one's own willpower alone. Even though his heroes fight valiantly against oppression, the social systems that control their lives seldom change, so their struggles seldom lead to freedom. In these heartbreaking stories, O'Neill shows how the American Dream falls short in a capitalist society. At first, Yank thinks he is indispensable to modern society in *The Hairy Ape* because of his brute strength and productive labor. He believes his commitment will ensure his respect and acceptance from society, and he identifies entirely with his work. But this delusion is shattered when he meets Mildred Douglas. Despite being the source of energy for the affluent's lavish lifestyles, Yank finds himself treated like a disposable worker. Death, estrangement, and rejection characterize his subsequent quest for self-discovery. That is why O'Neill proves that hard work isn't enough to break down social barriers. Even though they are the ones who generate wealth, workers do not enjoy any of the benefits that come with it.

In a similar vein, *Anna Christie* shows how, despite one's resilience, economic circumstances determine one's fate. Anna, who has been socially and economically marginalized for many years, tries to start over. Her opportunities are severely limited by poverty, limited education, and patriarchal social structures, despite her emotional strength and determination. Capitalist society often denies people born into disadvantaged economic circumstances genuine freedom, as her experience shows. Hard effort and moral principles alone, according to O'Neill, won't be enough to fix the systemic effects of gender inequality and classism. Consequently, the disparity in opportunity that underlies the claims of equal opportunity is brought to light by Anna's struggle.

Another major critique of the American Dream is offered in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. It seems like James Tyrone is standing in for its fruitful completion. He reaches the level of economic success typically associated with Americans, having risen from abject poverty. Still, he isn't happy, emotionally secure, or fulfilled by his wealth. His artistic aspirations, marriage, and family's emotional stability are all shattered by his obsession with preserving his fortune. Consequently, O'Neill shows how achieving material success in capitalism can lead to isolation



and misery. Acquiring wealth does not always free people from the mental tolls of poverty or the inconsistencies of capitalist ideology.

When taken as a whole, these three plays debunk the idea that personal initiative is the sole determinant of one's social standing. Although they are at different levels of the social hierarchy, James Tyrone, Yank, and Anna all feel the effects of the economic downturn. The inconsistencies in the system are shown by their failures, which are more than just individual tragedies. According to O'Neill, who takes a Marxist stance, the opportunities available to workers, women, immigrants, and other oppressed groups are severely limited in a capitalist society, while the powerful are able to amass privilege. No amount of personal resolve can eradicate the systemic inequality that permeates our economy. A further reflection of Marx's ideology is the hope that is repeatedly dashed throughout O'Neill's play. Capitalism hides the institutional mechanisms that perpetuate class divisions while simultaneously encouraging individuals to believe that success is solely dependent upon personal responsibility. As long as employees continue to blame themselves for their problems instead of blaming structural inequality, the status quo will be hard to challenge. O'Neill's characters buy into this ideology time and time again, placing the blame on themselves for problems caused by economic factors that are largely outside their control. False consciousness persists within capitalist society, as shown by their inability to recognize the structural origins of their suffering. The mental and emotional tolls of chasing after financial success are another key component of O'Neill's critique. Capitalism, according to his plays, turns aspiration into anxiety, relationships into economic calculations, and social status into one's own identity, all at a profound human cost. Those on the economic margins face insecurity, estrangement, and social exclusion, while those on the wealthy side often give up empathy, originality, and authenticity in their emotional expression. Capitalist values reduce rather than increase human happiness in both cases. A society whose primary metric for success is monetary accumulation reveals its limitations when economic achievement is divorced from true happiness. A key theme in Eugene O'Neill's dramatic imagination, as pointed out by Travis Bogard (1972, p. 234), is "the price that capitalism exacts from the human spirit." His plays' dramatic structure and thematic content are both influenced by this worry. Surprising or abrupt events are seldom used by O'Neill to portray oppression. Capitalism, in his view, is more of a slow but steady destroyer of human relationships, mental stability, and individual ambitions. His drama is a reflection of the daily operation of capitalist ideology; it features confrontations within extended families, repetitive conflicts, realistic dialogue, and cyclical cycles of disappointment and hope. Instead of being a sudden and devastating event, oppression seems to be a never-ending cycle of mental and social breakdown.

In the end, it's not just the failure of specific characters that O'Neill uses to criticize the American Dream. His play challenges the very idea of a society that puts a premium on material achievement and disregards the systemic injustices that impact people's lives. O'Neill shows through the tragic stories of the Tyrone family, Yank, and Anna that despite the promises of opportunity and freedom, capitalist society often leads to inequality, emotional despair, and alienation. By contrasting the utopian promise of unrestricted opportunity with the harsh realities of social stratification, his plays serve as incisive literary critiques of the myths that uphold capitalist culture. From a Marxist point of view, O'Neill's dramatic universe shows that true human emancipation necessitates a radical shift in the economic and social systems that sustain inequality, rather than relying solely on individual initiative.

## 7. Conclusion

By applying Marxist analysis to Eugene O'Neill's plays, we can see a long-running attack on American capitalism. The economic systems he depicts in his tragedies define human awareness, erode human potential, and cause the misery that permeates them. These systems include the ownership of production means, the pressure to sell one's labor, and the accumulation of capital. Tragedies like Yank's estrangement, Anna's exploitation, and the Tyrone family's demise are inevitable results of a society that prioritizes economic and social



stratification. The plays written by O'Neill do not provide revolutionary agendas, and he was not a Marxist in any formal sense either. Raymond Williams (1977) points out that literature can do ideological work even if it isn't politically programmatic. O'Neill's drama was a significant critical intervention in twentieth-century American ideology because it exposed the capitalist structures, gave voice to the working class's suffering, and rejected the American Dream's consolations.

Rather than reducing O'Neill's art to economics, this paper argues that a Marxist reading of his works enriches it. It offers a new perspective on the inseparability of individual suffering and societal structure, as well as on the intertwining of the private and political in American theater.

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