







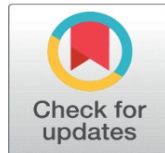
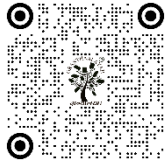
THE EFFECT OF ATMOSPHERIC SETTINGS: VISUAL STRUGGLES IN THE PLAYS BEYOND THE HORIZON AND ANNA CHRISTIE

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the relationship between the visualized struggles endured by characters in Eugene O'Neill's plays and the natural and manmade settings of the Plays. Imtiaz Ali brought to light his writing process in a podcast, unabashedly proclaiming that his popular scenes arise simply from an image or impression of a feeling. [Shahryar \(2026\)](#). Eugene O'Neill's plays are a depiction of the tragedy that ensues from the physical and psychological sufferings endured by the characters. In plays like Anna Christie and Beyond the Horizon, the geography of the inhabitants plays an integral role in shaping their lives. On the one hand, Christopherson is shown to display a habit of blaming the sea for everything that has made his life miserable; on the other hand, Robert Mayo suffers from an inevitable end after having chosen a farm life that goes beyond his natural disposition, which eventually becomes the cause of his failure in life. Eugene O'Neill's work has been well established in the drama of topographical representation, articulating the valuation of spaces in dramatic arts. The current study examines the visual representation of the inner and outer experiences of the characters on stage in Eugene O'Neill's plays Beyond the Horizon and Anna Christie. The study uncovers how ecological and spatial structures shape the psychological condition of the characters depicted in the plays Beyond the Horizon and Anna Christie. A close textual analysis has been performed to understand the impact of atmospheric settings on the spectacle of the plays.

Keywords: Tragedy, Spectacle, Visual Representation, Atmospheric Setting, Anna Christie, Beyond the Horizon

1. INTRODUCTION

Eugene O'Neill's technique evokes the essence and rhythm of music while moving away from the traditional way of narrating events in life [Moleski \(1981\)](#). His visualization of the relationship between the setting, atmosphere, and human behavior through spaces has been admired worldwide. A close resemblance of his characters and settings with cinematic representation is not a mere coincidence, but is attributed to his deep-rooted interest in film as a medium to express the subtleties of the human condition. In recent scholarship, it has become significant to discern the environmental impact on individuals and its visual representation in society. The 20th century has witnessed extreme conditions that can be

imagined or endured on the planet. The drama and theatricality of the era highlighted the suffering and atrocities represented on the stage or screen to inform future generation spectators of the repercussions of subtle ignorance towards increasing violence and horror against humanity. Eugene O'Neill is one such dramatist who ensured a candid and realistic depiction of the inner experiences of people he had encountered directly or indirectly. The genius of the playwright lies in his appreciation and criticism for liquefying occurrences into emotions. O'Neill's theatre serves as a medium that presents an ontology of places and people while exposing an estrangement between them. [Gomel \(2014\)](#) points out that the "mimetic space" employed in narratives of the realist tradition depicts spaces that are associated with ambiguity in postmodern literature. Gomel goes on to highlight that literature and new media of the modern age remain keen on representing and exploring narratives of spaces. The atmospheric settings are depicted in a way to signify the characters' physical and psychological temperaments. Researchers have studied how the representation of uncanny spaces, such as abandoned palaces, gothic estates, gloomy workhouses, provincial towns, claustrophobic houses, barrooms, and taverns, invokes strangeness and unsettling feelings in viewers. The dramatic approaches in exhibiting the natural environment of the characters on the stage gained prominence in the early Modern era with the advent of cinema. The current study examines the visual representation of the inner and outer experiences of the characters on stage in Eugene O'Neill's plays *Beyond the Horizon* and *Anna Christie*.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Researchers have explored various databases, including SAGE Journals, JSTOR, Science Direct, and Internet Archive, to perform the current research. The visual impact of the drama is not just the result of the linguistic capabilities of the playwright, but his ability to transform a structured space of theatre, with the help of sound and light effects, into a location or place loaded with meanings. The study uncovers how ecological and spatial structures shaping the psychological condition of the characters are depicted in the plays *Beyond the Horizon* and *Anna Christie*. A close textual analysis has been performed to understand the impact of atmospheric settings on the spectacle of the plays. Major critics like Susan Sontag have indulged in uncovering the impact of images on the spectators, as representative arts have the ability to reflect our reality and also shape it. Furthermore, [Sontag \(1977\)](#) has argued that images are associated with the stress of processing the suffering or pain repeatedly. She establishes the power of visual representation to empower the spectators in deciding their own personalized meaning, as opposed to the present digital culture. Sontag essentializes that material reality often foreshadows imagination that navigates the figurative terrain. The works of Beckett exemplify the need to understand the intensified relationship between the environment and the mental state of being, while his minimalistic stage design tells a different story of its own. Thus, the present study will help uncover new ways of understanding nature and its relationship with individuals.

The expressionist plays of the early 20th-century drama depicted the urban cityscape in tandem with the decaying aspect of nature. Expressionism, which developed in the 20th century, is also known for incorporating dramatic techniques such as symbolism, contrast, and autobiographical elements in depicting brutal human conditions. Eugene O'Neill has employed all the aspects of expressionism to characterize the incidents of the individuals he met in his life. *Beyond the Horizon* and *Anna Christie* are two such plays that anticipate lived human experiences as an integral part of their ecological existence while preserving the natural enchantment behind [Sarkar and Sarkar \(2023\)](#) the 'slice of life'. The chase scene in *Emperor Jones*, an overemphasized aspect of the play, brings out the essence of the ultimate relationship between spectacle, atmosphere, and the psychology of a character in theatre and cinema.

3. DISCUSSION

The characters populating O'Neill's Sea Plays are neither presented in-between nor on the boundaries, but in an ever-expanding space like a sea, farm or hill "Oh, those cursed hills out there that I used to think promised me so much! How I've grown to hate the sight of them! They're like the walls of a narrow prison yard shutting me in from all the freedom and wonder of life! [O'Neill \(1921\)](#), Act 2 pg 72). The sea has often been echoed as a haunting presence in the lives of its inhabitants "And Anna, dis ain't real sailor Job. Dis ain't real boat on sea. She's just ole tub--like piece of land with house on it that float. Job on her ain't sea job. No. Ay don't gat job on sea, Anna, if Ay die first. Ay swear that's when your mother die." [O'Neill \(1922\)](#), Act 1, 14). The elements of sea and landscape in both plays are utilized to induce a spectacle that transforms visual sensation into diverse reactions on viewing stimulating images [Jeon et al. \(2009\)](#). Apart from the visual force, the settings have been transformed into transcendental entities- the symbolic representation of

the classical equivalent of fate. Marina has studied *The Lady from the Sea* and *Anna Christie* to ascertain that the sea, represented as a transcendental substitute in modern tragedies, possessed metaphysical capabilities to bind individuals into its own natural order. [Marina \(2016\)](#). The study has illustrated the traumatic suffering of Chris Christopherson,

the sea is 'dat ole davil', a symbol of uncertainty and an unknown future, a menacing force which has swallowed up countless members of his family, and from which he endeavours to protect his daughter, but is also a force from which he cannot escape; he is pulled back to the sea almost against his will, and has a great affection and passion for the ocean, while simultaneously blaming it for all his past misfortunes [Marina \(2016\)](#)

The symbols of permanence and temporality are reappropriated in both the plays *Beyond the Horizon* and *Anna Christie*. Chris remains in a physical and psychological dilemma reflected in his insecurity about his daughter "Ay don't want for you know dem sailor fellas. They're all no good for marry gal" [O'Neill \(1922\)](#), Act III, 30), his constant use of "Py golly!" "Skoal!" "Hell!" loosens the tension between his relationship with his daughter and the sea.

The vulnerability of the individuals is depicted through the worsening condition of their living situation. The fear and anxiety of Chris and Robert are depicted through the narratorial commentaries. The view of the ship, as described at the beginning of Act II, "Dense fog shrouds the barge on all sides, and she floats motionless on a calm. A lantern set up on an immense coil of thick hawser sheds a dull, filtering light on objects near it. In the rear is the cabin, its misty windows glowing wanly with the light of a lamp inside." [O'Neill \(1922\)](#), Act II, 16), resembles Chris's dread towards Anna's willingness to live on the sea. Therefore, a visual spectacle of constant threat and uncertainty lurking in the atmosphere is presented by Eugene O'Neill's great works. He goes on to portray Robert's deteriorating health by shifting viewers' attention towards the deterioration of the Mayo household,

The room, seen by the light of the shadeless oil lamp with a smoky chimney which stands on the table, presents an appearance of decay, of dissolution. The curtains at the windows are torn and dirty and one of them is missing. The closed desk is gray with accumulated dust as if it had not been used in years. Blotches of dampness disfigure the wallpaper. [O'Neill \(1921\)](#), Act III, 97)

Furthermore, a description of Robert's appearance, showing disheveled hair and the coloring of his cheeks due to high fever, informs the spectators of his weak health.

An enchanting pull towards the sea can be felt by the viewers through a depiction of characters' economic and imaginative need to survive in a coercive society. Christopherson and Edmund are shown to detest the instability and violence of the sea towards its inhabitants,

Hard work all time. It's rotten, they're all fool fellas, them fellas in our family. They all work rotten job on sea for nothing, don't care about anything but just gat big payday in pocket, get drunk, get robbed, ship away again on another voyage. They don't come home. They don't do anything like good man do. And that old devil, sea, sooner, later she swallow dem up, while on the other hand" [O'Neill \(1922\)](#), Act II, 18)

The above lines depict the economic vulnerability of sailors at sea. While Robert is portrayed in *Beyond the Horizon* as fascinated by the opportunities and knowledge available at sea, he never leaves Mayo farms and dies from the scarcity of imagination in his life. According to Robert, the allure of the sea can provide anyone with rich imagination, and thus, he is frustrated to read the dull and stale letters of his brother Andrew, "His letters read like the diary of a of a farmer!" [O'Neill \(1921\)](#), Act III, 72). The depiction shows that Andrew was more suited for the farm; as a result, Robert, offshore on Sunda, would have suffered less at sea. The management of the farm and its continued maintenance didn't require any imaginative indulgences or Robert's expertise, but rather monotonous and laborious work.

The fog is used in *Anna Christie* as a device to enhance the effect of drama. It has been referred more than twenty times in the play. It shows Chris's frustration "Fog, fog, fog, all bloody time. You can't see where you vas going, no." [O'Neill \(1922\)](#), Act IV, 50) and Anna's thrill "—like I'd been living a long, long time—out here in the fog, It all seems like I'd been here before lots of times—on boats --in this same fog" [O'Neill \(1922\)](#), Act II, 18) The noise of the horn at sea, "about nine o'clock of a foggy night two days later. The whistles of steamers in the harbor can be heard." [O'Neill \(1922\)](#), Act III, 39), found effective by O'Neill is further exemplified in his autobiographical play *Long Day's Journey into Night*. The reference to the window in *Beyond the Horizon* is continuously made to bring the idea of Robert's dream as he is found gazing out on the road that leads to the sea and freedom. To create a moment of surprise and enchantment, O'Neill uses the sound of knocking on the door with the news of the bursting machines and Ben's resignation. Robert remains shocked at Ben's reason for quitting his job "When I drive down with the milk in the mornin they all laughs and jokes at me- They

was laughin at me for workin for you, that's what!" O'Neill (1921), Act II, 70) and understands his own inability to manage the farm as a major reason.

Eugene O'Neill knew the importance of silence as a dramatic pause in play. Silence is denoted as a slow and decaying presence in *Beyond the Horizon*. It is represented through the character of Ruth, who finds it difficult to respond to Robert's indulgences of reading. She is shown staring at the stove silently "The two women remain silent for a time, staring dejectedly at the stove" O'Neill (1921), Act II, 107) and finally when she thinks Andrew would appreciate and provide her with a life of peace and happiness, she is left alone "But Ruth, if she is aware of his words, gives no sign. She remains silent, gazing at him dully with the sad humility of exhaustion, her mind already sinking back into that spent calm beyond the further troubling of any hope" O'Neill (1921), Act III, 128). The pessimism of Ruth's fate is replaced with Burke's enthusiastic turn towards life and the sea, "I'll be roaring it out like a fog horn over the sea!" O'Neill (1922), Act II, 25) "brought me safe through the storm and fog to the wan spot in the world where you was!" O'Neill (1922), Act II, 24). Fog horn, used as an element of annoyance in the later plays, serves as a source of strength and hope for Anna and the spectators. *Beyond the Horizon* was written before *Anna Christie*, but the latter was considered a comedy rather than a tragedy due to such visual significations. Anna's tragedy turns into a happy marriage while Ruth's desirability for the most powerful man ends in hatred and abandonment.

4. CONCLUSION

The visual representation of the settings plays a significant role in inducing specific emotions in the characters. *Anna Christie* and *Beyond the Horizon* entail the evolving personality of the playwright as he understood the psyche of different types of spectators. While the setting in *Beyond the Horizon* created a tension about the impending tragedy, the flirtatious relationship between Edmund Burk and Anna dissolved the rigidity by creating the illusion of a happy marriage between a sailor and a seaman's daughter. Anna and Robert's admiration ends in different fates on the stage. The playwright has used manmade and natural phenomena like fog, foghorn, windows, barges, bells, lamps, dusts to depict the vulnerability of the characters. The approaching tragedy of Robert or Chris Christopherson's anxiety towards Anna's choice to adopt a sea life is all rendered through the enhanced use of daily objects. O'Neill's uniqueness as a dramatist in representing the psyche and environment of the sailors and their life at sea reveals his excellence and abilities as a storyteller. He was successful in conveying the realism of tragic situations in plays like *Anna Christie* and *Beyond the Horizon*.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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