

# Modern Psycho-Aesthetic Discussion of O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*

Seyedeh Sara Foroozani, Bahee Hadaeagh

**Abstract---** *Tragedy in modern American drama is preoccupied with the study of creativity and loss, as the two prove strong solidarity in aesthetic discussions. Adorno recognizes certain unbalanced relationships between nature (modern society) and an individual as the ultimate source of suffering, central to an understanding of aesthetic expression. Whereas, art endeavors to transcend its inherent experience of suppression and pain through negating the reality of loss; Adorno's Truth Content associates itself with a non-discursive form of experience that refers to the transient nature of truth, compromising a self-reflexive, propositional and subjective nature, to which all aesthetic questions terminate. Correspondingly, in psychoanalytic debates, Jacques Lacan develops his theory based on unconscious operations and transient essence of meaning in different contexts. Lacan introduces the Imaginary Order, the Symbolic Order and the Real Order, as concerned with the haunting experiences of loss in unconscious and the concept of objet petit a, so as to ponder on the uninterpretable and unattainable existential domains. The Real Order resists the Imaginary and the Symbolic, claiming to have existed beyond language and prior to all, in a way that no media can embody the Real; it can only point to the Real. Since the Truth Content and the Real Order are attached to the experience of loss and repressed desires, Eugene O'Neill seems to utilize aesthetic negation to study a new form of autobiographical realism, interested in unmasking the multilayered reality. Accordingly, for the first time in the history of psycho-aesthetic studies, the present research aims to provide a fluid psychological analysis of Eugene O'Neill's heroin, originated from the Real Order so as to reveal the reason beyond her romantic negations and to ponder on the degree to which Lacanian Real Order contributes to Theodor Adorno's concept of Truth Content in modern drama.*

**Keywords---** *Aesthetic Negation, Eugene O'Neill, Strange Interlude, Theodor Adorno, Truth Content, Jacques Lacan, Real Order.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Modern tragedy in Eugene O'Neill's works ponders on "the problem of co-relation between loss and creativity, "pioneered by second-phase Shakespearian plays that "binds together grief, loss, and creativity" so as to "assuage our repressed infantile desires" (Karim and Riaz Butt 238-239). Kristeva examines "the ways in which loss mobilizes the afflicted towards creativity, lying in "either the acceptance or the denial of the underlying pain" (ibid, 240). However, this creative process; though depressively self-destructive, is not necessarily degenerating and subversive, as the work transcends its inherent pains to reach its intended beauty and supposedly objective reality, through modern aesthetic negations.

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Aesthetic negation in theory refers to the transient nature of truth, bringing the truth into false and establishing it in polarization to society. Rupert Clendon Lodge defines modern negation in relation to its traditional counterpart, as referring to the “[j]udgements of difference, absence, exclusion, etc., expressed in a propositional form which is negative (*A is not B*)” (82). Correspondingly, Theodor Adorno notes, “[a]rt acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of” proposing that “doubtless artworks became artworks only by negating their origin” (Adorno 3). Modern art possesses a self-reflective critical nature, justifying its “antithetic attitude to reality” (Czekaj 121). Negation’s dubious orientation toward the transient nature of reality, rationalizes its indeterminate fluid character.

Theodor Adorno’s magnum opus, the *Aesthetic Theory*; comprises a vast labyrinth in psychological, sociological and philosophical debates, concerned with human suffering—especially modern societies’ effects on human condition. Adorno specifies that oppression is created through politics, economics, culture, and materialism, but is maintained most significantly through unconscious. He notes “[s]uffering remains foreign to knowledge; though knowledge can subordinate it conceptually and provide means for its amelioration, knowledge can scarcely express it through its own means of experience without itself becoming irrational” (Adorno 18).

Influenced by modern philosophical theories of Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, Adorno insists on nature-individual relationships, arguing that there are certain unbalanced relationships between nature (modern society) and an individual, which are the source of suffering in individuals. He, further, notes that all forms of artistic expressions either contribute to a form of knowledge and consciousness about human suffering as a result of an unbalanced relationship, or it may lead to applying changes in order to minimize an individual's suffering. In this sense, Adorno views suffering as a bipolar experience of negative and positive expression, central to an understanding of aesthetic expression. Nathan Ross also cites “[a]ll aesthetic questions terminate in those of the truth content of the works: [it] is the spirit that a specific work objectively bears in its form true” (2015 269), though the two do not necessarily overlap.

The *Truth Content* associates itself “with a form of experience that is non-discursive, riddle-laden and reticent to communication, it places his aesthetics in tension with later strands of critical theory that depart from the ideal of communicative rationality” (Adorno 88), parallel to aesthetic negation. Accordingly, Adorno refers to *Truth Content* as dealing with both physical and spiritual dimensions of art; meaning that it resides both in its objective stylistic form and its subjective thematic content. These subjective and objective domains coexist within each other and this duality helps the audience decide what the truth is and what is not. Concluding that the “form of an artwork can best be understood as ‘true’ in relation to other forms of thought and feelings that exist in society. The “artwork is true to the extent that it takes up by way of mimesis what is false in society and so renders consciousness capable of transforming or escaping the spell of false consciousness” (Ross, 2017 194).

Loss and fragmentation centralize Lacan’s model of human psyche. In textual analysis, Lacan searches for the most remotely unreachable zone in human unconscious, recognized as the *Real Order* holding that the “constitution of art's sphere corresponds to the constitution of an inward space of men as the space of their representation” (Adorno 8). Lacan’s attention to “extraordinarily intense personal experiences and his extraordinarily acute sympathy with the emotional problems of all people contributed more to his tragic psychology than did Freudian theory” (Fathima 2). The inclusion of the *objet petit a* in *Real Order* “deal[s] affirmatively with the negativity of experience . . . held to be nothing more than the mark of that process of repression that obviously goes into the artwork” (Adorno 8). Lacan identifies *objet petit a* as interdependent to the separate *Other*, asserting that the two haunt the unconscious persistently, acknowledging the preliminary experience of absence and loss as the mighty operative agent in creation and development of subjective unconscious.

Fascinated by psychoanalytic practice of autobiography in drama, O'Neill showed great interest in unmasking the character's psyche, holding that the self is "structured like an onion. Mask after mask might be removed, but underneath would lie only another mask and, ultimately: nothing, horror vacui" (Carpenter 58). He ponders on "neurasthenic, self-tormented and rather repellent type[s] . . . lost in the waste of their own barren passions, drowning in misery and despair" (Dorothy 56). O'Neill characterizes bipolar worlds: "one, the external world of physical reality, the other, a world of malcontents and concupiscent ambitions" (Fathima 5). Relating *Truth Content* to the *Real Order*, O'Neill seeks refuge in dramatic disillusionment of artwork's disguised engagement with the experience of loss and repressed desires, brought about by social institutions.

Correspondingly, Robert Hullot-Kentor specifies Theodor Adorno's psychoanalytical viewpoint toward art and literature. Adorno further eulogizes an inherent philosophical argument in form and content during his study on the *Aesthetics*; developing a theoretical framework on basis of *Truth Content* discovery within an artwork. Following this, Alan McPherson ponders on existential characteristic of the *Truth Content* for Adorno, noting that negative dialectic is an aesthetic approach for achieving the Truth Content in critical negotiations. Concerning this, Thijs Lijster suggests that works of art must be viewed as the conservators and guardians of the *Truth Content*; providing a work of art with critical power, to complete its sociopolitical mission.

Subsequently, Fumi Okiji engages himself with the study of loss and the inadequacies of life and the ways of comprehending such deficiencies in arts. He refers to the critical potentiality of art and the destructive and controlling nature of the modern world, while seeking to denominate art as the new model for American sociality which disregards social and racial discriminations. Okiji holds that art can provide the desirable setting for the application of id-ego dichotomy, noting that the analysis of subconscious experience of suffering reflects the quality and functionality of aesthetic art with regard to its organic bipolarity of id as the instinctive side of humanity and ego as the *Real* side of the self. Camilla Flodin advances Okiji's discussion, citing that *Truth Content* is linked to the experience and the expression of non-human suffering; specifically the animal suffering, proposing that in order for a piece of art to be recognized as an aesthetic authentic art, it must grant voices, not only to repressed individuals, but also to repressed non-human nature and suffering animals.

Consequently, as for the *Aesthetic Theory*'s vast interdisciplinary scope of study and its scarcity of application in modern dramatic fields, the current research remarkably seeks to prove significant manifestations of aesthetic negation in Eugenie O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*, while providing a perspective on its comparative discussion favoring Adorno's concept of *Modern Negation* applied on *Truth Content* hybrid with psychoanalytic *Real Order*. As Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is essentially concerned with musical negotiations, very few studies have been done on its application in other fields of art, yet not a single research has been done on literary dimensions of Adorno's aesthetic theory up to the present moment. Two pioneering theoreticians, accompanied by a leading American dramatist have been brought together for the first time through the framework of modern drama. Accordingly, the current study enjoys a great deal of novelty due to its comparative approach (aesthetic theory, literature and psychology) and its illuminating viewpoint toward critical art and literary discussions.

## II. PSYCHO-AESTHETIC DISCUSSION OF STRANGE INTERLUDE

Eugenie O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* is a modern "mental theatre" (Pizzato 5). The play investigates dramatic operations of *Truth Content* and *Real Order*, as both are preoccupied with author's psychological suffering, and the role of loss in his aesthetic creations. O'Neill masterfully ponders on the organic solidarity between the unattainability of the lost in

Lacanian *Real Order* and the resistance in Adorno's *Truth Content*, exposed through the protagonist's aesthetic negations, knowing that "[g]reat artworks are unable to lie, [e]ven when their content is semblance" (Adorno 130).

Best known for its extensive experimental touches of soliloquies and stream of consciousness, *Strange Interlude* rehearsed as a controversially innovative play. O'Neill's choice of young adult female heroin and confronting her with socially controversial subjects such as child abortion right and the issue of adultery, which weren't open to negotiation at the time of the play, attracted critical attentions, as the *Truth Content* "is not external to history but rather its crystallization in the works" (Adorno 133).

*Strange Interlude* characterizes personal life of a woman typical of the early twentieth century, dealing with her metamorphosis to adulthood through "[t]he progressive self-unfolding truth of the artwork" (Adorno 130). She struggles to recognize her psychological orientations and sexual desires, while she's maturing. Simply put, the play is the life story of many other miniature lives, joined together under Nina Leeds' story of romantic negations.

O'Neill's presentation of two-dimensional perspective to the bipolar world of story brought him huge success. The heroin's application of interior monologues and stream of consciousness, as her major narrative technique, revealed her deepest layers of thought to the audience, whereas the characters' actions show strong contradiction to their interior monologues, since "[e]very act of making in art is a singular effort to say what the artifact itself is not and what it does not know" (Adorno 131).

In fact, O'Neill has intentionally written the interior monologues in lower space mode, so as to differentiate between the character's conscious and unconscious psyche, interpretatively crucial in "the readers' efforts in comprehending the text as well as the technique" (Karim and Riaz Butt 246). Critics believe that the interior monologues were not intended to read aloud in the play as they belonged to the silent subconscious or Lacan's unspeakable *Real Order*, contrary to Shakespearean asides which were crucial to the character's psychological analysis. Twice affected and deceived by the patriarchal-made world of wars and paternal jealousy, the young beautiful Nina Leeds, as she constantly switches to her loss concealed in *Real Order*, saying that "I dreamed of Gordon" (O'Neill 17,18).

She consciously manages to manipulate real lives of three male characters; her husband, her old admirer and her secret lover, each time negating one in favor of the Other – *Objet Petit a*. Best reflected in her dialogue "I have always loved your love [Charlie's] for me" (O'Neill 342), O'Neill reveals the heroin's manipulations as they are the latent Truth Content, concealed in her Real Order, through her interior monologues, as the "truth content of artworks, which is indeed their social truth, is predicated on their fetish character" (Adorno 227). O'Neill ponders on the Symbolic Order attempts at protecting socio-cultural ideologies and value system, while negating the disguised *Real*. Nina seems to be devoid of divine restrictions. She only seems to belong to her past unresolved complexes, as the Lacanian theory of Loss and fragmentation holds, while simultaneously O'Neill recognizes these existent complexities as the ultimate motivation behind her actions, the way she proves subordinate toward her *Real Order* commands, as her "truth content cannot be separated from the concept of humanity" (Adorno 241). Concerning this traumatic experience the heroin cites:

We should have imagined life as created in the birth-pain of God the Mother. Then we would understand why we, Her children, have inherited pain, for we would know that our life's rhythm beats from Her great heart, torn with the agony of love and birth. And we would feel that death meant reunion with Her. (O'Neill 76)

The play's negating "form springs from its truth content" (Adorno 189), situating Nina Leeds' irrational decisions in opposition to the three man's sheer rationality. Likewise, the heroin's unattainable love of Gordon, who is killed in the First World War as result of her father's jealousy, residing in Nina's *Real Order* is set in confrontation with three accessible romances, although "art's truth content transcends the knowledge of reality as what exists" (Adorno 258). Interestingly, Nina Leeds' manipulative actions in negating the three lovers seem convincing and comprehensible to the

audience as they open a view toward her psychological *Truth Content*, as Marsden quotes: “she has strange devious intuitions that tap the hidden currents of life . . . dark intermingling currents that become the one stream of desire” (O’Neill 230). Reflecting on the unattainability of her previous love;

[The] complete presentation of false consciousness . . . It is for this reason that works unfold not only through interpretation and critique but also through their rescue, which aims at the truth of false consciousness in the aesthetic appearance. (Adorno 130)

Following this, Nina seeks to aesthetically negate the loss of her love, by clinging to three other men, characterized as her husband, her lover and her genteel uncle and admirer, to satisfy herself, provided that none could emotionally or psychologically defeat her loss or complete her fragmented side, as beautifully noted:

My three men! . . . I feel their desires converge in me! . . . to form one complete beautiful male desire which I absorb . . . and am whole . . . they dissolve in me, their life is my life . . . I am pregnant with the three! . . . husband! . . . lover! . . . father! . . . and the fourth man! . . . little man! . . . little Gordon! . . . he is mine too! . . . that makes it perfect!” (O’Neill 231)

Seeking to negate her zeal for generative reproduction, she volunteered in attending army hospital to nurse soldiers, while secretly waiting for a compensation for her lost love, as reflected “I must give my health to help them to live on, and to live on myself . . . I must pay for my cowardly treachery to Gordon!” (O’Neill 35). To audiences’ surprise, Nina is presented with an author and a college friend of her deceased love, called Sam Evans after the death of her father in Act Two. Connecting with two men, Evan and Marsden, Ned Darrell, a doctor friend of Nina at hospital, convinced her to marry Evan as a remedy for her aesthetic romantic negation. During Act Three, the audience learns about Nina’s pregnancy and her shocking exposure to the issue of insanity running in Evan’s family as a heredity disease.

Convinced that she won’t have this baby due to heredity issues, while still obsessed with the idea of child and biologic reproduction, this time O’Neill’s heroin asks Ned Darrell to make her dream come true during Act Four. Finally in Act Five, Nina and Darrell’s child is born and named Gordon, as Nina’s aesthetic negation leads to the revelation of truth content, which is the need for compensating the loss of her loved ones. During Act Six, Marsden reports Darrell has left for Europe to be away from Nina’s love, while deeply suffering from jealousy over Nina’s feeling for Darrell. O’Neill’s heroin is accused of possessing three men at the same time; “the Nina I could never fathom . . . her three men! . . . and we are!” (O’Neill 230).

Act Seven occurs with eleven years gap in 1934. Gordon has grown up and has sensed Darrell and Nina’s secret love. However, in 1944 after another ten years interval in Act Eight, Gordon is presented with her fiancée Madeline Arnold to have gathered with Nina, Sam, Darrell and Marsden to watch him attend a boat racing match. The athletic Gordon is now presented as the incarnation of Nina’s lost love, the dead Gordon: “he is ended. There is only his end living—his death. It lives now to draw nearer me, to draw me nearer, to become my end!” (O’Neill 70-71). O’Neill reminds the audience the haunting memory of Gordon Shaw and the effects of his existential loss in Nina’s life even decades after his death, as a “reconciled reality and the restituted truth of the past could converge. What can still be experienced in the art of the past and is still attainable by interpretation is a directive toward this state” (Adorno 41).

Sam dies in Act Nine, oblivious of his child’s real biological identity, while Nina has aged and her passion now resident, turns toward Marsden as the securer of stability and sobriety in marriage, concluding that her juvenile experiences were the strange interlude in her life between childhood *jouissance* and middle age serenity, quoting “to be old and to be home again at last--to be in love with peace together--to love each other’s peace” (O’Neill 347). Accordingly, Adorno only confirms the truth content that is “commensurable to philosophical interpretation and coincides” (Adorno 130) through the “interpretable dimension of existence; . . . [without and beyond] the filters” (Habib 239).

### III. CONCLUSION

Truth Content is a form of self-reflexive awareness in modern *Aesthetics* that supplies an artistic expression with a form of knowledge and satisfactory degrees of self-consciousness, emanated from unbalanced relationship between an individual and the society. Contributing to modern tragedy; the current research considered human suffering as a bipolar experience, crucial to the understanding of aesthetic negation as applied through dramatic expressions of the *Truth Content*. Provided that Adorno's discussion of *Truth Content* proves close solidarity to Lacanian psychoanalytic *Real Order*, presentations of loss, fragmentation and suppressed desires, have been exchanged through aesthetic negation in Eugene O'Neill's masterpiece drama, *Strange Interlude*.

The truth embodies a transient nature. Foisting the truth into false, the aesthetic negation accredits an artwork as the antithesis and the critic of the society. Separating itself from representational techniques, the propositionally self-judgmental, subjective and indefinite nature of modern negation justifies Eugene O'Neill's unconscious obsession for autobiographical dramatization of his traumatic familial story in *Strange Interlude*, though the *Truth Content* incarnated through Lacanian *objet petit a*, and *The Real* remains skeptical and unattained.

The current research approaches an aesthetic experimental discussion of the most unattainably remote emotions and psychological complexities, never questioned before. Identifying with Lacan's psychoanalytic concept of *objet petit a*, heroin's experience of fragmentation, incompleteness and loss plays a crucial role as both psycho-aesthetic theories enjoy the same analytical criteria, which doesn't negate our suffering experience of loss, instead it stimulates the pain in order to organize and form the current experience. O'Neill masterfully clings to Nina's *Real Order*, putting her in constant touch with the things that are associated with her *objet petit a*. Though she persistently tries to negate her loss, the traumatic experiences of her father's death and later on her husband's stroke, catalyzes her sentimental desire for other men, accompanied by her youthfully strong sexual instinct. But, here and there, she loses the control, as the *Real Order* encompasses all, negating the previous Orders.

It is only at the end of the play that O'Neill's heroin-Nina, now in middle ages and fully matured, decides to choose the serenity of a marriage with Marsden over continuing the frustrated passionate affair with Darrell. This time she refers back to herself, as the mighty provider of happiness, realizing that one must primarily depend on herself in achieving emotional satisfaction and psychological happiness in life, when asking Marsden that "My having a son was a failure, wasn't it?" (O'Neill 345). Provided that her memories of youth weren't but a strange interlude between childhood vivacity and old age sobriety, O'Neill locates an interlude of now and the current moment between the memories of past and the future, as they contribute to *Truth Content* concealed in the *Real*.

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