

## **The Subaltern Speaks: A Feminist Reading of Eugene O’Neill’s “Sentimental Stuff”**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Eugene O’Neill has always attracted criticism for his biased portrayal of women characters in his plays. Women have been portrayed solely from the male point of view and O’Neill is not alone in this as this lopsided depiction of women is as old as patriarchy. O’Neill’s short poem “Sentimental Stuff, thus becomes an enigmatic expression of the traditional male and emancipated female voice in a typical courtship setting. The poem under consideration, unfolds like a well-crafted drama wherein we witness the frustration of a male poet when his beautifully written poetry fails to please his lady love. The male poet cannot think beyond the sensuous charms of his ladylove whereas the woman concerned wants to be appreciated for her wits rather than physical beauty. This paper places this contrast under the wider ambit of feminist criticism, where the male gaze is dissected using the concept of *ékphrasis* and the latent patriarchy in supposed romantic poems is exposed. The paper also deconstructs the poem to bring out various ways of objectification of women. Historically, men have always controlled the pen and therefore, portrayal of the sexes. Any effort by the ‘signified’ to break the stereotype is met with disapproval by the ‘signifier’. This poem by O’Neill brings to surface the vast gap between perception and reality and the refusal of the traditional mindset to accept it when it comes to male-female equation.

*Keywords:* Feminism, *ékphrasis*, objectification of women, patriarchy

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Eugene O’Neill has long been celebrated as one of the greatest dramatists that the USA has produced. His plays have always struck a chord with those at the margins of popular discourse. Breaking the shackles of popular melodrama, he brought the heroism inherent

in the ordinary men on surface and imbued them with nobility, vitality and grandeur. Amidst all the glorification of a Nobel Prize and multiple Pulitzer Prizes, there have been accusations of biased portrayal of women characters in his plays.

It is in this context that this paper seeks to present the poem "Sentimental Stuff" as a very interesting and intriguing read. Through this paper, an attempt is made to explore the way women have traditionally been objectified in poetry and the way Eugene O'Neill has tried to break the mould of conventionality and given voice to the women by actually placing the female at the subject position in contrast with the patriarchal system. This poem manages to convincingly break many stereotypes associated with Eugene O'Neill, the artist and the portrayal of women in literature - both at the same time.

The poem can be analysed as a dramatic monologue interjected with a very powerful voice of "femininity". The dramatis personae are a male poet and his beautiful muse. It consists of a total of nine passages of five lines each - the first five passages are deceptively simple, written in typical fashion of courtly love poems, extolling the physical charms of the lady who is apathetic to the ballads, sonnets and villanelles written in her praise. She does not succumb when the male poet pens beautifully worded and rhymed poetry, honouring her freckles and lips and nose. The turnaround comes in passage six, when out of sheer desperation, he writes something half-heartedly, appreciating her mental faculties and wit, and the lady falls

for it. The male poet is exasperated, he does not believe his own work, he does not agree with what he has written but it is accepted by the object of his love and writing. This is a unique situation - a triangle between the subject, the object and the work of art. In the first five passages, the male poet is the dominant one, objectifying the female through his poetry and by the end of it, the object takes control of her portrayal and turns the age-old patriarchal depiction of women on its head and has the last laugh.

## DISCUSSION

Let's have a look at the poem now:

I WROTE a sonnet to her eyes,  
In terms Swinburnian and erotic;  
Poured out the burden of my sighs  
With language lurid and exotic--  
She did not heed.

I wrote a ballad I deemed fair  
With sprithy play of silver rhyme  
To sing her glorious golden hair  
Aglow with sun in summer time--  
She did not hear.

I wrote a soulful villanelle  
About the wonder of her mouth,  
Lips like the crimson flowers that dwell  
In forests of the tropic south--  
She made no sign.

I wrote a musical rondeau  
To praise her roguish little nose,  
Dabbed at with powder, white as snow,  
Through which a freckle warmly  
glows--  
She would not see.

I wrote a solemn, stately ode,  
Lauding her matchless symmetry,  
I thought that this might be a road  
To open up her heart to me--  
She spoke no word.

Then in a feeble triolette,  
I told the keenness of her wit;  
A blush of anger o'er me crept  
I was so much ashamed of it  
--She fell for it--  
--And this is it--

"What matters it if you are fair?  
I love you for your wit,  
Your mental poise, your wisdom rare,  
What matters it if you are fair?  
Beauty is fleeting, light as air  
I'll nought to do with it,  
What matters it if you are fair?  
I love you for your wit."

She praised this assininity  
And scorned the good ones that I wrote,  
This bunch of femininity,  
On whom my fond affections dote--  
Has got my goat.

She put my real ones on the pan,  
And gave my puerile one a puff,  
And said, "I'll love you if you'll can  
That horrid sentimental stuff--  
I've had enough."

(Neill)

A classic war between the sexes - a desire by the man to measure women on the scale of beauty and an equally strong resistance by the woman and the counter effort to be measured on the scale of wit - this is the crux of this poem by Eugene O'Neill. The poem

opens itself up to multiple interpretations at various levels - from ekphrasis to male gaze to phallogocentric nature of language to feminism. Primarily, the premise is very simple - an effort by a male poet to win the favours of his lady love by writing verses appreciating her physical beauty. This is what men have been doing since ages - this is what they decided, is to be praised in a woman other than her purity, of course! No one has ever asked what the women want to be appreciated in them - do they feel delighted when they are treated as mere bodies without a functional brain or a single logical thought? Thus, for the male artist, the woman becomes an object to be painted - either with colours or with words - hence the charges of objectification of women.

The Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World defines ekphrasis as "an extended and detailed literary description of any object, real or imaginary". Thus, ekphrasis bridges the gap between the visual and the literary i.e. the image and the word or the signified and the signifier. According to WJT Mitchell in his Picture Theory, in feministic terms this binary opposition can be extended to the female image verses the male word. The female image is objectified and gazed, while the male author or artist is the subject and the gazer. (Uzundemir, 2014) O'Neill cheekily refers to Swinburne as if foretelling this very interpretation of his effort because being a prominent member of Pre- Raphaelite Brotherhood, creating sensuous, verging on the erotic, images of females, was the forte of AC Swinburne. The same objectification of female form is evident in the works of

male Romantic poets such as John Keats and P. B. Shelley. John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819), a poem that explicitly feminises the work of art, figuring it as "a still unravished bride", paradigmatically reflects the inherent tendency of ekphrasis to conceive aesthetic relations between poet and art object in terms of gender and sex role (Guimarães, 2012).

In "Sentimental Stuff", the male poet follows this age-old tradition of portraying women as objects very seriously. In the first five passages, the reader is subjected to the description of the loveliness of the parts of the object concerned. Not even once, is she referred to as being whole- she is just a sum of many beautiful parts. Blazon was introduced by the great Italian sonneteer Petrarch during Renaissance, in his romantic poems wherein, different parts of the beloved's anatomy are described, analysed and compared with other objects as a way of appreciation by the male suitor. And it was imitated by numerous love poets including Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser in the 16th century to John Donne, Andrew Marvell in the seventeenth century. In 18<sup>th</sup> century, from mere objectification of female form, it got converted into satirical and degrading description of woman's physical attributes whereas Pre-Raphaelites and Romantic era poets used it to evoke sensual imagery- the common refrain being passive, silent body of woman under intense male gaze where each part of her anatomy is poetically described ostensibly for the male reader of the work under the garb of appreciating woman.

Sir Edmund Spenser in stanza 10 of 'Epithalamion' describes the beauty of his newly wedded wife without realising that in the process, he is actually objectifying her by comparing her body parts to unconnected inanimate objects:

Her goodly eyes lyke Saphyres shining  
bright,  
Her forehead yvory white,  
Her cheekes lyke apples which the sun  
hath rudded,  
Her lips lyke cheryes charming men  
to byte,  
Her brest like to a bowle of creame  
uncruded,  
Her paps lyke lyllies budded,  
Her snowie necke lyke to a marble  
towre,  
And all her body like a pallace fayre,  
Ascending uppe with many a stately  
stayre,  
To honors seat and chastities sweet  
bowre. (Spenser, 1997. Print)

Her eyes, forehead, cheeks, lips, breast, neck... are compared to precious jewels, fruits, flowers and white smooth cream, later her chastity and shyness are over emphasised and we are left wondering at this advertisement of a perfect bride- she should be beautiful and untouched - two basic conditions set by patriarchy which hold true even today to eulogise woman.

And Spenser still fares better than his contemporary Philip Sidney who wrote love poetry in which the lady was not only the object but also incidental and the love was more of self-love. For him appreciating

his lady love is akin to praising parts of her body irrespective of the fact that such fragmentation of another human-being renders her into a mere object with the poet manipulating and controlling the image. In the first song of *Astrophel*, for instance, Sidney writes a blazon on his beloved, devoting a separate stanza to each adored body part: eyes, lips, feet, breast, hand, hair and voice.

According to Maria Baker:

"Segmented and scattered into images of fetish worship, the adored female body like a shattered mirror broken into brightly polished fragments reflects to the speaker his own act of self-creation as a master poet.

"Doubt you to whom my Muse these notes intendeth

Which now my breast o'ercharged to music lendeth"

He begins and focuses attention as much on his own act of creation as on the woman." (Baker, Vol. 56, No. 2 (May, 1991))

There can be several other instances of such objectification of the female body but Robert Herrick's short poems focusing only on parts of Julia's body without mentioning her as a sum of those parts is worth mentioning here. He writes 'Upon Her Eyes', 'Upon Her Feet', 'Upon Julia's Breasts', not to please the lady love but to share his erotic fancy with his male readers. And as per Ms. Baker, "The eroticized part, in fact, denies the female body its integrity and erotic power

which Herrick transfers to one part. The erotic relationship of greatest import is not the imagined one between the poet and the woman but the one between the poet/gazer and the fetish he has created in language."

Andrew Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress' is a poem of seduction, scaring the woman of transience of beauty and youth and exhorting her to make use of it by making love to the male suitor without pretending to be coy.

An hundred years should go to praise  
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;  
Two hundred to adore each breast,  
But thirty thousand to the rest; (Marvell)

Again, the physical charms of the mistress have been alluded to - right from her eyes to breasts and other parts which are worthy of long devotion but alas, human life is not long enough to indulge in the games of love and she should drop the act of coyness and get into the act of sexual love making without wasting further time.

"worms shall try  
That long-preserved virginity,  
And your quaint honor turn to dust,  
And into ashes all my lust"

She is passive and silent throughout and the poet takes the objectification further by making it sufficiently clear that it's her body which he is interested in and any denial on woman's part would mean that she is inviting death and decay. The sentiments

shift from adoration to accusation pretty swiftly as the male subject is not willing to give much room for denial or dissent to the object. There seems to be a basic inability to accept woman as a whole - a complete person with a mind, a body and a soul. And the reason is simple - body can be objectified, can be versified, can be owned or controlled while portraying a complete persona through words would be a complex task, since it will involve viewing the woman as a human being - at par with man and not as a beautiful object.

Mitchell cites a passage from German writer Gotthold Lessing's *Laocoon* (1766) in which Lessing describes words recreating images as "convert[ing] a superior being into a doll," an attitude Mitchell characterises as word's fear of "castration" by the image (Mitchell, 155). Thus, the poet narrator in "Sentimental Stuff" is in control of those words which, according to him, best describes the virtues of his lady love. Thus, her eyes become the topic of an erotic sonnet on the lines of Swinburne and the hair which have long been a symbol of femininity and latent sexuality, inspired a fair ballad and the wonders of her mouth saw themselves getting transformed in to a villanelle. The male contemplator excels in creating word painting of his aesthetic object. He controls the pen; therefore, the authority to represent the woman lies with him rather than her. Here, speech and control are the male domains whereas being a passive visual is the female destiny. If we look at it in terms of binary opposites then it's a clash between the word and the image, subject and the

object, male and the female. The word, the subject, the male tries to define, control and own the image/object/female.

"The female head is a particularly rich and important site in the symbolization of gender and the linking of gender to the transcendental values of specific cultural and religious systems"...the anatomical part of female body that gives women a voice and an identity that thereby threatens to unmake and disrupt the classic gender discriminations that have linked men to speech, power, identity and mind (Eilberg-Schwartz, 1995).

This phenomenon of male image-ownership of female identity thus, serves to sate both lust and the need for men to remain the dominant gender. In our poem, the male poet has some latent need to project the lady as physically very attractive, perhaps which satisfies his sense of possession or ownership and this possession he wants to show off through equally fetching verse which again, is aimed at self-satisfaction. He controls the pen i.e. the art and the woman i.e. the object.

This observation brings us to the second half of the poem where there is a complete volte face. The male poet writes a technically weak poem with a different content. Hence, this time the form is weak; it's not a fair ballad, or an ode or a technically perfect sonnet but a weak triollette. He is not happy with his work. He doesn't find it critically praise worthy but the lady succumbs to it. This poem so beautifully sums up the typical masculine response to 'this bunch of femininity'- this bunch of femininity

that refuses to feel flattered by the choice of words or the poetical form which the poet narrator so lovingly bestows upon her. The man is so used to objectification of women that even in poetry, he is disturbed about having to pen verse to accommodate the demands of his lady love, feeling insulted that his superior verse was rejected and just cannot quite understand how an inferior quality work can make a woman so happy. The reason is quite simple - the typical male cannot see beneath the skin - the form, the rhyme, and the words i.e. the outer covering has to be perfect and as per the accepted norms of literary canon but the sense which is being conveyed, the message being rolled out, once again confirms the traditional equation between the sexes. An interesting point is that the lady in question is absolutely blasé about the appreciation of her physical attributes and does not care much about the form of the verse which finally appreciates her wit, intelligence and mental poise. Are we not turning the long-held notions about superficial and deep here? The male poet cannot see beyond the surface whereas the female is more particular what the words are conveying rather than the form or the outer covering. Hence, poem and woman become one in the hands of poet the man. In both the cases, he is more concerned about the body than the soul - what he has to say slides behind how he is saying it.

And there is a way to put the female down despite all her efforts at retaining control over her portrayal - the females of the world just cannot appreciate good

poetry. The ability to appreciate art still remains a masculine bastion.

She praised this assininity

And scorned the good ones that I wrote,

The women can read and write, they might become aware of their rights and the injustice meted out to them, still they cannot separate good poem from the bad one i.e. the aesthetics are not developed yet. The Feministic war cry sounds shrill, because the woman is made to appear immature and unappreciative of standards set for good poetry. Here, the charge is that of culture and class - it is almost a colonial mindset where the coloniser can never accept that the colonised can ever reach the sublime intellectual levels which come naturally to them. It's the voice of the subaltern which is being made fun of. In a predominantly male discourse, the women are made to sound illogical. The poem at one level comes across as some inside joke among the men - a joke on feminists, those who are serious about their portrayal in literature. At the end, it's the man laughing at the attempt of woman to be taken seriously. He can condescend, he can oblige, but can never actually credit the woman with wit or intellectual capacity and lady's approval of bad poetry is all the proof that he needs to show that despite their best efforts, the women don't have it in them.

Derrida states that language, by its very nature, is logocentric, phallogocentric and operates in binary oppositions. According to him, Western thought since Plato has

been greatly affected by the “metaphysics of presence”- a system of thought which operates in binary oppositions and tends to define one as the lack or absence of other/s and inadvertently creates a hierarchy where one term of each dichotomy is perceived to be more privileged than the other- master/slave, culture/nature, subject/object, male/female and so on. This dualism essentially conveys the idea that a male is what a female is not; hence, if the male is rational then the female is irrational, if he is strong, it automatically implies that she is weak and if he is the subject then of course, she has to be one of the objects. Therefore, women can never achieve active subject position in a discourse as language, invariably gets trapped in the system where distinction empowers subject at the cost of object and patriarchy ensures that man remains in the subject position. As per Juliet Mitchell, women have been excluded from symbolic order. Men have controlled pen and therefore, the system of language, education and eventually culture. To become a part of this symbolic order or language, one needs to be masculine. Thus, females or feminine can make appearance only as objects within this masculine order and serve as commodity to be exchanged within masculine economy. Hence, Lacan and Spivak contend that women can never acquire subject position, can never speak and cannot develop a feminist symbolic.

The most serious threat to the patriarchal system comes from the fact that masculine depends on the female body for its birth, survival and sustenance. Therefore, in most

patriarchal systems, women have been reduced to biological functions. If a female refuses to be typecast, it is no surprise that she ends up frustrating the male.

Hence, the declaration by the baffled poet:

This bunch of femininity,  
On whom my fond affections dote--  
Has got my goat.

In O'Neill's poem, the male poet himself plays the critic to his own work and smugly attributes perfection to his initial poetic creations. He is measuring his work by the yardstick set for good piece of poetry and is not concerned in the least about the impact it is having or not having on the female for whom this piece was originally conceptualised. What the lady expects from her poet lover is immaterial...being a woman she should be happy that her eyes and nose are being immortalised through poetry. How she wants to be known or remembered is inconsequential. The poet lover is at his best when he has to portray her physical features but is at total loss of ideas when he is forced to appreciate her wisdom, mental poise and wit. These virtues certainly, to him, are not suitable for being applauded through the medium of poetry or perhaps these virtues are not to be appreciated in the lady who he loves. So, a woman can be loved merely for her physical charms, intellectual gifts are not required. And if they are there, then praising them becomes a challenge, because either the woman's wit is not praiseworthy when compared to man or it is not praise worthy



in a woman at all! For either of these two reasons, the poet lover is at a total loss of inspiration and poetic flair when forced to write on some other attributes other than physical.

The lady in our poem wants to be identified as witty, sharp and intellectually gifted. She needs this assertion from the man. It is as if she believes this fact about herself when it comes from him. This demand from her, limits the freedom that the male poet earlier had while writing poetry. He could choose his subject and write freely, but with this new imposition, his freedom is arrested and the result is a weak artistic creation. This system is often mistakenly called love but is in fact nothing more than emotional alienation and a denial of freedom through conflict with the other (Sartre, 1958, 2003).

She needs to see herself through the eyes of the man as an intellectually competent person; she doesn't want to be stereotyped. From the philosophical point of view, this again is a kind of submission to someone other than the self; yet, from the Feminist point of view, this is a major breakthrough. After centuries of objectification, we finally have a female who rejects this man-made sentimentality as:

And said, "I'll love you if you'll can  
That horrid sentimental stuff--  
I've had enough."

The lady certainly is Avant-garde. She is not interested in these age-old techniques of wooing. She is assertive and demanding, has the tenacity to reject beautifully worded

poetry if it does not appeal to her own parameters of appreciation. She does not accept praise as a favour rather, she accepts it as her due and knows exactly what in her she wants to be extolled. She is the new woman - she wants an acknowledgment of her gifts beyond a mere biological coincidence. She knows that she is beautiful but does not want to be defined by her looks alone. She is challenging enough to force the man think out of his comfort zone. There is nothing new or creative in praising the eyes or lips or neck of the women; she raises the bar here, and not surprisingly, the man fails. He comes up with his weakest work yet. And he is upset with himself as well as her for being put in this situation. His frustration is the frustration of every single man who still refuses to see women other than mere objects. O'Neill makes the woman appear logical, rational and calmly assertive in contrast with the initially over-confident suitor.

## CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it can safely be concluded that Eugene O'Neill was not indifferent to the age-old bias against women in literature. In this poem, he actually manages to distance himself from his male protagonist who is also a poet just like him, and create a female who is self-assured enough to reject sentimentality in favour of wit and intellectualism. This rejection of "sentimental stuff" does not make her less feminine, rather, it helps her in breaking the Madonna/ Eve stereotype. In fact, O'Neill's lady is a complete individual in her own

right. She does not symbolise ‘lack’ of anything; she is a complete individual in and she has full support of O’Neill in her endeavour. That is the reason the poem that started with the traditional literary attempts of the male poet, ends with the calm assertion of the female that: “I’ve had enough”. To put forward her point of view, she does not have to portray the male in a negative light, she does not have to either accuse him or make fun of him the way the male does. She is not playing in the realm of binary oppositions for a change. The male poet though comes across as bigoted, used to having his way, while the female simply rejects his efforts with the confidence of one who knows her worth.

Thus, through this poem, Eugene O’Neill successfully presents himself as a conscientious artist who is equally sensitive to the dissent and frustration among the intellectually aware females as to the lost and highly sensitive men on the margins of popular discourse. In his plays, probably the women did not get much space, perhaps he, as a dramatist, desired to highlight certain other issues which claimed his attention but at least in this poem, he manages to bring out the grudge of several generations of feminist thinkers against the objectification of women in literature to hammer home the point that perhaps, it is high time that women get a voice of their own, even in the literature penned by “the other sex”.

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