

## Decay and Distortion in Family Relationship in Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*

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If one talks about the concept of 'General Will', one cannot but start oscillating between two types of 'Wills', i.e., 'actual will' and 'real will'. The 'actual will' of the individual is his impulsive and irrational will. This 'actual will' is transient and conceives of the present only. It is based on self interest and is not related to the well being of society. Such a will is narrow and self-conflicting. On the other hand, the real will of the individual is a rational will which wills his real interest in relation to the general welfare of the society. 'Real will' thinks more of common good or interest than the good of the individual. 'Real will' of the individual therefore, promotes harmony between the individual and the society. When one follows the commands of one's actual will and disregards real will or 'General Will' of the community disturbance and decay sets in one's relationships.

Professor Leeds in *Strange Interlude*, unable to establish harmony between his self-regarding and altruistic instincts, feels jealous of Gordan Shaw. He blurts out resentfully while explaining to Marsden the change that has come over Nina after the death of her lover. In his aside he points out :

Her eyes ... I know that look ... tender loving... not for me... damn Gordan... I am glad he's dead.(SI,498)

He even confesses to his daughter:

I was jealous of Gorden. I was alone and I wanted to keep your love. I hated him as one

hates a thief one may not accuse not punish. I did my best to prevent your marriage. I was glad when he died.(SI,503)

Professor Leeds follows the dictates of his 'actual will' and disregards his 'real will' and this, in turn, leads to his unnatural and unsocial relationship with his daughter. O'Neill here views human relationship with dismay because he finds that the sense of belong is at base an artificial need. It corrupts human relationship as we wish to impose our relationship on others and vice-versa.

Driven from man to man and from experience to experience, Nina becomes capable only of exploitation. After her father's death, she marries Sam not out of love but to make herself busy in "bringing a career to his surface" (SI,528) and to "become a mother"(*Strange Interlude*,540)). Note, for example, the following:

I couldn't find a better husband than Sham... and I couldn't find a better lover than Ned... I need them both to be happy (SI, 609).

Overcome by the dictates of her 'actual will' she has come to believe in her mother's dictum: "Being hay, that's the nearest we can ever come to knowing what's good". (SI,546) this takes her to Darrell whom she asks to father her child for her and her husband's happiness. She now follows her 'actual will' and disregards her 'real will'.

The dictates of 'actual will' in the case of Darrell and Marsden makes them jealous of not only Sam but also Nina's acts and decisions are governed by shattered past with Gordan Shaw

and the memory of Gordan Shaw haunts her mind at crucial moments– when she decides to give herself to crippled soldiers, and when she decides to “give Sam life” (SI, 544).

Nina and Darrell all the time keeps oscillating between the dictates of their ‘actual will’ and ‘real will’. Hence, their relationship with each other is bound to distort and decay. Nina wants to take divorce from Sam and Darrell comes back from his vacation to marry Nina and be happy once and for all. But when they are reminded of their duty towards Sham, they repress their selfish desire and try to feel contended with what life has given them. Their relationship starts decaying.

Marsden’s mother also follows the dictates of her ‘actual will’ and disregards her ‘real will’ and in turn her relationship with her son and Nina turns unnatural and unsocial. She opposed the marriage of her daughter too. Like others, she is also a product of the society she lives in.

Marsden is a case of repressed emotions and, hence, unable to establish true and harmonious relationship with Nina. He hates to be designated as ‘Father Charlie’. He encourages Nina to write a biography of Gordan Shaw in the hope that his helping her while Sam was in the city would bring them alone together. Marsden all the time oscillates between his fatherly affection for Nina and his healthy love of a male for a lady. By following the dictates of his ‘actual will’ his relationship with Nina starts decaying and distorting and becomes unnatural and unsocial.

Nina’s son Gordan, hates Darrell because he feels that Darrell is his rival for the love of Nina. Darrell remarks:

Perhaps he realizes subconsciously that I am his father, his rival in your love; but I am not his father ostensibly, there are no taboos, so he can

come right out and hate me to his heart’s contact. (SI, 624)

He does not hate Sam because he knows Nina doesn’t love Sam. He rather shows that he has becomes more attached to Sam in order to spite his mother who he feels is in love with Darrell and has, thus, wronged his father. In fact, it is the unnatural relationship between Nina and Darrell, a product of the dictates of their ‘actual will’ that comes in the way of harmonious relationship between the mother and the son. Gordan’s relationship with Nina and Darrell spoils on account of the lover’s moral transgression.

It was Nina’s selfish and perverted desire to possess all the three men simultaneously that robbed Darrell of his career and his right place in the family.

O’Neill, in this play, authentically dramatizes that when man follows the dictates of his ‘actual will’ and disregards his ‘real will’ his relationship with other human beings becomes unnatural. Besides, man’s superior education and his knowledge of science takes him away from his social self to his individual self. The only solution to the problem, O’Neill seems to suggest, lies in man’s going back to nature like Sam Evans for whom ignorance is a bliss and who follows the dictates of his ‘real will’. But this, in turn, will happen only when a new and just society, based on Rousseau’s “Theory of General Will”, comes into being.

## WORKS CITED

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract*. London: Penguin Book, 1962. Printed.

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SI (Strange Interlude). All the references are from *Nine Plays*.