

The Search for Happiness: Literary Stylistics in Eugene O’Neill’s Beyond the Horizon

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Abstract

The present paper analyzes the game of happiness and it approaches the American dream in Eugene O’Neill’s *Beyond the Horizon* from a stylistic angle. In his *Poetic Effects*, Adrian Pilkington studies the interdisciplinarity and the close relationship between literary studies and stylistics. The linguist argues that literary stylistics emerges because ‘literary works are organized in such a way that the meanings potentially communicated are communicated through the contextual assumptions that the writer makes manifest through the language used’ (Pilkington 63). O’Neill uses different stylistic devices to attack modern American social institutions. He puts on stage two brothers who cannot reach happiness because of their constant oscillation between illusory dreams and real reality. The fake pursuit of happiness will also be analyzed through stylistics, linguistic games, the significance of metaphors and the use of allusions. The philosopher Wittgenstein studies the importance of decoding the linguistic game and its role in understanding reality. Wittgenstein argues that linguistic games consist in ‘constructing an object from a description, reporting an event, forming and testing a hypothesis, making up a story, play acting and making a joke’ (Perinbanayagan 165). Irony, jokes, linguistic games, allegory, metonymy, extended metaphors and other stylistic devices will be used to map out the way O’Neill dramatizes the tragedy of the brothers and their failure at achieving the American dream of material success or the dream of family union. The final goal of the paper is to show the role of literary stylistics in decoding O’Neill’s message about the necessity of reconstructing links with reality.

Keywords

Literary Stylistics, Dream vs real reality, happiness, intentional reality sarcasm, modern drama, tragedy.

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Introduction

Before studying the game of Happiness in *Beyond the Horizon*, it is important to start with an overview about the modern American stage as a space of unveiling the modern Adam's disillusionment with the Utopian American dream of happiness and success at different levels. Indeed, some modern American playwrights used realistic and other innovative techniques to point out the myth of the American dream and to invite the audience to reconsider their misunderstanding about dreams and happiness. Nihilism is tainted with happiness in some modern American plays to show that 'happiness is universally elusive, to be found neither in yielding to nor in restraining one's illusions' ('American Press'378). The deep link between illusion and happiness indicates that happiness remains an impossible and aborted dream. Some modern playwrights argue that happiness is an illusion, but the essence of modern man lies in his continuous quest for happiness and in his efforts at changing his doom. Eugene O'Neill is one of the Irish American playwrights who believe that: 'a human being needs the illusion of happiness, and shows how the need may be supplied by a theatrical illusion' (Styan 91). In *Beyond the Horizon*, O'Neill sneers at two brothers who falsely believe that they can easily achieve happiness and they wear different masks, but they cannot escape the reality of failure. The real self comes to the surface whenever each brother tries to invent imaginary lies about fake happiness. In one of his interviews, O'Neill defines happiness as a complex notion which implies a sense of tragedy. He confesses: 'To me, tragic alone has the significant beauty which is truth....I will write about happiness if I can happen to meet with that luxury, and find it sufficiently dramatic and in harmony with any deep rhythm in life'(qtd. in Brietzke 2). In other words, O'Neill defines happiness as 'luxury' because it is not easily attainable and he has doubts about reaching happiness. He adds that the path of happiness is thorny and it is dramatic because it leads to the vacillation between illusion and reality. The present paper sets out to study the pursuit of happiness in *Beyond the Horizon* from a stylistic approach. The special use of language will be analyzed to criticize the characters' limited view about happiness.

Literature Review

The play has been studied from different psychoanalytic, gender and thematic approaches. To start with, in *Perverse Mind* Barbara Voglino establishes a comparative study between *Beyond the Horizon* and other plays. She focuses on the dramatic ending of the play compared to other sea plays like *Anna Christie*. Unlike Anna who leaves the stage after being socially redeemed, Robert Mayo leaves the stage and the world because of severe tuberculosis. Indeed, Anna 'appealed to contemporary middle-class audiences as Robert May's death from tuberculosis didn't' (Voglino 35). The present paper will examine the reasons behind the absence of happiness in *Beyond the Horizon* and it will compare the differences between the romantic beginning and the open-ended nature of the play. Unlike Voglino who reduces the end into the death of Robert,

this paper focuses on the multiplicity of meanings and on the playwright's main message about the pursuit of happiness. On the other hand, Judith Barlow studies the play from a feminist angle and she criticizes the limited depiction of Ruth as the subject of male desire. Barlow writes that Ruth's 'conception of women is rooted in a traditional equation of feminine with maternal that limits his ability to cast women in subject positions rather than as objects of masculine desire' (164). This view will be challenged by arguing that Ruth succeeds at redefining female identity, at inventing her own happiness and at teaching the male lovers about the roots of happiness. She is aware of her husband's flaw and she pokes fun at his inactive eagerness.

In addition to the classical readings of the play, other critics have focused on the political aspects of *Beyond the Horizon*. For example, Patrick Diggins in *Desire under Democracy* offers a political reading of the play and he highlights the role of urbanization in shaping family relationships. He observes that 'marriage is the graveyard of love. ..the world no more be made safe for democracy. What begins in sentimental idealism ends in tragic realism' (170). Put differently, the absence of happiness in the play under study is caused by the illusion of democracy, political disorder and the myth of the American dream. Unlike Diggins who accentuates the role of democracy, this paper will examine the correlation between economic reality, excessive emotions and the myth of happiness. On the other hand, some postmodern critics claim that the presence of warring selves is the main factor behind misfortune. Indeed, the play is approached from a postmodern perspective and some critics accentuated the idea of fragmentation, the absence of unity and the presence of multiple selves within the same persona. For example, Groff notices: 'the brothers create a dualism of opposing attitudes, idealism and pragmatism. Separated, fragmented neither can become a whole' (276). The idea of multiplicity will be linked to happiness by showing the coexistence between the romantic and supposedly happy self and another dark and realistic side within the same character. The paper will delve into the inner self of the characters and it will start from the literal use of language to reach deeper meanings.

To understand the politics of happiness, the paper will deal with a stylistic reading of the play by referring to Pilkington's view on the interdisciplinarity between linguistics literature. The paper will differ from the classical readings of the play by offering a new perspective about happiness. Postmodern stylistics will help in announcing the end of idealism and the beginning of a realistic vision about happiness. O'Neill deconstructs the ideal view about happiness to construct a new understanding about the reality of happiness.

Theoretical Framework

The interdisciplinarity between literature and stylistics will be explained through the notion of postmodern stylistics. In fact, 'Postmodern stylistics champions plurality over authority; it is based on archaic, antihierarchical notion of writing' (Dettmar 49). The plurality can be exemplified through the use of stylistics as a way of deciphering the interplay between reality and illusion in Eugene O'Neill's *Beyond the Horizon*. In the play, the correlation between the literary text and stylistics is made clear from the beginning of the play and through the symbolic dimension of the title. The ironic use of title gives hints at the limited possibilities of the human being and at the inability of achieving Euphoria. The brothers dream of achieving the American dreams of affluence and of family reunion, but they are stuck by the reality of sickness, disintegration, unhappiness and failure. Postmodern stylistics is also defined as 'stylistics of excess, the text is too rich, the surface too lush, the prose too joyous' (Dettmar 49). What is specific about the play is that it is teeming with stylistic devices and enigmatic language. The reader and the audience are equally invited to go beyond the horizon of the surface meaning and to reach the deep message of the playwright.

The affinities between stylistics and literature are explained by Adrian Pilkington. In his *Poetic Effects*, Pilkington insists on the multiplicity of meanings and the unlimited interpretations

of the same literary piece of writing. He writes, ‘in open literary texts the process of semiosis is given free rein. Keywords or signifiers in source texts came to generate a wide range of further meanings or signifieds’ (Pilkington 24). For instance, in *Beyond* happiness has different interpretations and it takes different shapes. The present paper sets out to study the playwright’s new vision about happiness and his ironic twist of the characters’ superficial view about happiness. The game of happiness will be examined through analyzing the mental roadmap of the characters, the and the..... In his *Poetic Effects*, Pilkington adds that ‘the theoretical approach to aesthetic experience or literariness must be an account of real mental representations and read mental processes that are triggered as a literary text is read’ (Pilkington 17). Literariness will be explored through comparing the inner and the outer portraits of the brothers and their oscillation between reality and illusion. The interdisciplinary between literature and stylistics shows that ‘texts are not born literary, they have literariness’ (Pelkington 8). Put differently, stylistics can be used to interpret *Beyond the Horizon*, to understand the different riddles and meanings of happiness.

Symbolism and generation of different meanings:

The correlation between stylistics and literature can be studied through symbolic dimension of the setting and the presence of multiple meanings. The symbolic aspects are revealed from the very beginning of the play through the opening stage directions and the minute description of the space. Indeed, the play opens with ‘freshly plowed fields clearly divided from each other, checkerboard fashion, by the lines of stone walls and rough snake fences’ (O’Neill 1). The division and the presence of two spaces connotes the presence of two contradictory streams of thoughts and foreshadows the fraternal battles between the emotional and the rational sides. The contradictory ways of thinking are caused by the cultural American shift from the Agrarian to the Urban way of life and the degeneration of the frontier myth which put an end to Agrarian expansion. The nostalgia to the Old West is manifested through the image of wild nature; The presences of stones and the rough snakes stand for the thorny path and put the notion of happiness into question. Indeed, the play opens with a happy tone and with the characters’ expectations of going beyond the limited horizon of their tight farm and exploring new spaces. However, the limited horizons and the presence of obstacles are suggested through the pictorial description of the setting. The farm exists in the ‘straggling line of piled rocks, too low to be called a wall, [which] separates this field from the road.’ (1) . The presence of rocks implies the brothers’ struggle against implacable powers and their vacillation between the dreams of achievement and the bitter reality of constant struggles against the impossible. The contradictory touch of the setting is also evoked by the presence of fields and roads. In fact, ‘the field stands for the elder brother who believes in work and the road is indicative of the day dreamer Robert who aspires what life beyond’ (Gutpa 14). The two brothers have two different ways of life, but they share the same longing for happiness. Unlike the elder brother who believes in hard work and he wants to reach happiness, the younger brother has a utopian view and he ponders over happiness in a romantic and an unrealistic way. This remarkable oscillation between illusion and reality triggers certain tragic effects because it will prove that happiness is an illusion and real happiness should pertain to reality.

In the same context of stylistic richness, the alternation between visual and tactile imagery and the profuse use of words with negative connotations about sickness ‘gnarled, twisted. Parlor’ (4) suggest the presence of tormented souls in the farm and foreshadows the gradual downfall of the farm owners. The dramatic struggle is exposed through the image of the apple tree and the presence of a snake: ‘an old, gnarled apple tree, just budding into leaf, strains its twisted branches heavenwards, black against the pallor of distance. A snake-fence sidles from left to right along the top of the bank, passing beneath the apple tree.’ (4). The apple tree stands for the warring ideas and the conflict between the emotional and the rational brothers. The gap between the two sides is the source of tragedy because each brother is wearing a mask and going beyond his nature. The

apple tree can also be interpreted as the tree of knowledge: 'Knowledge does not necessarily bring healing or integration. In the case quoted above, the apple brought about a terrible war and organizes the conflict between the conscious and the unconscious' (Stewart 47). Robert consciously chooses to live in the farm and he is unconsciously looking for the freedom of the sea, but Andrew chooses to live outside the farm and he is unconsciously longing for owning the land. The reversal of roles appears when Andrew betrays his dream of owning the land and Robert drops the idea of being engaged in an economic enterprise. Accordingly, the dramatic aspect is accentuated because 'characters' actions and nature are either completely synchronous or diametrically opposed' (qtd. in Brietzke 140). Desynchronization between farm vs land, conscious vs unconscious, appearances vs reality and reality vs illusion is the main source of tragedy and the main impediment to happiness. The impediments of happiness are elaborated by Kant who believes that 'rational beings are knowingly and necessarily under moral obligations, and this induces a moral condition for the enjoyment of happiness, for we are, as if were, always subject to the sting of conscience' (Muchnik 150). It is the case of Edmund, Robert and Ruth who are torn between personal freedom and morality. They are not able to cross the limited Catholic boundaries and they are entrapped in the same circle of stagnation because of their misconceptions about dreams, reality and happiness.

The Game of Happiness: The Absence of Happiness

The symbol of the horizon is another significant sensory image which invites the audience to go beyond the limited literal meaning and to go beyond the surface. The absence of happiness is revealed through the interplay between the glow of optimism and the presence of a dimmed light. The horizons are described in the opening scene using the following words: 'The horizon hills are still rimmed by a faint line of flame, and the sky above them glows with the crimson flush of the sunset. This fades gradually as the action of the scene progresses.' (2). The regressive movement indicates the mental roadmap of the brothers and to the way they are yearning for the glorious past when they used to be ideally united in the farm. This longing for belonging to the Agrarian past is the source of identity crisis in the play as it shows the brother's oscillation between the Old and the New West. The dominant dimmed color of darkness in the farm creates a mood of absurdity and it entails the collapse of the family and the collapse of the old values. Crevecoeur's belief in the American farm as the serene locus of happiness is overturned during the industrial era where happiness is becoming a meaningless and an alien notion. Unlike the English farmer, Crevecoeur who wrote: 'I will revert into a state approaching to that of nature, unencumbered either with voluminous laws, or contradictory codes, often galling the very necks of those whom they protect,' (qtd. in Marx 113) Eugene O'Neill farm is described as a chaotic place where wildness reigns supreme and regeneration does not occur. In fact, "The field in the foreground has a wild uncultivated appearance as if it had been allowed to remain fallow the preceding summer. Parts of the snake-fence in the rear have been broken down. The apple tree is leafless and seems dead' (125). This metaphorical death gives allusions to the new disorder where the modern Adam strives to resist the urban nightmare and to diffuse new channels of optimism in the modern valley of ashes. Wilderness, the dull atmosphere and the presence of death indicate the absence of happiness. The Game of happiness and Metaphorical death will be further analyzed through the failure of the American dream of constructing a happy home.

Love and the Limited Understanding of Happiness:

Robert and Ruth have ironically tried to go beyond the limited horizons of pessimism and they resorted to love as a source of happiness. However, their romantic enterprise is doomed to failure and the institution of marriage is another source of tragedy in the play under examination. Unlike the beginning of the play when love used to be associated with depth, tranquility and comfort, the climactic scene is marked by the presence of monotony, dullness and dejection. The

beginning of the play is punctuated with the use of exaggeration, but the post-marriage scenes are dominated by the use of sarcasm. The shift in terms of using stylistic devices reflects the vacillation between illusion and reality. Exaggeration is introduced through the mixed feelings of extreme joy and through the presence of passionate dreamers: . (*He sighs unconsciously*) But you see I've found—a bigger dream. (*Then with joyous high spirits*) I want you all to understand one thing—I'm not going to be a loafer on your hands any longer. This means the beginning of a new life for me in every way. I'm going to settle right down and take a real interest in the farm' (12). Robert clearly drops the dream of leaving the farm and he opts for pure love as the main route to happiness. He adds in a dreamy note: 'the secret that called to me from over the world's rim—the secret beyond every horizon; and when I did not come, it came to me. (*He clasps RUTH to him fiercely*) Oh, Ruth, our love is sweeter than any distant dream!' (42). Robert believes that love is the main source of happiness and he links happiness to marriage and sticking to the land. Robert's limited understanding of happiness can be discussed as he leaves behind his main dream of discovering new lands and he chooses to stay at farm. Robert fails at achieving his dream of marital happiness because he does not work-hard or make any efforts to construct a functional and a happy family. O'Neill is implicitly criticizing modern couples who choose their partners, but they do not keep faithful to the sanctity of family or make any efforts to create a stable happy home whose members are balanced.

Rob is disillusioned with the institution for marriage and Ruth is deceived by her slothful husband who dreams of happiness without working for the well-being of his family. The register of fervent passion is replaced by humiliating words and verbal violence between husband and wife. Ruth uses sarcasm when she addresses her husband using the following words: 'I hate the sight of you. Oh, if I'd only known! If I hadn't been such a fool to listen to your cheap, silly, poetry talk that you learned out of books! If I could have seen how you were in your true self—like you are now—I'd have killed myself before I'd have married you!' (74). Self-regret is manifested through the use of a sarcastic tone against the husband and the use of pejorative terms 'cheap, silly, fool.'

The Reconsideration of Happiness:

Stylistically speaking sarcasm 'derives from the word meaning to tear flesh. Sarcasm is often called biting humor, and there is a good reason Sarcastic comments that hit the intended target hurt. The use of stress represents one of the underlying, unresolved anger issues.' (Seaward 143). Sarcasm is mixed with bitterness as it encompasses the speaker's anger and his harsh reaction. Ruth's sarcastic style and her sound of fury imply the aborted dream of creating a happy family, accentuate the dichotomy of rise and fall and denote the remarkable fall from being endowed with a dreamy spirit into being pragmatic. She addresses her husband in a sarcastic tone: 'You think you're much better than the other folks, because of your college education... I hate the sight of you' (74). Ruth mocks her husband for his theoretical knowledge, his arrogance and his failure to preserve real love. She rebukes him for being irresponsible and careless about providing his family with basic needs. The romantic feelings before marriage are transformed into hatred, animosity and disillusionment with the dream of creating an eternal union. Ruth discovers that love fails at functioning as a source of happiness and she grasps that happiness is a sheer mirage. The playwright contends that happiness is not a given gift, but it is based on a process of continuous work and struggle. The fading beams of love reflect O'Neill's sarcastic twist about the limited understanding of love as a source of happiness and his invitation at reconsidering the deep meaning of happiness. Like Ruth, Robert has the aspects of the modern tragic hero who is ruined by his own choices and by his excessive passionate impulses. The farm has thus moved from being the icon of love and peace to functioning as the symbol of sterility, dejection and limited horizons. In fact, 'The farm and physical horizon develop in the mind through O'Neill's technique into symbols of the tragic limitation of human hope' (Griffin 10). Put differently, symbolic language

is important because the natural elements create a pessimistic image and foreshadows the huge gap between the dreams of constructing a happy life in the farm and the reality of failure, sickness and death. In One of his interviews, O'Neill mentions the importance of affecting the emotional chords of the reader and the importance of the setting and the symbolic style is more expressive than words. He writes: 'the alternation of longing of loss....very few people knew this was definitely planned to produce the effect. But I am sure they all unconsciously get the effect. It is often easier to express an idea through such means rather than through words or copies of real actions' (qtd. in White 79). The analysis of symbolism has shown that there is a multitude of meanings in the play and that figurative language plays a fundamental role in delivering O'Neill's message about the illusion of happiness.

Intentional Realism:

The vacillation between dreams and reality is further elaborated through the use of realism and the life-like effects traced in the minute description of characters. The American philosopher Jerry Fodor studied the relationship between language and the cognitive aspects. He argues that intentional realism gives 'the major lesson that aesthetics has to learn from the philosophy of mind' (Fodor 1993, 43). The Cognitive aspect invites the audience to move into depth and intentional realism is meant to question the reality of failure and to attack the American dream. Intentional realism is observed through the description of Robert: 'His features are delicate and refined, leaning to weakness in the mouth and chin. He is dressed in gray corduroy trousers pushed into high laced boots, and a blue flannel shirt with a bright colored tie' (5). The choice of somber colors implies a sense of darkness which does not comply with the expectations for joy and his longing for eternal happiness. Robert used to dream of moving to the sea which functions as a symbol of freedom and he is hunted by the dream of moving to the sea. He freezes the moments of the past when he says:

'Those were the only happy moments of my life then, dreaming there at the window. I liked to be all alone—those times. I got to know all the different kinds of sunsets by heart. And all those sunsets took place over there—(*He points*) beyond the horizon. So gradually I came to believe that all the wonders of the world happened on the other side of those hills. There was the home of the good fairies who performed beautiful miracles. I believed in fairies then. (*With a smile*) Perhaps I still do believe in them. (26)

The passage is riddled with connotative language and happiness is clearly linked to the past which gives an idea about the dim reality of unhappiness. Robert can be blamed for his superficial understanding of happiness and for believing in his dreams without acting or inventing the means to achieve his goals. He was clearly indulged in illusions and his insistence on the presence of fairy tales is another indication about his deep immersion in delusions. The presence of the hidden smile in the stage directions suggests O'Neill's sarcastic tone against the dreamer who keeps believing in dreams without being decisive. Robert's inner belief in the absence of happiness. He is shifting his focus and is no longer believing in the tale of the sea, but he is resorting to pure love as the source of happiness. He informs the audience: 'Something I discovered only this evening—very beautiful and wonderful—something I did not take into consideration previously because I hadn't dared to hope that such happiness could ever come to me. (*Appealingly*) You must all remember that fact, won't you?' (O'Neill 39). Dramatic irony arises when the audience is aware of the future fall of Robert; His tragic flaw is his limited view about his happiness and his inability to go beyond the horizon because of his limited scope. His happy moments are transient and his love story vanishes because of the reality of material conditions. Instead of working hard to improve his conditions, Robert remains a passive spectator who keeps dreaming without acting. Robert is a tragic hero who is responsible for his self-destruction and for his wife's aborted dream of creating a happy family. His tragedy lies in being

overwhelmed with romantic feelings and forgetting about reality and the necessity of making efforts to achieve goals and dreams. The absence of goals, the absence of motion and the feelings of superiority put an end to Robert's dreams. Robert is educated, but academic success is different from the lessons learned from the school of life. In line with Robert's absence of action, O'Neill informs the audience that real happiness necessitates hard work, constant attempts at progress and pragmatism. The play is valuable because it invites the audience to ponder over happiness and to grasp that perseverance is the main secret behind happiness. The play has an allegorical dimension because it depicts modern man's oscillation between illusions and the reality. The flaw of modern man is his belief in dreams without having enough determination to concretize dreams.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper is an attempt to understand the multiple understandings of happiness and American dream(s) and to invite the audience to consider the importance of reality. The stylistic approach to *Beyond the Horizon* helps us recognize O'Neill's message about the reality of failure and his redefinition of happiness. The correlation between stylistics and modern drama shows that happiness resides in accepting reality instead of being disillusioned with the American dream. Literary stylistics invites the audience to reconsider the real meaning of happiness and to understand the role of hard-work in bringing about happiness and progress. The merit of *Beyond the Horizon* lies in inviting the audience to go beyond literal meaning and to grasp the tragedy of the farming family and the inability of its members to go beyond the adamant power of fate. The human being is doomed to fate and external powers, but his well-being resides in resisting, accepting reality and achieving goals. Stylistics is thus an important tool for deciphering universal messages, for staging human tragedy and for criticizing the limited understanding of happiness. Future research on the correlation between stylistics and literature can focus on performance stylistics of *Beyond the Horizon*.

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