Evolution of Black Characterization in American Theater: Eugene O’Neill’s *The Dreamy Kid* and Entrée into “Authentic Negro” Experience

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**Abstract**

Eugene O’Neill’s *The Dreamy Kid* (1918) is one the earliest plays in American Theater which openly addressed the plight of blacks when America was reeling under racial violence. Although DuBois’ famous claim in 1903 set off the discourse that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of color-line,” dramatic literature of the era hardly depicted black life realistically. While African-Americans’ status as an ethnic minority denied them any serious place on stage, they were the primary choices for white authors’ fanciful projections of clown figures to produce race-humor. Understandably thus, black roles in early American Theater were frequently burlesqued. This gave rise to stereotypes and minstrel thespians that showed concocted images and aspects of black life. Eugene O’Neill broke such appalling custom of commercial theaters and presented some true-to-life characters on stage. This paper aims to look into his second play on “Negro problem,” *The Dreamy Kid* (1918). It was the first drama to cast black actors in black roles on Broadway that covered a particular feature of black life and experience in America during Great Migration. O’Neill, through its staging, presented “an authentic Negro character” by drawing upon some harsh realities of New York’s ghetto life.

**Keywords**

Minstrelsy, Black Characterization, Racism, American Drama, Great Migration, New Negro, Double Consciousness.

Eugene O’Neill is much credited for his candid representation of blacks in American dramatic literature at the turn of twentieth century when racial intolerance was a common phenomenon in the Unites States. To speak from history, blacks’ elevation from the moment when slavery was proscribed (1865) to the time when the suffrage bill was passed (1965) went through numerous knockouts and setbacks mainly in the forms of inequity and segregation through impositions of black codes, Jim Crow laws, and notorious Ku Klux Klan’s lynching spree. Based on such existing racial reality, it can easily be grasped that black characterization on stage would hardly be race-neutral, particularly because the mainstream American Theater or Broadway was dominated by white actors, directors, and playwrights. Relevantly thus, the handling of black characterization by playwrights from antebellum to modern theater has given rise to some interesting speculations. Some critics and scholars in recent years have opined that African-Americans were mostly used by white American authors as a canvas for whimsical drawings (Frank 75) where Black images or roles on stage merely conformed to canyoning; the main objective of these black portraits was fraught with performing to the “comfort zone of the whites” (Harrison). However, O’Neill’s *The Dreamy Kid* is often considered one of the earliest representations of “Negro problem” in American Theater. Based on an African-American family’s moving to a New York ghetto during Great Migration, the play chronicles how a black American dream got shattered in North due to racism.
The earliest black depiction took place in New York’s John Street Theater which saw the American premiere of Isaac Bickerstaffe’s and Charles Dibdin’s comic opera The Padlock (1769), first presented in 1768 in London’s Drury Lane. This play familiarized the ludicrously inebriated, irreverent character of Mungo, later made more famous in US by Lewis Hallam Jr., who clearly suggested the predicament and bitterness of his race when he lamented, saying, “Me wish to de lord me was dead” (qtd. in Cockrell 20)! This duality of the illiterate, shiftless yet sometimes shifty buffoon and of the shamefully downtrodden emerged regularly in characterizations of blacks for the next hundred and fifty years. This particular comic stereotype, primarily burlesquing the black life and experience, further brutalized any chance of authentic creative impulse when in 1828 TD Rice introduced the blackface minstrel shows which, in 1840s, Daniel D Emmett carried to extreme buffoonery. It included stereotypes like Jim Crow, representing African-Americans as primitive, boondocks and coarse figures, a black send up of Davy Cockett or Mike Fink; his city equivalent was the almost effeminate Jim Dandy, a blackfaced Yankee Doodle, whose chic get up was in itself parodic.

The minstrel shows, in fact, forbade the black community any sort of presence on stage for nearly a century. Minstrel thespians, mostly white actors, would paint their faces black with burnt corks, decorate their heads with fright-wigs to carry out slapstick gestures with song and dance that caricatured the black experience as being: “lazy and shiftless, afflicted with a peculiar appetite for watermelon, which is devoured in an equally peculiar manner, a cavernous mouth coming in handy, which, on other occasions, shapes itself into unmatchably funny and slavishly broad grins, or as a funnel for a glass too many of cheap gin, or yet as witness to atrocious incapacities such as twisted pronunciations, meaningless long words, and incomprehensible jabberings” (Olanian 13). Historian Nathan Irvin Huggins points out in his seminal work Harlem Renaissance that Jim Crow or minstrel shows had nothing to do with black life or experience in reality, and that these stage-products were mere white fanciful imaginings. Referring to those “wrong” images or misrepresentations of African-Americans in the commercial minstrel theaters, he says, “Despite standard explanations that these white showmen were mimics of southern plantation Negroes, there is very little evidence to support the claim. Close analysis of the minstrel shows reveal very little Afro-American influence in the music, dance, or inspiration. In fact, the two principal character types who define this theater—Jim Crow and Jim Dandy (or Zip Coon)—are unlike any concept of the plantation black or even the Sambo stereotype” (248-49). Since most of the performers and composers were Northerners with hardly any knowledge of Southern life, the shows not only turned out to be “extravagant fiction” (Wilmeth and Miller 319), but also became testimonies that bitterly “denigrated black culture” (Hart 496).

A hotcake for the commercial theaters, the minstrel shows with troupes and black musical companies reinforced the stereotyped stage picture of the African-Americans where their comical demeanors became the character staples per se. Sterling A Brown writes, “[I]f the Negro could be shown as perpetually mirthful, his state could not be so wretched. This is, of course, the familiar procedure when conquerors depict a subject people. English authors at the time of Ireland’s greatest persecution built up the stereotype of the comic Irishmen, who fascinated English audiences and, unfortunately, in a manner known to literary historians, influenced even Irish authors” (188). Brown’s view suggests that the black portraits on US stage or in dramatic literature came under substantial white hegemonic control, and as a result, the peculiar image of a “mirthful Negro” would flood the antebellum and postbellum theater industries. As though serving the common imperialist cause, most of the literati bypassed blacks’ three-century long inhuman struggle, discrimination, segregation, and oppression. The slave became a “mirthful” fool for whom the word “wretched” stood as a complete mismatch.

However, it was “occasional dramatist” (“Three Negro Plays” Times) Ridgley Torrence who is often credited to have elevated black actors in dramatic roles on Broadway for the first time in US history (Wilmeth and Miller 28) through his Three Plays for a Negro Theatre staged on April 5, 1917 at New York’s Madison Square Garden where his three plays, written between 1914 and 1917, a comedy “The Rider of Dreams,” a tragedy “Granny Maumee,” and a passion-play with religious overtone “Simon, the Cyrenian” were staged.1 Regarded as folk plays, these not only conformed to “unimaginative realism” (according to Times), but also were seen, as per Susan Curtis’ account, as lacking Negro experience of any sort. According to her, both Torrence and Hapgood (the director and the producer, respectively) had no idea of or acquaintance with Black theater or performers. She is critical of the play’s plot, which in her opinion was “based on a sketchy and frequently exaggerated experience of Black life in [playwright’s] native Xenia, Ohio.” Susan Curtis views that Torrence misconstrued Black life as he tried to show that “Blacks were at the center of America’s folkloric tradition” while searching for an “archetypical ‘American’ play” (qtd. in Robinson 171).
Although Torrence’s plays helped grow interests in dramatizing African-American folk life, David Krasner considers them “misguided representations of black life” (97). However, Krasner’s bottlenecked observation, while discussing other folk playwrights like Richardson, Heyward, Connelly and Green, that O’Neill was also “inspired to write black folk drama” by Torrence, is extraneous and comes out of the blue. In fact, O’Neill’s black plays hardly cater to any “folksiness” of the South, but rather involve New York ghetto life and black migration of first two decades of twentieth century, drawing upon the impact on racial reality in the North that eventually led the blacks to further physical and psychological confinements. O’Neill’s characters bear genuine Harlem impulses, and their moral dilemma lies in the DuBoisian “double consciousness” with no strings attached to the South, let alone conforming to ritualistic “paraperformance” usually stapled with rural South.

For instance, the Dreamy kid, Abe, in the play is plucked-out-of-the-street portrait of a Lockeian “New Negro” cult with militant look—the kind of which had some historical connotations. The belligerence that the 1919’s audience came across in Dreamy exactly fitted in and went hand in glove with the “New Crowd Negro” cartoon published in the September 1919 issue of The Messenger right after race riots shook some US cities when victorious black soldiers returned home from World War I (Pfister 127). Quite in tune with the New Negro ethics, out of self-defense (used as a justifying motif throughout the play) Dreamy “croaked” the white fellow and now on the run form police who are chasing as well as closing on him like “hungry dogs” in McKay’s famous Harlem poem “If We Must Die.” He meets his nemesis when he comes to see his grandmother (who “single-handedly” brought him up) for the last time on deathbed—the incident, fraught with O’Neill’s succinct skill of stage description, not only shows institutional racism’s travesty assault on battered race’s emotional situation, but also stands for a significant shift in attitude, philosophy and interaction of two generations’ (portrayed through Dreamy and his grandmother) dealing with racism in general. Though Dreamy knows he will be outnumbered by police who have closed him in, he vows to “git some o’ dem fust” in a sheer defiance and commitment of “fighting back” as though complying with the spirited New Negro mantra of McKay’s poem.

Not surprisingly, O’Neill’s depiction of black life, widely recognized as a taboo subject in art and literature back then, did equally draw flak and fame as it was not customary for a white author to talk about the “Negroes.” While influential white literary critic of the twenties like Francis Ferguson came down heavily on O’Neill for choosing Harlem as setting in his play (Cargill 271-82), black intellectuals like WEB DuBois highly extolled the playwright for portraying black life as it was lived in America and saw O’Neill “bursting through” the prejudices by addressing black race’s problems (Duberman 65-66; Sheaffer 138). O’Neill even came under such a spotlight that he was considered a serious campaigner of black raison d’être, an author with intellectual acumen who well understood and was able to dramatize “Negro problem” in the 1920s, the peak of Black Renaissance. As instrumental literati, he was asked to assess “work of aspiring black dramatists in his capacity as judge of playwriting contests” (Pfister 121) by both The Crisis and Opportunity, two of the most distinguished black publications and the major generating forces for the Black Renaissance. Although O’Neill did not live to see the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s, his four plays, The Dreamy Kid (1919), The Emperor Jones (1920), All God’s Chillun Got Wings (1923), and The Iceman Cometh (1939) presented testimonies potent enough to corroborate why a movement with such legerdemain would be in the offing in a racially divided country. Hence, while forging plots of his Negro plays, he depicted “faithfully” (Shaughnessy 149-54) their plights and dilemmas as well as their ambitions and frustrations.

Relevantly thus, in April 1924, having examined some playwrights’, above all O’Neill’s, considerable inputs in the last eight years, during which O’Neill already staged four Black plays covering different facets of African-American life, leading twentieth century drama critic George Jean Nathan wrote in the American Mercury (which later was quoted appreciatively in Opportunity, a periodical of the Urban League and social work among blacks):

Up to eight or nine years ago, it is doubtful if in the entire range of the American drama was to be found a single authentic Negro character. The Negro of drama was then either of the white wool wig and kidney pain species, given to excessive hobbling, many a “yas, yas, massa, I’se a-comin,” and a comic line on his every exit, or of the species that was essentially a mere blacked-up Caucasian minstrel end man, in a cutaway coat three sizes too large for him and a snowy toupee, who was rather dubiously transformed into a dramatic character by giving him one scene in which he taught little Frieda and Otto how to say their prayers and another in which he apologetically shuffled into his master’s library when the mortgage on the latter’s old southern estate was about
to be foreclosed by the northern villain and, with tears in his eyes and a quaver in his voice, informed him that, come what might, he would stick to him until he was daid. (186)

Nathan’s statement well summarizes the deplorable status of blacks on American stage for a century and a half, and for a thorough understanding of the stage-evolvement of the “Negro of drama” that Nathan is referring to, a discussion is worthwhile. In fact, an avid reader of antebellum dramatic literature would easily detect two kinds of characters, termed as stereotypes, frequenting the stage: one is the commonly available drolly thespian and the other is the sacrificial devotee. The latter was developed within a few years of the rise of minstrelsy, keeping pace with the growing abolitionist sentiment in the North.

Arguably, the first ever role of a black in an American play is Zeke in Anna Cora Mowatt’s *Fashion* (1845), a comedy in five acts, ripe with malapropisms and farcical intrigues. Here Zeke is “a colored Servant” dressed in oversized “red and blue livery, cocked hat” (312; 1.313). He is a matured culmination of minstrelsy’s “blacked-up” (white actor in black face) portraiture aimed at arousing “race humor”—a stage antecedent of “Jim Crow” (Richards 307). To be specific, he is Jim Crow’s city counterpart Jim Dandy. The play starts with a skit as he refers to his new dress as “a coat to take the eyes off all Broadway! … it am de fixins dat make de natural born gemmen” (1.313). A gatekeeper cum valet, Zeke is an announcer of visitor-arrivals who speaks in vernacular and in twisted words, and whose appointment is justified by his malapropist employer Mrs. Tiffany as such: “I am rather sorry that he is black, but to obtain a white American for a domestic is almost impossible” (1.315). Mrs. Tiffany, like most of the Americans of the day, not only slanders the black race but also rechristens Zeke’s name since it sounds “vulgar” to her liking. When Zeke is called in, besides his job responsibilities being explained by her, his biblical name of “Ezekiel” meaning “strength is God” is commandingly replaced leaving him no choice whatsoever even to object or differ with employer’s opinion:

Your name, I hear, is Ezekiel.—I consider it too plebian an appellation to be uttered in my presence. In future you are called A-dolph. Don’t reply.—never interrupt me when I am speaking. A-dolph, as my guests arrive, I desire that you will inquire the name of every person, and then announce it in a loud, clear tone. (1.313-4)

Besides being such circumscribed, Zeke serves the purpose of a punch-bag in the play as everyone hurls abuses, in the form of racist remarks mostly, towards him. When, upon Mrs. Tiffany’s advice, Zeke informs Trueman—an all-American Yankee, a stage antecedent as well as modernized version of Jonathan, that “Missus say she’s not at home,” he is violently treated by Trueman who, with “a stout cane in his hand” retorts Zeke with threatening voice: “Out of the way you grinning nigger!” The stage description then reads, giving raw fun to the audience: “Zeke jumps out of his way as [Trueman] enters’ (1.323). Yet again, Truman throws similar kind of words to Zeke to stir “race humor”: “Out of my way; do you want me to try if your head is as hard as my stick” (4.350)? Not by the heroic Trueman only, but Zeke has also been molested almost invariably by all the characters in the play; for instance, he was referred to as “a nigger in livery” by Snobson, and threatened to be fired by Mrs. Tiffany with dismissing tone. These maltreatments towards him by the white characters in the play were mainly targeted towards providing the audience with light slapsticks at the cost of libeling an African-American, and hence numerous racist comments and verbal innuendoes typified the black roles in early American dramas where they were presented as “perpetually mirthful” caricatures and used for arousing spontaneous laughter of the white audience.

Similarly, even in the plays that seriously led propaganda for abolition on stage, in George L Aiken’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* (1859),² can be found the white authors’ topical fantasy with the stereotyped and caricatured black portraiture. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Haley is not satisfied with the only “article” Tom as he asks Shelby to “fling in” the child Harry, Eliza’s and George’s son, to “settle the business” deal because the kid proved itself to be a good item for speculation; the following scene shows how the kid is worth it:

[HARRY runs in]
SHELBY (continued): Hulloa! Jim Crow! [Throws a bunch of raisins towards him.] Pick that up now. [HARRY does so.]
HALEY: Bravo, little ‘un! [Throws an orange, which HARRY catches. He sings and dances around the stage.] Hurrah! Bravo! What a young ‘un! That chap’s a case, I’ll promise. Tell you what, Shelby, fling in that chap, and I’ll settle the business. (1.378-79)
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Here Aiken’s use of the word “Threws” twice in stage direction pulls off zoo imagery: the raisins and the orange could easily be given instead of being thrown into the ground or air. With this animal imagery, Harry is shown to be relegated first into a chicken (eating off the ground), and secondly into a monkey (plucking off the air)—thus fulfilling the status of a “nigger” in white dominated society where his skin-alikes are referred to as “article” by comparatively more sympathetic masters (Tom and Topsy were called “article” or commodity with good market value by their respective first masters Shelby and St. Clare in 1.2 and in 2.2 respectively). St. Clare treats the coarse, uncultured, little girl from backwoods, Topsy (an infant version of Jim Crow), in the same way as he asks her to give a minstrel show to please Ophelia:

ST. CLARE: … And speaking of that puts me in mind that I have made a purchase for your department. There’s the article now. Here, Topsy! [Whistles.]
[TOPSY runs on.] …
ST. CLARE: … I thought she was rather a funny specimen in the Jim Crow line. Here, Topsy, give us a song, and show us some of your dancing.
[TOPSY sings a verse and dances a breakdown.] (2.391)

Quite alike, Boucicault’s The Octoroon opens with a skit using the “darkies” or black children who run about the stage, steal bananas from plate before they are viciously chased away by old Pete who refers to these kids as “black trash” who “nebber was born” (1.451)—much like Topsy in Uncle Tom’s Cabin who herself claimed: “Never was born, tell you; never had no father, nor mother, nor nothin’. I war raised by a speculator, with lots of others” (2.392).

Tellingly, the evolvement of Jim Crow shows of 1830s and 1840s involved light-heartedly aping mannerisms of an aged Negro in the forms of songs, dances, etc. on stage. While employing children onstage for diversion was not altogether uncumstomary to the then minstrel audience, yet Aiken’s and Boucicault’s plays project how choosing the kids for providing Jim Crow entertainment at home not only stands as an appalling instance of waning slavery era values, but also goes on to show how even the good or humane Southern masters were so overtly-prejudiced that they were unable to overcome the social jinx. Indeed the literature of the era, even with serious abolitionist tendencies, was also not out of this racist league.

The title characters of the plays, Uncle Tom and the octoroon Zoe, are another kind of “kidney pain species” created out of bigoted white imagination: very kind, good-natured, naturally docile, and devoted like a pet to its master. In Uncle Tom’s Cabin, when Chole asks old Tom to runaway with Eliza and Harry and escape “hard work and starving” under a new master, Tom replies showing unimaginable, utterly irrational devotion to master Shelby, who is quite rationally trading Tom to save the estate. Knowing too well that a tough life is beckoning him, Tom says, “Mas’r always found me on the spot—he always will. I never have broken trust, nor used my pass no ways contrary to my word, and I never will” (1.381). Zoe in The Octoroon is a “child by a quadroon slave” who gives vent to her existential frustration saying that out of her whole lot of blood, only “one drop in eight is black—bright red as the rest may be, that one drop poisons all the blood” (2.467). Yet when her fiancée white George, the nephew of her master, offers her to elope with him to get married and thus to getaway from her auction with other slaves to pay off the estate’s “old Liverpool debt,” she declines. Knowing well that fleeing away would not only help her with a better life as a freed black but also would pave the way for her marriage with George in North (since under Southern state-law she could be only kept as a slave-mistress here), she instead replies with emotion-choked voice showing unwavering devotion towards her mistress: “I’d rather be black than ungrateful! Ah, George, our race has at least one virtue—it knows how to suffer” (2.467)

Critics nowadays consider that such wretched, inert, abiding, and too-good-to-be-true stage projections like Uncle Tom or Zoe by white playwrights such as Aiken or Boucicault were chiefly targeted at staving off African-Americans’ threatening virility with a view to keeping the Caucasian blood untainted from the danger of its being turning into mulattos, quadroons or octoroons—signifying a step closer to whiteness. Commenting on such racial images floating in American literature from the mid-nineteenth until the early decades of twentieth century, Kenneth Burke writes facetiously: “One could safely bestow one’s love upon such essentially ineffectual foibles and imaginings. They had the lovableness of the incompetent. Americans, driven by some deep competitive fear, seem to open their hearts most easily to such symbols of ‘contended indigence’” (361). Thus, the antebellum authors
projected the distinct racial division well before supremacist writers like Madison Grant or Lothrop Stoddard who, during the first two decades of twentieth century, urged the American whites to perform their sacred “racial duty” by keeping the “Negro” in its “place” (Stoddard 252).

O’Neill also wrote about the black slaves in two of his notes for Negro plays, but against those Tom or Sambo images. While “Bantu Boy” (1927) represents the period when millions of Africans were forced from their homes and transported to America as slaves, the “Runaway Slave” (1935) speaks of their ordeal and inhuman condition in America under their masters, who are not only overtly possessive, strict and wicked but also busy in speculations and fathering black children for earning more money. The ideas for these plays are models potent enough to assert that O’Neill, besides planning to write a lengthy cycle of eleven plays depicting the effects of acquisitiveness on Harford family entitled “A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed,” had similarly in mind an ambitious project of portraying the White greed in America who used Blacks as profitable product like ivory. O’Neill bestowed upon his black protagonists self-esteem and acumen that challenged and diluted the white psyche, and thus “elevated the image of the Negro in America in early twenties” (Abrahamson 40). When an African clan leader, the Bantu chief, is tricked to a US slave-ship and brought to be afterwards sold and separated from family, he slaps back and scoffs at the institution of slavery as he tells his master who intends to free him now, “Freedom is God’s, white man, you cannot set me free. I’m free” (Floyd O’Neill at Work 176).

When Eugene O’Neill came to Greenwich Village and started experimenting with realistic and expressionistic plays during the first two decades of twentieth century, the cultural imagination of the American Theater had binary grasps on the matter of African-Americans. On general level, minstrelsy facilitated whites with the ability to fantasize about blacks as they wanted or wished, and on serious or academic point, there had been a note of negation about Negroes for which they were ruled out of being impact-figures in literary scenes. That is why, late in postbellum, modern America, leading black intellectuals complained that most of the progressive white American men of letters “want[ed] Uncle Toms, Topsies, good ‘darkies’ and clowns” as black portraits in overall literature (DuBois “Criteria of Negro Art” 985). It is important to note here that the thought of black life and experience always carried with it the undeniable and dreadful topic of slavery and racism for which their depictions in literature had long been ignored by authors. JP Diggins identifies two probable reasons for such absence of true-to-life portrayals of blacks in overall American literature before O’Neill after he compiles findings of recent scholars. According to him, firstly, general mass even of the late antebellum era seemed to be “less concerned about the institution of slavery”—Lincoln himself during his famous debates with Stephen Douglas noticed this that in the new territories people were even in support of slavery. Secondly, a big role was played by the “guilt over the institution of slavery” that repressed the story of subjected people for which, as Diggins contends, “in recent years contemporary historians, once young radical activists from the sixties, have criticized previous generations of academics for neglecting to include in the study of American history and society the story of African-Americans” (135-37).

It is, therefore, remarkable to note that O’Neill voiced for the blacks when no author, historian or academic dared to bring it up either out of “guilt,” or of fear for Ku Klux Klan, or of losing reputation in the midst of white majority. Seen from another angle, O’Neill unearthed a significant feature of American history through testing and scorning America’s dominant group’s consciousness which inhumanly barred members of an entire race from all sorts of human rights, as well as killed, lynched, and kept them in segregation from jobs, churches, schools, neighborhoods, etc. even in the modern era of twentieth century.

As mentioned earlier, a very common motif of the tragedies of the era, ranging from antebellum to early twentieth century, is that the innocent half-breed succumbs to life only due to possessing a skin color which he or she feels like peeling off. This view, mostly coming from white authors, which came to be called “scientific racism” by sociologists of late twentieth century, became so predominant while forging a plot of a drama dealing with racism that it started seriously to overlook the practical problems of the just-migrated blacks in the North. Thus, from Irish-American Boucicault’s The Octoroon (1859) to African-American Hughes’ Mulatto (1935), the emphasis seemed to have been on the “tainted” skin color of naturalistic debacle. It was considered the root cause of the marginalization, segregation, discrimination, and debasement of blacks in the hands of the dominant class in the United States overlooking the outer reality of the life led on the streets and slums of New York and Harlem.

Indeed, New York and most of the Northern cities underwent a phenomenal event of Great Migration when nearly 1.5 million African-Americans migrated to North from the South between 1910-1940 not only to escape
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racism, lynching, KKK, but also to seek employment in industrial cities, in arms manufacturing, and to get education for their children. Usually seen in black history as the African-American dream of leading a better life, this great expectation became the worst nightmare in the North for Blacks as they found the left-behind Southern brutal memories exposed them to more atrocities in urban North. Race riots, job discrimination, housing restriction, oppressive reality of ghetto existence, overall depression and the Southern cultural and linguistic traits that created “otherness,” dashed their dream or hope. The literature of Harlem Renaissance unfortunately covers very little of these problems encountered by the newly-migrated African-Americans. O’Neill wrote his Black plays during these torrid years, and became the only exception among writers, black or white, of the era to depict the “urban black problems.” Huggins recounts, for instance, how even black intellectual writers like James Weldon Johnson deliberately stayed away from talking about these “problems” of the “common [black] man.” According to him, “[I]n those years [1920s] few Harlem intellectuals addressed themselves to issues related to tenements, crime, violence, and poverty. Even Opportunity, the magazine of the Urban League and social works among Negroes, did not discuss urban problems as much as it announced the Negro’s coming of age. In part this was due, no doubt, to the desire of black leaders to stress black achievement rather than black problems” (Huggins 4-5).

Huggins rightly claims that the then black scholars’ endeavor to bolster “a positive self-image” not only “annoy[s]” the “present-day readers” for ignoring such serious “urban black problems” like segregation, housing restriction, social discrimination, killing, etc. encountered by thousands of members of the race during Great Migration, but also renders Johnson-like intellectuals as “cultural elitists” who simply overlooked the crises as their objective was “to stress black achievement rather than black problem” (5). He further contends that such tactical move or “desire of the black leaders” proved futile at the end; as he says, “It would take more defeat than [black leaders] had yet known for them to believe that what they were building would, in time, imprison them” (4). The only exception among them, as claimed by this acclaimed black historian, was Langston Hughes. But regrettably, Hughes’ only Broadway success Mulatto (1935) is trapped in the quagmire of “tragic mulatto” cult, set in the rural South, hence bypassing the “new” urban life or Black Renaissance of the North.

It is O’Neill’s The Dreamy Kid which was arguably the first to address the situation of the black ghetto in New York City, and at the same time, the first play to give African-American actors access to mainstream drama or Broadway (Sternlicht 47; Gelbs 399). It marks a landmark moment in American dramatic literature—celebrating the African-Americans’ memorable entrée to the white professional theater, making history with an all-black-cast stage engaged in serious tragic roles. The play was produced in 1919, a time when America was wobbling with racial violence. Besides numerous killings, The Crisis reported as many as 77 lynching of blacks in that year. With the end of the war in 1919, race riots broke out in industrial cities where blacks were experiencing acute job discrimination and housing restrictions (Pfister 129). In New York City, many black men were gunned down in fights, crossfire, and shootouts. It was during this tense period that O’Neill learned from his close and lifelong friend, the black gambler Joe Smith, of a young streetwise, small-time gangster named “Dreamy,” the prototype of the character in this one-act play.

In The Dreamy Kid, O’Neill introduces for the first time on stage what cultural analysts in late twentieth century termed as “structural,” “institutional,” and “cultural” mores of racism (During 162-65). It tells of a shameful era of US, where the existing parameters of its society put in place a social structure that conditioned lack of opportunities for blacks and thus made it difficult for them to strive for staying alive let alone living a better future, where public institutions like law enforcing agencies were used to bash the minority groups, where the confined cultural Others like Dreamy kids of the era, sufferers of overt racial fanaticism, were hunted down indiscriminately.

The Dreamy Kid takes place in a rundown bedroom in a colored neighborhood in New York City. As generally viewed that “O’Neill was the first American playwright to include the setting of his plays as part of the central action” (Cawthon 24), so here the internal description of the slum tenements go hand in glove with the external reality of black life. The stage description of the house in New York City where Abe, the Dreamy kid, was brought up from late childhood to adulthood, the environment as well as the atmosphere hanging over the neighborhood, the abject situation of Abe’s grandmother on deathbed surrounded by medicine bottles, etc. chronicle a common sight of poverty, despair, estrangement and aggravation. It gives the impression that the population of this part of the United States hardly “belong.” Among other references to the wretched image of Manny Saunders, there includes an “old-fashioned wooden bed-stead with a feather mattress … In the rear wall, toward the right, a low window with ragged white curtains … The rooms is in shadowy half darkness, the only light being a pale glow that seeps through the window form the arc lamp on the nearby corner, and by which the objects in the room can be dimly discerned. The
vague outline of Mammy Saunders’ figure lying in the bed can be seen …” (675). The apartment and the overall
ghetto reflect African-Americans’ living in isolation and squalor. The play opens with Mammy’s allegorical
chattering as she “weakly” calls her granddaughter Ceely Ann to say in southern faint and broken dialect, “Light de
lamp … Hits mighty dark in yere” (675). The audience in few minutes would come to know that her last wish is to
see “Dreamy,” the apple of her eye, her sole inspiration in the haunted and devastated South, whom she named
“Dreamy” while migrating to North. Born in slavery, Mammy Saunders migrated to North with an aspiration of a
changed and good fortune where Dreamy symbolized the means of achieving black American dream for her. She
speaks of that moment of ecstasy and faith when she gave her grandson the very name:

Does you know how yo’ come by dat nickname dey all calls yo’—de Dreamy? Is I ever tole yo’
dat? Hit was one mawnin’ b’fo’ we come No’th. (684)

Such dream of achieving higher social status did not come true in the North for blacks. If the southern black
memory of tears and blood was their bitter lot, the new brute Northern environment was the bitterest. Late in the fag
end of twentieth century, leading African-American playwright August Wilson bemoaningly recounts the events
unfolded during this migration and opines, “We uprooted ourselves and attempted to transplant this culture to the
pavements of industrialized North. And it was a transplant that did not take” (Rothstein 1). O’Neill, through
Mammy and Dreamy, representatives of two generations of blacks, did validate August Wilson’s words seventy
years ago how and why “the transplant … did not take” place.

In fact, Mammy here pioneers the vision of black American dream of Great Migration—coming in the urban
North from resigned passivity of life on isolated Southern country farms in the hope of changing social and financial
status. In this regard, The Dreamy Kid shares weight with Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun (1959).
Hansberry’s Mama (Lena Younger) plays the second string of black American dream as she buys a house for her
family in the midst of the whites, who do not want to take her family in, with a wish of getting assimilated. Hence
Mammy Saunders stands as a prototype of black’s desire to vie for equality in white-dominated American society.
Both plays’ records of the evolvement of the black desires in America and their unyielding dream to earn
recognition in the face of society’s jaundiced view of them are considered rare moments in American drama.

Abe “Dreamy,” the title character, smacks of an ignorant, meek, innocent young lad whose name is ironical
when judged against his defiant, frightening and boisterous disposition as a teenager right after the play begins.
O’Neill’s stage description for Dreamy reads: “He is a well-built, good-looking young Negro, light in color. His
eyes are shifty and hard, their expression one of tough, scornful defiance. His mouth is cruel and perpetually drawn
back at the corners into a snarl” (1.680). This will stand as total contrast to what Mammy Saunders, who raised him
single-handedly from a baby, reminiscences how “Dreamy” had an innocent childhood and used to gaze at the world
with joy, admiration and dream for which she named him such:

Down by de crik—under de ole willow—whar I uster take yo’—wid yo’ big eyes a-chasin’—de
sun flitterin’ froo de grass—an’ out on the water— … yo’ was always—a-lookin’—an’ a-thinkin’
to yo’se’f—an’ yo’ big eyes jest a-dreamin’ an’ a-dreamin’—an’ dat’s w’en I gives yo’ dat
nickname—Dreamy. (1.690)

Dreamy, according to Ceely Ann, has evolved into a “lowflung young trash,” and she regrets the fact that “ole
Mammy don’ know no dif’frunt but he’s de mos’ innercent young lamb in de worl’” (678); Dreamy has been
running from law for shooting a white man dead in a brawl which, in his words, was done “ter perfect [his] own life”
(681). Little does Mammy know that Dreamy has been raising a gang, always fights with white men and policemen
for subsistence. An on-the-run Dreamy now comes to visit her, jeopardizing his life in the process since police
successfully closes on him at play’s end. He vows, however, never to be taken alive in this post-slavery, modern era
by the agents of the white law much like his antebellum forerunner George Harris in George L. Aiken’s Uncle
Tom’s Cabin (1852). This strikes a strong relevance and affinity between him and George to show how for decades
the blacks like him have been on their heels to be alive, fugitive in the eyes of white law for a crime they had to
negotiate with as the worst possible choice, pushed and confined to a back-against-the-wall situation for existence,
thus biting the dust of white civility. George in Uncle Tom’s Cabin has no other option but to flee to Canada to
prevent his wife and kid from being separated for entire life (his infant is also about to be sold to a speculator), and
when he declares to escape to North and then to Canada, and is asked by an anxious Eliza of a possible capture in
the hands of law for breaching the clauses of the Slave Act, George shows his strong resolve by declaring, “I won’
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be taken, Eliza—I’ll die first! I’ll be free, or I’ll die” (1.1.377)! Likewise, pretty much determined to evade the “chair,” Dreamy maintains the same demeanor and violently retorts Irene’s view that police might track him down someday saying: “Dey don’ get the Dreamy alive—not for the chair! Lawd Jesus, no suh” (690)! The fact of the matter is, though blacks have been emancipated de jure in 1865, their conditions hardly changed. They could not break free the clutches of institutional racism and are still on the run.

O’Neill further delves into the crime-motif of Dreamy to illuminate a distressing and disturbing situation of black life in twentieth century US, showing miserable sights of black experience half a century after emancipation. In fact, George’s criminal offence in Uncle Tom’s Cabin was that of fleeing, and thus breaking the white law by trying to keep his family together; otherwise all three of them would be living separately without knowing each other’s whereabouts or existence. Backing up his own decision for breaching the Southern law, he asks Wilson, a white planter, to picture:

I wonder, Mr. Wilson, if the Indians should come and take you a prisoner away from your wife and children, and want to keep you all your life hoeing corn for them, if you’d think it your duty to abide in the condition in which you were called? I rather imagine that you’d think the first stray horse you could find an indication of Providence, shouldn’t you? (2.396)

In Dreamy’s case, it was an act of self-defense. He did his best to stay out of the deadly encounter with the white fellow, but his attacker was pigheaded:

‘T’warn’t my doin’ nohow. He was de one lookin’ for trouble. I wasn’t seekin’ for no mess wid him dat I would help. But he tole folks he was gwine ter git me for a fac’, and dat fo’ced my hand. I had ter git him ter perfect my own life. (1.680-81)

The truth is, though Dreamy is living in postbellum era as a free man, the law of the land is determined and influenced by race, color and position where the oppressed minority is denied fair share or trial. Since everyone is not equal in the eyes of biased law, Abe does not turn himself over to police for committing a homicide in self-protection; and even though he has witnesses for this, he knows very well that he will not go through a just trial. Living in a hostile environment where the law of the state will not protect him, Abe chooses to run away from it.

Chased by the police, the representative of hostile environment, who are hot on his trail, the doomed Dreamy becomes, in Joel Pfister’s words, “O’Neill’s embodiment of the black dream of freedom in the North turned into a nightmare” (124). Nonetheless, Dreamy adds further tag on black’s trajectory of evolvement in America—by taking the baton from his avatar George Harris and running—by becoming a postbellum Northern runaway felon from an antebellum Southern runaway slave.

Dreamy in the play is reminiscent of Alain Locke’s “sudden and shocking … New Negro” who has soaked in the spirit of Claude McKay’s 1919’s famous poem “If We Must Die,” who would be bent upon “fighting back” against the white bigotry with militant-intent. Putting on expressions of “shifty and hard … scornful defiance” on face, wearing “well-fitting clothes of a flashy pattern” where “a light cap is pulled down on the side of his head,” he is always “fightin’ wid white folks, an’ tolin’ a pistol in his pocket” (678). Dreamy, thus, is a verbatim from such image for his disposition exactly fits in and goes hand in glove with that of the “New Crowd Negro,” cartooned in the September 1919 issue of The Messenger by taking the baton from his avatar George Harris and running—by becoming a postbellum Northern runaway felon from an antebellum Southern runaway slave.

Indeed, O’Neill’s play stands as a historical testimony bearing the reasons as to why it was not possible for black dream to come true in North. The playwright achieves this by shifting one of the major focuses on The Dreamy Kid to unearth the loss of Dreamy’s innocence and the reasons behind it. According to Mammy’s accounts, Dreamy has always been a good boy on whom she has strong faith as she tells all around that “Dreamy ain’t gwine let his ole Mammy die all lone by he’se’f an’ him not dere wid her” (682). She seems content and proud with the good upbringing she provided Dreamy with even in her deathbed: “if dere’s one thing more’n nother makes me feel like I mighter done good in de sight er de Lawd, hits dat I raised yo’ fum a baby” (684). Mammy Saunders dies in her innocence and naivety with the knowledge that her grandson is the same good “dreamy kid” once she raised. O’Neill’s special theatrical maneuver spares her the agony of reality.
The point is, Dreamy loses his innocence because the very society he lives in denounces and castigates him for his racial affiliation or skin color, deprives him of the basic opportunities of sustenance, job or descent living, and thus makes him take resort to disreputable or violent means to stay alive or to take his frustration out on. Rightly thus, Floyd views, “As the years passed, the child’s eyes lost their dreaminess, which was crushed by the harsh realities of his life on the streets of New York” (The Plays 155). In other words, the social system that breeds racial narrow-mindedness and oppression hardly lets any colored person maintain a livelihood to exist respectably in society. Robert Blauner, in his Racial Oppression in America, recounts a testimony of a Black American living in that era to delineate how wretchedly they survived: “We need jobs. I got eight kids, and I’ve only worked ten days this year. I ain’t ever been a crook, but if they don’t do something, I’m gonna have to take something. I don’t know how they expect us to live” (200).

Moreover, the offstage presence of police as one hostile force representing and propagating institutional racism should also be taken into consideration. Members of police force have often been charged with harassment and unconscionable brutality against the blacks and other minorities in the US. This accusation, nonetheless, applies here as they advance to hunt down Dreamy even at the time of his acute mental turmoil. Since they ingloriously close in and he is aware of their hatred towards his race, Dreamy grows more with militant-intent and pledges to fight back rather than to be taken alive. Through splendid theatrical ingenuity O’Neill here is stirring audience’s compassion towards Dreamy, who, regardless of this impending danger around, persuaded by his superstitious belief and goaded by love for dying grandmother, decides not to run off but to be on her side. The police pose threat not only to Dreamy, the torch-bearer of next generation of blacks, but also to old grandmother who suffers from emotional sterility in his absence. Since it is usual discernment among historians and critics that the American police, “probably include the highest proportion of individual racists … of all established institutions” in US (Blauner 97), the audience is repulsed, disgusted and frustrated seeing police’s lack of humanity, particularly when they attack the house in about the time of the old woman’s passing out.

O’Neill here seems to bank upon and play with this common black perception of this racist organization to corroborate the verity when he puts more stress not on the gross exterior of gangster-murderer Dreamy, but on the delicate interior of caring Dreamy. Dreamy is not portrayed as an obstinate criminal or flagrant lawbreaker affecting a threat to civilization, but rather as someone with humane qualities as seen in his love and concern for family members, superstitious fears, and risking life just to meet the dying grandmother. When Mammy laments to Dreamy that he has not been around for some time to talk to her, he replies with a note of appeal: “I ain’t had de time, Mammy; but you knows I was always game ter give you anything I got. You knows dat, don’ you, Mammy” (1.684)? Edwin A Engel observes that “beneath his hard, efficient, snarling exterior there appears increasingly the soft and dangerous tendencies which he has carried within him … Superstition, affection, boyish bravado, effect the disintegration of the adult Negro who was unfortunate enough to come of age in the sordid, alien, white man’s environment of New York City” (46). Thus, by apprising audience of the reason behind Dreamy’s killing the white man, O’Neill seems to downplay the gravity of the homicidal offense to diminish our aversion towards him. In a critic’s words, “O’Neill induces [audience’s] complete sympathy and pity for a conventionally abhorrent character” (Woollcott 134). In consequence, audience’s sympathy reaches out to Dreamy who murders a white man to protect himself from getting killed.

Besides serving as a microcosm of black community, the family unit is depicted to harbor genuine love and altruism among them throughout, which goes far to show O’Neill’s care for the oppressed minority, particularly considering the fact that The Dreamy Kid is the only play dealing with all black characters without the “melting-pot” situation except for the offstage presence of white policemen. When the action kicks off, Ceely Ann is discovered to serve the needs of the dying Mammy Saunders and reassuring her of recovery as well as cheering her up even though Ceely is found to wipe her tears with handkerchief secretly. Although completely aware of Mammy’s failing health, she tries to invigorate her spirit claiming that old Mammy is soon going to regain her health to start over again: “de doctor tol me des when I goes down to de door with him. (glibly) He say you is de mos’ strongest ‘oman fo’ yo’ years ever he sees in de worl’; and he tell me you gwine ter be up and walkin’ agin fo’ de week’s out” (1.676). Also, the fret and solicitude of Dreamy’s girlfriend Irene for his safety, her wide search to track him down in order to hide him from the encroaching police, her determination to stay and die with him, obviously excites our admiration for her. Through these characters O’Neill appears to present to the audience a glaring picture of what true love, care, gratitude and fellow-feeling are all about. O’Neill denied this rare show of harmony to any of his ensembles of whites in his entire dramatic canon.
Again, if pondered as to why a young potential kid is hanging around and doing nothing, the answer would be that for Dreamy and many blokes of his race there is hardly any opportunities to advance in a racially prejudiced society. To wonder why Dreamy is involved in “fight’in wid white folks,” it might be that he considers them as an entrenched vehicle of his people’s oppression, his folks’ poverty and repression. George S Schuyler observed in the twenties: “It is difficult enough to survive and prosper in this world under the best of conditions, but when one must face such an attitude on the part of those who largely control the means of existence, the struggle is great indeed. … Nothing else could be expected from a people who confront a continuous barrage of insult and calumny and discrimination from the cradle to grave. The Negro is a sort of black Gulliver chained by white Lilliputians, a prisoner in jail of color prejudice, a babe in the forest of bigotry” (285 and 291). Therefore, the restless and paranoid Dreamy, portrayed as a murderer as well as a belligerent, defiant and repulsive character, is hard-bitten by the harsh realities of his surroundings where the social and administrative systems were indifferent to his plight. The curtain falls in climax as Dreamy sends Irene away, barricades himself in the room, crouches down by Mammy’s side (who is about to “croak”) giving her his left hand and holding the cocked revolver in right hand, aiming towards the fast approaching police at the door. His two hands are clutching “two warring ideals” (DuBois The Souls 2) where Mammy represents the African cultural heritage, while his pistol stands for a fast, free, violence-prone American way of “New Negro” life.

Dreamy’s tragedy is the consequence of ethnic prejudice existed in the then America. His succumbing to racial fate through a tragic struggle elevates him to the position of “an authentic Negro character.” Diggins views that through Dreamy O’Neill introduces “a hardened black man rising to individual responsibility and moral choice” who is able to discern the “conflict of values” which lies at the core of any tragedy. Dreamy thus turns out to be a tragic hero of a modern black tragedy who is “divided against himself, torn between the warnings of his gangs to stay away and the memories of his grandmother that compel him to return” (Diggins 141-42). While Doris Abrahamson considers that O’Neill offered the theater a “dramatization of black life beyond the level of minstrel show” at a time when “minor [minstrel] roles were reserved only for blacks (27), Olivia Coolidge thinks that through The Dreamy Kid, O’Neill “paved the way for an understanding that [blacks’] position as underdog in [American] society is not comic and has important social implications” (140). Undoubtedly, this play marks a turning point in (African-) American dramatic literature wherein the playwright showcases a protagonist who is shown to be a victim of, and at the same time, a spin-off from the society sunk in racial inequity due to both ethnic groups’ internalization of racist beliefs.

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1 On the following day of plays’ premiere, The New York Times ran an article titled “Three Negro Plays Played by Negroes” where it compared “occasional dramatist” Torrence’s such initiative to draw black life in US with that of the Irish playwrights’ in Britain—“to interpret the traditions, sorrows and aspirations of the negro race, striving to speak for it in the theatre as Lady Gregory, Mr. Yeats and their fellows sought to speak for the Irish.” This article even goes far to judge tradition on both sides of the Atlantic by dubbing the derring-dos of Torrence’s protagonist in the dark comedy “The Rider of the Dreams” as “an amused and friendly study of a playboy of the Southern world who dreams great dreams, buts gets into all manner of trouble when he tries to obey them in an alien and fiercely practical world.” This nonetheless is reminiscent of Irishman Synge’s The Playboy of the Western World.

2 Stage versions/adaptations of the novels Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe and The Quadroon (1856) by Mayne Reid respectively.

3 Significantly enough, Hansberry’s title of the play, taken from a line of Langston Hughes’ poem “Harlem,” splendidly suits Dreamy’s plight—“Dream deferred? … Like a raisin in the Sun?” (Beaty and Hunter 1805).
References

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