



REGRESSION AS A DEFENCE MECHANISM IN EUGENE O'NEILL'S *ALL GOD'S CHILLUN GOT WINGS*

EUGENE O'NEILL'İN *ALL GOD'S CHILLUN GOT WINGS* ADLI OYUNUNDA BİR SAVUNMA MEKANİZMASI OLARAK GERİLEME

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Abstract

This research paper analyses the psychoanalytic theory of regression, originally speculated upon by Sigmund Freud and further developed by Anna Freud, and assesses its use in Eugene O'Neill's play *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, written in 1924. Regression, here identified as the ego's temporary or permanent reversal to an earlier stage of development, is a powerful instrument of analysis for understanding O'Neill's characters and their psychological tensions. Through close reading of character development, social context, and setting in the play, this study demonstrates how O'Neill makes use of Freudian theory to explain the effect of systemic racism, societal pressure, and internal struggle on the human psyche. Ella's breakdown and Jim's inferiority complex depict regression as defence mechanism and reveal its transformative and self-destructive power. This work demonstrates the manner in which psychoanalytic theory may enhance the analysis of dramatic literature and its comment on the crossroads of race, identity, and humanity.

Öz

Bu çalışma, Sigmund Freud tarafından ortaya konan ve Anna Freud tarafından geliştirilen gerileme (regresyon) kavramını incelemekte ve bu kavramı Eugene O'Neill'in 1924 tarihli *All God's Chillun Got Wings* adlı oyununa uygulamaktadır. Egonun geçici ya da kalıcı olarak daha erken bir gelişim evresine dönmesi olarak tanımlanan regresyon, O'Neill'in karakterlerinin psikolojik mücadelelerini anlamak için güçlü bir yorumlama çerçevesi sunar. Oyunun mekânı, toplumsal bağlamı ve karakter gelişimi yakından incelenerek, bu çalışmada, O'Neill'in Freudyen teoriyi, sistematik ırkçılığın, toplumsal normların ve içsel çatışmanın insan psikolojisi üzerindeki etkilerini ortaya çıkarmak için nasıl kullandığı gösterilmektedir. Ella'nın duygusal çöküşü ve Jim'in aşağılık duygusuyla mücadelesi, bir başa çıkma mekanizması olarak regresyonu örneklemekte ve onun hem yıkıcı hem de dönüştürücü potansiyelini açığa çıkarmaktadır. O'Neill'in eserini Freud'un savunma mekanizmaları çerçevesinde konumlandırarak, bu çalışma psikoanalitik teorinin dramatik edebiyatın anlaşılmasını nasıl derinleştirdiğini ve ırk, kimlik ve insanın kırılganlığı arasındaki kesişim noktalarına nasıl ışık tuttuğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

1. INTRODUCTION

“Don’t cry, Jim! You mustn't cry! I've got only a little time left and I want to play. Don't be old Uncle Jim now. Be my little boy, Jim. Pretend you're Painty Face and I'm Jim Crow. Come and play!”

All God's Chillun Got Wings, Eugene O'Neill.

The most notable interpretive theory among the modern psychoanalytic theory (which first emerged in the 1960s), is founded on the antiquated principles of the mind, instincts, and sexuality. It was initially a school of thought credited to the renowned intellectual, Austrian Sigmund Freud. His empirical theory that unconscious “defence mechanisms” insulate the individual from harmful sensations, thoughts, and desires was possibly his most significant innovation in human psychology. Anna Freud listed her father’s initial set of defence mechanisms in the first comprehensive book on those notions, *The Ego, and the Mechanisms of Defence* (1936).

Regression, in the words of Sigmund Freud, is an unconscious defence mechanism that results in the short-term or long-term transfer of the ego to a more formative stage, instead of dealing with undesired inclinations in a conscious mature approach (1977). The primary objective of this paper is to examine this idea in relation to Eugene O'Neill's 1924 play *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, focusing on the play's locales, social and political context, and the characters' psychological states. Particularly, in relation to Jim and Ella's psychological growth as a result of the Acts' advancement in the face of the then-normalized racial segregation.

2. DISCUSSION

Having introduced the social and psychological context of *All God's Chillun Got Wings* and its central characters, It is important to explore the theoretical framework that underpins their behaviour. The concept of regression, a key defence mechanism first described by Sigmund Freud and later expanded by Anna Freud, provides a lens through which the characters’ responses to social pressures, internal conflicts, and personal fears can be understood. By exploring regression in psychological terms, one can better interpret how O'Neill’s characters navigate the challenges of racial prejudice, societal expectations, and emotional struggles throughout the play.

Defence mechanisms, also known as adaptive mental mechanisms, lessen psychological dissonance and struggle when both inner and outer reality drastically alter. Such reality modifications, if not “distorted” and “denied,” can lead to crippling anxiety and/or melancholy (Vaillant, 2020). These concepts can be defined as cognitive functions that permit the mind to arrive at reasonable resolutions to problems the mind is incapable of solving. These arrangements often entail hiding from internal impulses or emotions that could possibly pose a danger to one's ego or cause anxiety. Defence mechanisms usually stem from the unconscious mind.

Defence mechanism as a concept initially comes from the psychoanalytic theory that there are opposing tendencies in the mind that dominate one another. The term is credited to have first originated in “The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence,” an article by Sigmund Freud, published in 1894. Although Sigmund Freud initially postulated regression and other defence mechanisms as a component of his psychoanalytic theory, his daughter Anna Freud later developed his theories on defence mechanisms, such as regression. Anna proposed that regression is an immature defence mechanism that surges when the regressor is incapable of coping with reality in a mature age-appropriate framework (1936). Anna indicated that an individual's behaviour may demonstrate the development stage on which they may have been fixated (1936). For instance, during the period of oral development, a person could form habits that involve their mouth. Any obsession with the mouth such as verbal abuse may be a sign of an oral obsession. Additionally, in Freud's viewpoint, he estimated that people who are fixated on the anal stage would either display overly clean behaviours or have a rougher or more wasteful nature, depending on how their parents responded to them when they were children (1905).

When regression is utilised as a coping method, the individual starts behaving like a juvenile, immature, or a behaviour out of their age range, regressors revisit a previous development stage and possibly exhibit excessive outbursts of rage, aggressive childish behaviour, and desperate need of reliance. As asserted by Weinstock, this defence must generally be viewed as maladaptive, because regressing to cope with stressors is likely ineffectual in most situations. Since it makes people overly reliant on others to be forceful and make judgements readily, regression may be substantially connected with doubt (1967). Moreover, Freud connected regression and fixation in the aetiology of neuroses. According to him, neurotic patients frequently adapt the notion of regression when faced with external stressors, they regress to a developmental stage that was immature and had a substantial

influence on their mental growth, despite the factor of being unconscious (1953). The individual's tendency to regress, as claimed by Carl Jung, "is not just a relapse into infantilism, but an attempt to get at something necessary: the universal experience of childhood innocence, the sense of security, of protection, of reciprocated love, and of trust" (1993). Nonetheless, as maintained by large research and data, those who use regression as a coping mechanism are usually met with increasing levels of anxiety and stress (Segal et al. 2007). Additionally, it is reported that the usage of regression to cope was associated with higher rates of suicidal thoughts and violent behaviour in adults and adolescents, and these two traits were intricately connected with one another (Apter et al. 1989).

Regression is therefore a double-edged mechanism: whereas, in the short run, it can function as relief of psychological comfort, long-term reliance on it may inhibit emotional maturation and aggravate mental disease. Understanding regression, especially through psychoanalytic conceptualizations, affords hints as to how humans cope with stress and the potential ill consequences of maladaptive coping mechanisms.

Having discussed regression as a primary defence mechanism in psychoanalytic theory, the query of how and why Eugene O'Neill's work provides a strong example for such principles becomes valid. The supreme interest of O'Neill in human psychology, inner struggles, and exposure to tabooed social themes—such as race and intragroup conflict—place his characters on the best lines for the study of regression in real life. Information regarding O'Neill's background and writing process is used to further explain how his personal and professional life influenced the psychological depth of his characters.

Being regarded as the father of American theatre, Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953), is one of the most influential American writers of the 20th century. He was given the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936 and won the Pulitzer Prize several times throughout his career as one of the first authors to consider the theatre and drama as literary works. He was regarded then and continues to be recognised as one of the most significant playwrights in American theatre, elevating plays above mere amusement or pleasure, despite the fact that some of his plays were not performed during his lifetime. His poetically titled plays were among the first to introduce realistic tactics to the American literary scene. His work *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) is frequently listed among the best legacies of American drama during his time. O'Neill's plays were amongst the first to employ deeper themes in drama, his works emphasised psychological components as he was personally interested in psychology, which was novel in American plays

at the time. Through his plays, he navigates his characters' psyche and dark feelings. Moreover, he was one of the first playwrights to include taboo elements in his works, including Black characters on stage, for instance. He tackled many political and imperial notions in his plays, alongside industrial and economic factors, which were so far ahead of his time. According to Olivia Coolidge's book on the playwright *Eugene O'Neill*, his plays purpose is to reflect the upheaval of an entire generation; Coolidge also claims that:

O'Neill is a man who lost his rudder...All his major characters are creatures of passion, unable to dominate force, which they do not understand. They are lost in a world, which is too big for them. It matters little that their struggle is not with an everyday world but an inner one. (O'Neill, p.126)

The theatre was the centre of Eugene O'Neill's existence, and his dramatic output—some twenty lengthy plays in less than twenty-five years (1920–1943)—remains an impressive feat (Pettit, 2015). His plays were renowned for the dark realism usage and the touches of personal elements and realistic tragedies; thus, he is credited as one of the most influential playwrights that contributed to developing the American theatrical industry and originality.

All God's Chillun Got Wings (1924) is an expressionist play about miscegenation. O'Neill expressed that he was influenced by an antiquated black hymn when he wrote this play. He emphasised in his notes the play's authenticity and stated that he witnessed it first-hand (1981). The play centres on Jim, a prospective Black lawyer, and Ella, his troubled, emotionally abusive white wife. Paul Robeson, a well-known American bass-baritone, played Jim in the play's illustrious initial release, while Mary Blair played Ella. The play's major characters engaged in some exceptionally light physical contact, which at the time caused an uproar and enraged people. The play can be seen as very advanced for its time. In the drama, O'Neill addressed the interracial problems that beset American society in the early twentieth century as the work had a Black lead. O'Neill provided peeks into the difficulties Black people faced at the time and what it would mean to date someone of a different race. When questioned about the performance, W.J. Arnold, a founding member of the Daughters of the Confederacy, stated that whilst it was merely a "play," physical contact went too far when a "Negro's hand" was asked to kiss and embrace. She further claimed that: "The play should be banned by the authorities, because it will be impossible for it to do otherwise than stir up ill feeling between the races" (Johnson, 1930).

Nevertheless, Eugene O'Neill's original and conservative approach later proved to be an innovative action that led to the American theatre's creative success. His play, *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, did not only tackle social and political topics, but further touched on the human psyche and struggle when faced with a set of social norms that prove them to be misfit. He explores both his main characters' psychological development by presenting these external elements and how they reflected on their reality.

Having outlined regression as a key defence mechanism in psychoanalytic theory, it becomes evident that O'Neill's characters in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* provide a vivid illustration of these concepts in practice, showing how societal pressures and personal anxieties can trigger a return to earlier stages of psychological development. *All God's Chillun Got Wings* revolves around Jim Harris, a young Black man, and Ella Downey, a young white woman, who marry each other. To understand their psychological journeys, it is important to consider how childhood experiences, societal pressures, and personal relationships intersect in shaping their behaviour. The story spans over a decade, and seven scenes, allowing the audience to observe the psychological development of Jim and Ella. The play illustrates how social and domestic challenges shape their personal and psychological growth. This timeline also highlights the progression from childhood innocence to the complex realities of adult life, letting the audience to see how the characters' psyche gets shaped over the course of years, alongside the social and domestic challenges they are put against, resulting in their personal and psychological development. Specifically, the audience witnesses how both external societal pressures and internal conflicts contribute to the regression observed in Jim and Ella. It is vital to interpret this play in the context of the 1920s in the US, a period in which racism and stereotyping profoundly affected perceptions of Black people. As late as the 1910s, Black actors in theatrical shows were referred to as "Brute Negro," a phrase implying extreme physical violence and stereotypical assumptions.

Before analysing their adult behaviour, it is useful to examine the childhood experiences that set the stage for their later regressions. The external factors and circumstances that significantly influenced the characters' psychology must be explicitly considered to comprehend their mental states. In this way, Eugene leverages the framework to illustrate the social-imperial settings of the time. He opens the play on an integrated corner in the south of New York. A triangle-shaped building's edge is formed by three roadways that converge. Despite being mixed-race, the people are separated by their skin colour, with Black people on one end and White people on the other, except for the children, who play marbles together in

the middle. This early scene establishes both the physical and social boundaries that the characters will confront throughout their lives.

O'Neill's use of the play's structure and settings can be viewed as a medium to convey the play's outcome. His setting is influenced by the social rules of his time, but he employs this medium to suggest the changes needed for a better society (Bernstein, 2006). Each location therefore acts as both a literal and symbolic representation of societal pressures. It is vital to consider each location that the play uses to expand on this point further. He begins the First Act by presenting a segregated neighbourhood, already mentioned in the stage directions : "In the street leading left, the faces are all white; in the street leading right, all black" (O'Neill, 1970, p.1). This visual separation underscores the racial dynamics that will influence Jim and Ella's development. He uses this locale three times throughout the play; his goal is to illustrate not only the separation between the races but also the inferior-superiority dynamic between them. In the context of the time period, African descendants were viewed as the inferior race and stereotyped as having poor living standards. However, O'Neill's depiction of Black characters is positive. Here, the playwright utilizes context and setting to develop his ideas, which is reflected in the shaping of his characters.

Having established the influence of setting, It is essential to explore how these social factors manifest in the characters' psychological development, throughout the play, O'Neill employs the church setting for the wedding and the interracial household of the main married characters in order to pinpoint the social rules that affect his characters' psychological development and inability to adapt those norms. When Ella and Jim get married, for instance, O'Neill uses a sombre and taboo atmosphere to emphasise the conservatism behind the two races being together, tackling the impact it has on both characters. This church scene illustrates how social expectations directly shape the characters' emotional responses and trigger regressive behaviour. The segregation in the scene is evident through all the characters interact with one another throughout the Act. Jim's inferiority complex is consequently shaped by his first-hand interactions with these societal agents. Meanwhile, Ella capitalises on her white privileges to mask her fear of being abandoned by Jim, a pattern that recurs throughout their marriage in subsequent scenes.

It is necessary to consider the circumstances that contributed to Jim and Ella's adverse psychological development. Particularly in Ella's case, as she is a white heroine who received greater social acceptance than Jim. To further explain, one needs to examine O'Neill's demonstrated path of conduct. For instance, beyond their race as little children, Ella, Jim, and

their other playmates understood each other for who they were and were not affected by the social norms at the time. Through illustrating their childhood experiences, the playwright touches on the idea that prejudice is learned systematically rather than instinctively. O'Neill portrays the growing influence of societal pressures on the characters as the timeframe shifts. As they mature, they both retreat to their racial boundaries and become more reliant on societal norms. Such instance is showcased when Jim notes that Ella had retreated to a 'whiter' friend group and started dating Mickey:

I've got lots of friends among my own--kind, I can tell you. You make me sick! Go to the devil! (She flounces off. The three men laugh. Mickey follows her. Jim is stricken. He goes and sinks down limply on a box in front of the grocery store. (O'Neill, p.8)

Nevertheless, as the play progresses, O'Neill shows both sides of the coin; despite Jim's struggles, inferiority complex, and ongoing efforts, he appears to be moving in the right course in his quest to illustrate his worth. On the other hand, Ella's life, despite her privileges, takes a tragic turn and she is abandoned by her partner eventually. Regardless of Jim's effort and sacrifice to marry Ella, her abandonment issues, sense of worthiness, and socially fed norms negatively affect her psyche. To elaborate further, one must note that Ella's sense of worthiness is more or less dependent on the social hierarchy set in order to keep the 'black' race at the bottom of the ladder. Additionally, her abandonment issues stemming from a white man's actions further influenced her sense of worth as a white woman. Even though Ella genuinely loves Jim, the barriers between their racial dynamics prevent her from overcoming them. Therefore, Ella's mental stability shifts dramatically and results in anger outburst and emotional displacements towards her husband:

How dare you grin at me? I guess you forget what you are! That's always the way. Be kind to you, treat you decent, and in a second you've got a swelled head, you think you're somebody, you're all over the place putting on airs; why, it's got so I can't even walk down the street without seeing niggers, niggers everywhere. Hanging around, grinning, grinning--going to school--pretending they're white. (O'Neill, p.28)

The displacement of her emotions here stem from her beliefs that she is superior due to her race privileges. She begins to displace her emotions outwardly on Jim in order to keep him under her authoritative power. She also uses this coping strategy to deal with the reality that her value was diminished to a skin colour, which made her increasingly afraid that Jim would be

able to see the whole picture. Ella, just like Jim, adopt the ethical standards of a culture “envenomed by the poison of prejudice” (Koreneva, 1990, p. 132).

It is crucial to realise that, as Freud noted, regression can occur in any of two manners. The first is a fixation on the anal stage, which would demonstrate either an excessively orderly nature or chaotic behaviour, depending on how their parents treated them when they were that young. The second type appears through oral-fixations including behaviours or habits like smoking, overeating. (1905). It is also essential to keep in mind that regression might result in extreme angry outbursts and aggressive juvenile behaviour because of the frantic desire for dependency. In this fashion, Ella's mental health suffered from the external agents employed by social norms and her unfortunate life experiences. Her problems with abandonment, anxiety, self-worth, and lack of life accomplishments all played a role in her adverse psychological growth, leading her to become unable to rely on herself to do anything, alongside being trapped by her fears of losing the one person who showed her sincerity despite the social pressures. O'Neill hence uses Ella's regression as the climax to demonstrate the psychological effects and struggles that stem from social injustice. Additionally, the playwright, specifically showcases Ella regressing to the times in which she was childhood friends with Jim, when both of them saw each other beyond their race boundaries, intimately and innocently without regard to the race discourse created by society:

Well, it's all over, Jim. Everything'll be all right now. I'll be just your little girl, Jim--and you'll be my little boy--just as we used to be, remember, when we were beaux; and I'll put shoe blacking on my face and pretend I'm black and you can put chalk on your face and pretend you're white just as we used to do--and we can play marbles--only you mustn't all the time be a boy. Sometimes you must be my old kind Uncle Jim who's been with us for years and years. Will you, Jim? (O'Neill, p.31)

This final Act makes Jim more conscious as he finally realises how Ella depends on him. Her anxiety of being abandoned by him caused her mental decline as well as her refusal to acknowledge her affections for Jim. Through Jim's reflection, the play emphasizes how regression in response to social and emotional stress can reveal both vulnerability and resilience in human behaviour. This pattern serves as a revelation for Jim's worthiness complex. “Forgive me, God – and make me worthy!... Let this fire of burning suffering purify me of selfishness and make me worthy of the child You send me for the woman You take away!” (O'Neill, 1924). By declaring this, Jim decides to stay with his wife, whose sense of reality is lost due to being afflicted by the toxin of prejudice, social expectations, and racial restrictions.

Overall, O'Neill's portrayal of Jim and Ella shows just how much social pressures, racial hierarchies, and inner insecurities can shape the human mind. Although regression provides temporary psychological comfort from her anxieties and fears for Ella, it also functions to heighten her emotional instability and reliance on Jim. Jim, however, experiences a surge in self-consciousness and tenacity as he negotiates these dynamics, illustrating the tension between inner psychology and outer pressures of society. The inner conflict of the characters illustrates that regression and other defence mechanisms, although temporarily relieving, cannot solve the underlying conflict derived from social prejudice and internalized fear. In the representation of these psycho patterns, O'Neill not only enriches his audience's understanding of his characters but also underlines the complex ways in which social norms, personal past and unconscious workings connect to influence behaviour and identity.

3. CONCLUSION

Eugene O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings* offers a rich portrait of regression as defence, consistent with the psychoanalytic theories described by Sigmund and Anna Freud. By going through the stage-by-stage psychological breakdown of Ella and the development of Jim, O'Neill shows how social norms, racial division and personal tragedy shape the human mind. Ella's tantrums, childish reliance and final collapse showcases Freud's regression theory as an escape to earlier phases of life when overwhelmed by stressors. Jim's parallel course demonstrates how systemic oppression produces the feeling of inferiority, one that he must overcome in order to develop a sense of self-worth and purpose. By applying Freudian theory to O'Neill's characters. It is clear that regression in the play functions not only as an individualistic means of coping but also as a more generalized commentary on the ruinous power of social prejudice. O'Neill's use of psychoanalytic theory ultimately deepens the dramatic impact of his play, depicting the complicated relationship between individual psychology and society and revealing the tragic consequences when human beings are unable to reconcile their inner conflicts with the external world.

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