

DCCD 2020**Dialogue of Cultures - Culture of Dialogue: from Conflicting to Understanding****THE CONCEPT OF WORTHINESS IN E. O'NEILL'S
"ALL GOD'S CHILLUN GOT WINGS"**

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Abstract

The article reveals the dynamics of the concept of worthiness in the twentieth-century socio-psychological American drama. Starting from the colonial times, written works produced in the United States resonate with this complex theme rooted in biblical imagery. Being one of the first and foremost American founding principles alongside the ideas of equality, political and spiritual liberty, the doctrine of worthiness has gone through constant change which brought in added dimensions to it. Subsequently, this cultural impulse is transmitted into the literature of later epochs, where it also undergoes massive transformation, thus, being the predicted response to the social and cultural contexts of each historical period. The aim of the present paper is to explore the linguistic and culturally determined manifestations of worthiness in the play "All God's Chillun Got Wings" by Eugene O'Neill, who ranks among the greatest American playwrights of the twentieth century. Asserting that worthiness is a relevant component of the play's poetics which helps to emphasize the development of actions and events in the dramatic narrative, the authors of this article seek to give a better understanding of the historical background as well as the dramatist's individual connotations attached to this concept in the literary work under analysis.

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1. Introduction

According to recent data, the focus of “research in the sphere of cognitive linguistics is concentrated on the study of concepts” (Gryshchenko, 2016, p 80). Some scholars attest to the point that literary texts and “precedent phenomena are considered as effective method for exposing the concept content” while defining “the problem of relationship between reality, thought, language and culture” (Chupryna et al., 2018, p. 125).

The foundations of American literature were laid during the colonial period. Puritan orthodoxy was the background from which the fundamental concepts of American literature and Americanism emerged (See 1). It is held that the linguistic explication of the concept of worthiness in the American worldview can be observed through the Puritan doctrine of chosenness. Likewise, some researchers contend that in literature after the seventeenth century the concept of worthiness receives various linguistic manifestations and can be built by such language units as dignity, chosenness, pride, nobility, self-worth (Mashoshina, 2018, p. 99). Such a close correlation of these ethical categories might have resulted from the source of their origin, since all of them are rooted in the Bible. At the dawn of American nationalism the Bible, more than any other book, framed the way that ordinary people thought about their lives.

The Holy Scripture is generally regarded to be the history of “the chosen people of God,” the people who, by the will of the Lord, have been entitled to spread His word throughout the world. According to the Bible, the Almighty endows the Jews with chosenness. Similarly, on the North American continent the role of the so-called “chosen people” was assumed by New England Puritans. As noted in Catherine Brekus’s (2016) article on American chosenness “drawing on a long Puritan tradition of identifying New England as “God’s New Israel,” many New England ministers argued that there were striking similarities between the plight of eighteenth-century Americans and the plight of the Israelites in Egypt” (para. 6).

In the article “Influential Motifs in American Literature since the Colonial Period” the Russian philologist Ksenia Baranova also reveals links between the colonists and the oppressed Israelites maintaining that the destiny of American men and women “was to follow the path to the New World where they would be able to build a so-called “New Eden” (Baranova, 2016, p. 13). As the New England Puritans assumed that they were tasked with building a “City upon a hill” – a community of worthy people whose religion was the only true denomination – their belief in American chosenness only grew stronger. Therefore, the bonds between the philosophical categories of worthiness and chosenness, which constitute the moral imperatives of Puritans, become apparent.

2. Problem Statement

Rooted in Puritan orthodoxy, the concept of worthiness is clearly traceable in numerous works by the authors of various historical eras, literary schools and aesthetic trends. Empirical evidence provided by prosaic texts indicates the validity of worthiness in American culture. Admittedly, the perception of the particular American spirit that was captured by H. Melville in the nineteenth century is still applicable today: “We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people – the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things

we feel in our souls” (Melville, 2000, p. 125). Likewise, the key representations of worthiness can be observed in the twentieth-century writings, particularly, in American drama.

A special interpretation of this conceptual structure one may see in the play “All God’s Chillun Got Wings” (1932) of the prominent American playwright, Nobel laureate Eugene O’Neill (October 16, 1888 – November 27, 1953). The exceptional originality that the idea of worthiness acquires in the socio-psychological drama of the Interbellum period is a principle underlying the choice of this dramatic text for the analysis. Some contemporary philologists assert that in the early twentieth-century literature Christian motifs accumulated new shades of meaning. That cultural fact might be the result of the numerous tragic events, stunning the world community in the twentieth century (Fedorenko, 2019, p. 450).

It is important that Eugene O’Neill, whose drama drew our attention, was inclined to criticize Christian views. The famous writer to a certain extent expressed indignation at the inherent way of life of some “religious” people. This problem has received substantial interest. Dennis Whitaker in his thesis “Themes and Technique in the Plays of Eugene O’Neill during the period 1921 – 1931” repeatedly accentuates the American playwright’s rejection of Christian, specifically, Puritan traditions. Whitaker claims: “He attacks puritanism from many directions. He shews, in *Diffrent* (1920), how obsession with sexual chastity depraves Emma Crosby and drives her to suicide, in *Dynamo* (1920), how rigorous religious indoctrination goads Reuben Light to murder and suicide and, in *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), how a relentless puritan rationale causes the destruction of a whole family” (Whitaker, 2016, pp. 106 – 107). Citing a number of O’Neill’s plays, the critic evidences his theoretical position.

Of course, disagreement with both social and religious traditions, established in the American society by the beginning of the twentieth century, is markedly manifested in O’Neill’s dramas. Those modes in many respects have preserved the rigidity and uncompromising character of classical Puritanism. Though Eugene O’Neill’s tone may sometimes be disillusioned, the author draws energy from the transformations of Puritan cultural impulses faintly echoing in his narrative. That is difficult to avoid because as Matthiessen (1957) notably observes: “An artist’s use of language is the most sensitive index to cultural history, since a man can articulate only what he is, and what he has been made by the society of which he is a willing or an unwilling part” (p. 15).

Evidently, the anti-Puritan moods, characteristic of the writer’s worldview, in no way prevent the emersion of worthiness in the structure of his play “All God’s Chillun Got Wings”. Nonconformity, typical of the famous writer, only diversifies the problematic manifestations of the conceptual aspect under analysis. Thus, the concept of worthiness, which was originally encoded in New England literature commensurating with a range of exclusively religious contexts, in the interwar period drama transforms into a rather complex social construct. Maya Koreneva (1990) defines the artistic world of O’Neill as “socially oriented”, i.e. including “the social problems of human existence” (p. 62). Undoubtedly, O’Neill’s dramas have attracted attention of critics from different fields of research, being the subject matter of numerous academic papers not only within textual studies, but in the Humanities in general (H. Bloom, L. Broussard, J. Chothia, I.S. Cimal, R.M. Dowling, T. Dubost, S.P. Fateeva, M.M. Koreneva, Yu.A. Klejman, J.W. Krutch, N.E. Kuteeva, E.A. Lyubimova, M. Manheim, M.P. Medvedeva, M. Maufort, J.Y. Miller, S.M. Pinaev, L. Porter, A.S. Romm, P.Yu. Rybina, V.B. Shamina, P. Voelker, F.C. Wilkins, A.A. Zhamanova, G.P. Zlobin and many others).

3. Research Questions

Despite the significant body of research devoted to various aspects of O'Neill's plays, there has been a paucity of studies investigating the defining characteristics of worthiness (seen as a constituent of the US worldview) in the twentieth-century American drama. Thus, the research questions are mainly aimed at the empirical data of the present paper:

What is the role of cultural and historical background in the construction of the concept of worthiness in Eugene O'Neill's "All God's Chillun Got Wings"?

What is the range and diversity of context-specific meanings of worthiness in in the dramatic text under analysis?

4. Purpose of the Study

The main objective of this paper is to determine the context-specific senses of worthiness as intended by Eugene O'Neill in "All God's Chillun Got Wings". The aim of the article makes is necessary to discuss the aspects of the playwright's poetics and single out the conceptual implications of worthiness relevant for clarifying this concept in O'Neill's writing.

5. Research Methods

The paper employs complex research methodology and comes to conclusions about the specifics of the concept content on the basis of a system of methods usable for language and literature studies including historical and sociocultural analysis, content analysis, descriptive research, textual analysis and narrative inquiry.

6. Findings

The play "All God's Chillun Got Wings" tells a love story of Jim Harris, a black youth, and Ella Downey, a white girl. The action of the drama develops dynamically. Over the course of seven scenes, the narrative encompasses the period of more than a decade making the reader witness the changes the characters undergo and the difficulties they encounter on the path of their personal formation.

Content analysis of the dramatic text in question enables us to establish that the contextual meaning of *worthiness* can be derived from our knowledge of the personae of the play, with a major focus on Jim Harris, the character whose structuring is the key to understanding the conceptual aspects of the drama. From a young age, the protagonist seeks for his own path in life by making unsuccessful attempts to overcome the conventions created by the American society of the early twentieth century, which was quite far from tolerance towards certain ethnic groups back then. Despite the official abolition of slavery after the Civil War in 1865, on the North American continent, most of the population continued to resist the adoption of the new state of affairs. In other words, "reconstruction failed to secure black freedom and was followed by a long period of inequality for black Americans" (Foner, 2013). For a long time Americans of European ancestry continued to regard black people as people standing on the lower levels of the social hierarchy, simply unwilling to see *worthy* fellow citizens in them, *equal* in rights and abilities. Of course,

over the past decades, the Western community has significantly revised their views on the problem of racism, replacing the old paradigm of values with the concept of a “melting pot”. According to the latter, people of different origins can not only coexist in the same geographical area, but also interact with each other, make friends, start interracial families, conduct business together, etc.

However, at the very beginning of the twentieth century the social stratification in the US was significantly different from the current one. From his own experience the protagonist gets acquainted with the inhumane treatment, his ancestors faced for centuries. Jim Harris comes from an African-American family of modest means on the outskirts of New York. The dramatist gives a vivid description of the setting: “A corner in lower New York, at the edge of a colored district... In the street leading left, the faces are all white; in the street leading right, all black” (O’Neill, 2004). The citation given serves a direct indicator of the fact that the main character grows up, socializing at the border of two quarters of different ethnic groups. Thus, Jim literally observes the collision of the “two worlds”: the “white” one and the “black” one. Despite the obvious multi-ethnicity of the place, from an early age the character has been feeling total injustice of the established orders. The young man is burdened by the striking differentiation of people, which is based only on racial characteristics, dividing neighbors into “friends” and “foes.” In such a community, personal achievements and talents are not taken into consideration. The individual ceases to be of any value and, in a sense, is even depersonalized. Barely noticeable in the “crowd” of people, one is forced to obey the adopted norms of behavior, however absurd they may seem.

The last thing is unacceptable to Jim, who is naturally endowed with nobility, honesty and determination. The development of the youth’s strong points was largely influenced by his father, an active and enterprising person. The latter worked hard, competently approached the solution of financial issues and, finally, accumulated some fund. This significantly distinguished Harris Sr. from the lion’s share of local African-Americans who spent all the money earned per day on “dubious” pleasures. Exceptional personal qualities allowed Mr. Harris to start his own business and no longer depend on anyone. The selfless work of Jim’s father not only saved his family from poverty, which at that time was common among the overwhelming majority of local residents, but gave them a unique opportunity to experience all the advantages of material well-being. That is why, by the time the main action of the drama starts, the protagonist’s family can afford a decent apartment with all the necessary facilities; meanwhile Jim and his sister Hattie are receiving education.

We presume that the identification of *worthiness* with the parental figure of Mr. Harris has a special importance for the structuring of the play. *Worthiness*, as we have seen in the abovementioned fragment is inseparably joined to such moral and ethical categories as *chosenness*, *honor*, *industry*, *perseverance*, *fidelity*, *conscientiousness*, *concordance*, *prosperity*, and *value*. The moral imperatives denoted by these abstract notions constitute Jim Harris’ ethos, since he takes after his father and aims to live a decent life like Harris Sr. did.

Despite the relative welfare of the Harris family, Jim still feels that he deserves more. Belonging to the race, subjected to mass discrimination in the USA in the first half of the twentieth century, does not allow little Jim to fully feel happiness and carelessly enjoy his childhood. In the first act of the drama, in the scene of the duologue with Ella, who is destined to become his wife in the future, the reader finds the following lines of the eight-year-old boy: “Since I been tuckin’ yo’ books to school and back, I been drinkin’

lots o' chalk 'n' water tree times a day. Dat Tom, de barber, he tole me dat make me white, if I drink enough. (pleadingly) Does I look whiter?" (O'Neill, 2004). The quote illustrates Jim's irresistible desire to change appearance reflecting his ethnic origin. Thus, the boy hopes for changing the other people's attitude to him, for becoming *worthy* of their respect. To realize this plan, the protagonist naively follows the local hairdresser Tom's advice, who openly taunts him, knowing about the intentions of the desperate child.

For Jim, as for other fellow citizens, the attribute *white* gets synonymous to the words *successful*, *worthy* and *chosen*. Again, the virtue of *worthiness* is the ultimate goal of Jim Harris. The character's compulsion to achieve it is repeatedly verbalized in various contexts of the play: "I'll make myself *worthy!*", "I've got to prove *worthy!*", "Forgive me God – and make me *worthy*" (O'Neill, 2004) (italics ours).

Nevertheless, Jim is growing up, and every year the gap of misunderstanding between him and his peers becomes harder to bridge. A vivid illustration of this aspect is given in Act I Scene II. Jim is now a young man in his late teens, who has received secondary education and is planning to enter a law school. Full of dignity, the appearance of the young man sets him apart from the guys of the same age, as if emphasizing the exceptionalism of the character. "He is dressed in black, stiff white collar, etc. – a quiet-mannered Negro boy with a queerly-baffled, sensitive face" (O'Neill, 2004). The gloss of his clothes, as well as the fact that he is going to the prom, causes irritation among the local youth who waste their time, having no bright perspectives. In response to Jim's friendly greeting, they only "grunt in reply, looking over him scornfully" (O'Neill, 2004).

The company ringleader, boxer Mickey openly expresses his contempt for Jim. Trying to humiliate him, the rude youth attempts the far-reaching plans of the black peer: "De trouble wit' you is yuh're gittin' stuck up, dat's what! Stay where yeh belong, see!... and yuh're tryin' to buy yerself white – graduatin' and law, for Christ sake!" (O'Neill, 2004). Then, using the vulgarism "nigger", Mickey recalls, that there is no chance for Jim to get into the "white" community, no matter how hard he tries to.

We reckon, there is a certain reason for the conflict arising. The trigger for the "collision" described is Ella. The girl who was once friends with Jim later turned away from him, preferring to interact with young people of her race, the fact she does not hide from the protagonist: "I've got lots of friends among *my own – kind*, I can tell you" (O'Neill, 2004) (italics ours). The young woman is currently dating Mickey. However, Jim still has a strong feeling for Ella and does not want to be a mere bystander, indifferently watching her waste time on people like Mickey and his minions.

As we see it, not only Ella's name mentioned becomes an outbreak for the boxer's attacks. On the one hand, they are driven by elementary jealousy for a person who is trying to go forward in life, climbing the social ladder and, accordingly, leaving people like Mickey behind. On the other hand, in Mickey's ostentatious bravado, there is an attempt to assert oneself in the company of mutual friends by infringing on the dignity of an individual, who, by virtue of his upbringing and nobility, is unlikely to dare to respond with equipollent aggression. The status of an informal leader, "alpha" is what Mickey's *worthiness* and confidence are based on.

It should be noted, that the protagonist's desire to succeed causes discontent not only among peers from other ethnic groups, but also among African Americans. Jim meets misunderstanding in the face of his old friend Joe. Their fathers used to work together, but the men's ways parted. Therefore, the life priorities of Jim and Joe are the natural result of parenting. Following the "bad" example of the elders, Joe

spends days idly wandering around. Not noticing, or, perhaps, unwilling to notice his own shortcomings, Joe criticizes Jim, directly informing the protagonist of his disaffection of the changes that he traces in Harris. Joe hardly recognizes his long-time friend, whose behavior he regards as pretentious and pompous, stating that Jim has certain intentions to renounce the African roots: “I don’t even know who you is! What’s all dis schoolin’ you doin’? <...> What’s all dis denyin’ you’s a nigger... Is you a nigger or is not you?” (O’Neill, 2004). Receiving no desired support even from a former playmate, Jim does not dare to argue with him. Looking into Joe’s face, the protagonist angrily agrees that both of them belong to the same culture, the same race: “We’re both niggers” (O’Neill, 2004). Despite the fact that the true reason for Joe’s harsh tone is his envy, it becomes clear that the rough remarks engender doubt in Jim’s soul, undermining the young man’s dignity. This passage vividly demonstrates O’Neill’s ability to highlight “the suffering caused by a cleft identity” of the protagonist (Dubost, 2019, p. 192).

Despite the animosity that Jim meets so often on the streets of his birthplace, the protagonist continues to demonstrate determination and perseverance in achieving his goal – a lawyer’s career. To implement the plans Jim needs to pass exams at a law school. Unfortunately, a naturally capable and hardworking young man is destined to repeatedly fail. The reason for this is the inferiority complex that has developed over the years, formed under the influence of the atmosphere in the community. In Act I Scene III, the protagonist tells Ella about his impressions of another failure at the exam: “I can’t explain – just – but it hurts like fire. It brands me in my *pride*. I swear I know more’n any member of my class” (O’Neill, 2004) (italics ours). Jim himself admits that the examiners are always very kind to him, but their kindness is more reminiscent of condescension directed at an individual who is lower in social status, which cannot but hurt a purposeful young man. The indulgence of the white Americans given to the black youth from the poor outskirts seems to Jim the climax of humiliation. After all, the protagonist does not expect consolations from the examination committee that will make him feel his own *worthlessness* and weakness once again. He is among those citizens who have their own visions on worthiness and “chosenness and its relationship to the fight for black freedom and equality” (Fagan, 2016, p. 3).

Years pass, but Jim still encounters difficulties at the coveted exam for admission to a law school, receiving notifications of refusal. However, the hero is not ready to give up yet. In addition, the protagonist is having significant changes in personal life. Jim reunites with Ella, whose life has proven to be tragic. Nevertheless, all these years, Jim has been around her, watching the changes taking place in the life of his beloved one.

In Act IV Scene 3 Ella seems to finally see clearly and understand, that Jim is kind and honest, the only *white* person among those who surround her. She is ready to admit this: “Don’t I know how fine you’ve been to me! You’ve been the only one in the world who’s stood by me – the only understanding person” (O’Neill, 2004). Ella warmly notes that she appreciates everything that Jim has been doing for her, and in the end even agrees to become his wife. We take it significant that throughout the dramatic action, Ella repeatedly pronounces the word “white” like a sacred mantra, addressing Jim: “The only white man in the world! Kind and white”; “You’ve been white to me, Jim”; “I want the whole world to know you’re the whitest of the white!” (O’Neill, 2004). Calling Jim “white”, Ella speaks not about the man’s belonging to a certain ethnic or social group, but about his exceptional humanism, devotion and sincerity.

In Ella's lines one will find no shadow of pretense, since Jim has been the only man to assist her in the period of crisis. The woman is genuinely grateful to Jim for the support provided to her. Still, we estimate that there is nothing but mere gratitude in Ella's statements for Jim's once-good deeds. Thus, upon becoming the protagonist's wife, the girl merely allows Jim to love her rather than returns this feeling. In addition, due to sociocultural differences that formed a barrier between the characters, it is difficult for the girl to overcome stereotypical thinking and discern in the man an equal, worthy life partner. Like the protagonist of the drama, the woman absorbs the values of the society "envenomed by the poison of prejudice" (Koreneva, 1990, p. 132), and therefore she is unable to respond to Jim's feelings, which inevitably leads to their mutual misfortune.

Going back to the action, we should note, that over time, Ella's health begins to deteriorate steadily. The girl suffers from a serious mental disorder. This ailment manifests itself in the form of sudden mood changes. At times, Ella is gripped by unexpected and unmotivated outbursts of anger. On other days, she falls into childhood and completely loses touch with reality. When attacked by aggression, the girl begins to curse others, blame her husband for all the misfortunes that befell her, and even attempts on his life and health. Often in Ella's rambling speeches one may trace words of hatred and intolerance towards people of the Negroid race: "... why, it's got so I cannot even walk down the street without seeing niggers, niggers everywhere. Hanging around, grinning, grinning – going to school – pretending they're white" (O'Neill, 2004). This passage reminds of the insults once addressed to Jim by her former boyfriend Mickey, previously mentioned in this article. We maintain that in these words Ella reveals her real attitude to Jim and other African-Americans, whom the woman, at heart, continues to consider *unworthy* of herself.

The tense atmosphere caused by Ella's ill health negatively affects Jim's state of mind, weakening his already affected nervous system. The emotionally and physically exhausted protagonist experiences serious difficulties with concentration, which cannot but interfere with his studies. The culmination of all the misadventures of the protagonist becomes another fiasco, which he experiences at the exam. Totally broken by regular failures, Jim refuses the further struggle for his innate right to *worthiness*. Watching the slow and irreversible fading of the woman, who caused his tragedy, the young man, nevertheless, does not reject Ella, despite the threat coming from her. His warm feelings for her have not changed over the years. He still worships her and is ready to be with Ella, giving her all kinds of support, even at the cost of his own well-being.

An ardent opponent of social injustice, Jim reconciles with the fate of a "slave". Maya Koreneva believes that Jim voluntarily accepts the shameful role of a humble servant who exalts Ella as a "white deity" (Koreneva, 1990, p. 226). It becomes obvious, that it is in worshipping Ella that Jim sees a *worthy* continuation of his life. This fact is reflected in the protagonist's lines in the final scene of the play: "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, 2004) (italics ours). Declaring these words, Jim renounces the lofty goals he has been striving for since his childhood, asking the Almighty for the opportunity to finally become *worthy* of Ella, who will never return affection and admit his *worthiness*.

7. Conclusion

To recap the findings of the present paper: the moral and ethical senses of *worthiness* descend from the earliest forms of American nationalism and are due to its theological origin when this category was a measure of values in the society of the first New England settlers. According to Puritan orthodoxy, the idea of *worthiness* is not free from ambiguity, since semantically it incorporates two opposing representational meanings: *worthy* and *unworthy* (Baranova, 2014, p. 28). Nevertheless, the categories of *worthiness* and *chosenness* are observed by some theoreticians in connection to *exceptionalism*, thus, acquiring the negative connotation. “Ideologies of exceptionalism are often critiqued for containing elements of presumed superiority and supremacy” (Smith, 2019, p. 488).

Raising the question of human *worthiness* in the drama “All God’s Chillun Got Wings”, Eugene O’Neill opts for a non-standard way of answering it. The American playwright appeals to the Puritan myths of *chosenness*, *equality* and *freedom*, stating their illusory nature. The writer manages to prove that in the society he depicts the aforementioned moral imperatives turn into their polar opposites. More often people infer the meaning of *worthiness* judging others by race and ethnicity rather than by their charitable deeds.

As we have seen, the complex structure of the concept of *worthiness* in “All God’s Chillun Got Wings” is formed by both historical and context-specific meanings including *honor*, *industry*, *perseverance*, *conscientiousness*, *prosperity*, *value*, *slavery*, *compulsion*, *lack of equality*, *the ministry of love*.

At the same time, this important constant of American culture determines the general tone of the drama and plays an important role in forming its subtext and, to a certain extent, contributes to the creation of the compositional coherence of the parts of this written work. *Worthiness* is inextricably linked to the structuring of the characters of the play, both main and secondary, determining their credo, behavior and the dynamics of personal development. We would like to stress, that established for the purpose of regulating social relations and aimed solely at the benefit of people, principles and directives, which seem to be the quintessence of morality and virtue, eventually turn into their own antipodes, bringing misfortunes and suffering to everyone who follows them. This happened in many respects with some Puritan ideas, gradually turning into the category of prejudice.

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