

‘I Didn’t Raise My Boy To Be a Soldier’

The Impact of War in Eugene O’Neill’s *The Sniper*

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Abstract

Eugene O’Neill is one of the most important American dramatists. He began his writing career at the start of World War I and ended it at the conclusion of the Second. No doubt, the two World Wars profoundly and permanently affected the lives of people all over the world. As his country became increasingly involved in these wars, O’Neill reacted in his own way to the horrors, dehumanization and monstrosity of war experiences.

O’Neill’s *The Sniper* sheds light on the shattering impact of the outbreak of armed conflict on the lives of simple ordinary people-Rougon’s family in this case. Since *The Sniper* is written in 1915, section one of the present study is devoted to the American participation in World War I, section two to O’Neill’s attitude toward war while the third section deals with the play per se. The study is rounded off with a Conclusion in which the most important findings are stated.

Keywords: O’Neill, World War I, *The Sniper*

1. The United States of America and World War I (1914-1918)

When Eugene O’Neill (1888-1953) began his writing career in 1913, his country, the United States of America, was on the verge of involvement in a global conflict. That conflict was variously called by historians ‘The First World War,’ ‘The Great War,’ and ‘World War I.’ It began on 28 July 1914 and lasted until 11 November 1918. Centered in Europe, it was a major conflict that involved all world’s great powers which were assembled in two opposing alliances: The Allies and The Central Powers (The New Encyclopedia Britannica, 1988, p. 756).

Being one of the largest and bloodiest wars in the history of mankind, more than nine million soldiers were killed, largely because of great technological advances in fire power without corresponding advances in mobility (Willmott, 2003, p. 307).

Believing that the war was a dreadful mistake and being geographically remote from the main battlefields, the American government’s initial response to the war was to declare a policy of strict neutrality and non-intervention. President Woodrow Wilson called upon Americans to be impartial in thought as well as in action (Wynn, 1986, p. 27). So, by and large, the dominant American response to the war at its outbreak and during its first months, Cooper (2000, p. 568) explains, was “one of remoteness and detachment.” However, he adds that the war “profoundly, unsettlingly and permanently altered how Americans viewed themselves and their place in the world” (Ibid, p. 567). Moreover, it was natural for them, Wynn (1986, p. 26) remarks, to react to the news coming from the battlefields with a “mixture of horror and disbelief.”

These feelings of repugnance were poignantly expressed in a letter the American novelist, Henry James, wrote to a friend on the first day of the war. In it, he describes the war as a “plunge of civilization into [an] abyss of blood and darkness” (Hynes, 1991, p. 3). Moreover, Jane Addams wrote of “that basic sense of desolation, of suicide, of anachronism, which the first news of war brought to thousands of men and women who had come to consider war as a throwback in the scientific sense” (as cited in Wynn, 1986, p. 26). The *New York Times* went further and suggested that in failing to prevent war, the Europeans had revealed their “backwardness,” and in reverting to “the conditions of savage tribes” had shown that “their civilization is half a sham” (as cited in ibid, pp. 26-27).

Before entering the war, Americans had gotten a good idea of its true horrors on the Continent. For months, newspapers at home had devoted all of their front pages to the war. Moreover, Allied propaganda, particularly lurid stories about the atrocities committed by the Germans-looting, pillaging, raping and killing of innocent civilians-seemed to be given credibility by the actions of the German forces themselves. The invasion of the neutral Belgium,

the razing of towns, the shooting of nurse Edith Cavell, the use of new lethal weapons that Americans found repugnant like poison gas, the aerial bombardment of innocent civilians, and above all else the submarine attacks on merchant ships and liners (For more details, see Hasley, 1919) all helped to “demonize” Germany and to convince the Americans that “war [was] necessary” (Carty, 2008, p. 20), if they wanted to restore “order...stability [and] regularity” at home and abroad (Wynn, 1986, p. 26).

However, the situation rapidly changed by May, 1915. The sinking of the British liner ‘Lusitania,’ with 128 Americans abroad had seriously imperiled the neutrality of the United States of America. It left a strong effect on the Americans and made them pay more attention to the war. The American press reacted to the attack as an act of barbarity “unworthy of a civilized nation,” (Ibid., p. 31) while former President Theodore Roosevelt denounced German act as “piracy” (For more information, see Roosevelt, 1915).

In January 1917, Germany decided to resume unrestricted submarine warfare on all commercial ships headed toward Britain in spite of President Wilson’s repeated warnings that United States of America would not tolerate German attacks on ships. Furthermore, the so called “Zimmermann Telegram,” which the American intercepted, added fuel to the flames. In this telegram, Germany offered Mexico financial and military help in return for joining the war as its ally against the forces of the Allies (See Smith. 1958, pp. 157-163).

The publication of the telegram outraged American public opinion just as the German U-boats started sinking American ships in the North Atlantic. President Wilson called for war on Germany. According to him, it would be “a war to end all wars,” and “made the world safe for democracy”(Bourque, 2006, p. 105). On 6 April 1917, after two and a half years of efforts to maintain neutrality, the American Congress declared war on Germany.

Americans recognized almost instinctively that entering the war marked a turning point in their lives after which nothing would be the same. For them, war meant, among other things, “adjustment to new patterns, and disruptions to be overcome, and forced a rapid growing up” (Winkler, 2000, p. 30).

In relation to this, Ford comments on the changes that befell the American society after the declaration of war. She claims that “the traditional interaction between the armed forces of the United States and the larger society significantly transformed during the Great War” (as cited in Mrozek, 2010, p. 429). According to her, it requires that one “take into account broader social and cultural issues,” and “political, economic, and psychological aspects that affect war and society” (in *ibid*).

She also emphasizes among other things, an “unparalleled presence of the military in American civil society in World War I, the large scale draft of young males into military service, the power of the federal government, and much else” (in *ibid*).

She also sheds light on the “Preparedness Movement,” which includes, among other things, the military drafting and training of “citizens soldiers,” the mobilization of public opinion through propaganda and suppression of dissent, the cultivation of science and technology for war, and the use of the Army in managing demobilization and the return of temporary soldiers to peacetime pursuits (in *ibid*).

Whether in Europe or America, World War I had a lasting impact on the lives of people. It was seen by many as signaling the end of an era of stability and peace. Historian Hynes (1991, pp.i-xii) explained: “A generation of innocent young men, their heads full of high abstractions like Honor, Glory . . . went off to war to make the world safe for democracy. They were slaughtered . . . Those who survived were shocked, disillusioned, and embittered by their war experiences . . .” This generation becomes in Robbins’s (1993, p. 151) words, a “lost generation.”

The social trauma caused by the unprecedented rates of damage and casualties manifested itself in different ways. In fact, the war experience led to a collective trauma shared by many from all participating countries. For years afterwards, people mourned the dead, the missing, and the many disabled. Noteworthy were the statistics of the dead, diseased and deformed which were stark enough (See Ch. 6 of Robbins, 1993, pp. 150-165).

To sum up, no man who took part in World War I ever completely shook off the experience. In fact, the images of suffering and anguish became the widely shared perception among those who participated in the war.

2. Eugene O’Neill and The War

Like his fellow citizens, O’Neill’s life and writings had been considerably influenced by the outbreak of the two World Wars. Apart from his war pieces, many of O’Neill’s plays either shed light on the impact of war on the lives of ordinary people or made war a background for the action. To give but few examples, in *Strange Interlude* (1927) and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1930), the action pivoted on a war scene which served as the background for the inner wars of the characters. Nina of the former lost her Gorden in World War I while Orin and his father’s lives were considerably affected by their participation in the American Civil War. The corrupt Benn of *Diff’rent*

(1920) had been even further corrupted by reason of having been in the American Expeditionary Force in World War I while the backdrop of *The Iceman Cometh* (1940) was the bustling pre-World War I New York.

Generally speaking, O'Neill was not interested in the particulars of the two World Wars. Rather, his plays showed their writer's interest in presenting "variations of the archetypal waste-land-image-with men dwelling in oases which they have themselves constructed out of mirages" (Engel, 1953, p. 299). In them, he reacted in his own way not only to a time out-of-joint, but also to "the dehumanization, the inwardness, the spiritual vacuity, [and] the self-destructiveness of the world" he was living in (ibid).

This personal vision of the seamy side of life which O'Neill plays conveyed was further focused by what Egri (1986, p. 6) calls, the "shell shock" of World War I." Of course, like other Americans, O'Neill was bombarded with enormous quantities of propaganda from the parties involved in the war. However, he was not swept away or taken in by the chauvinistic nature of war propaganda (Ibid). As early as May 1914, in the poem "Fratricide," O'Neill recognized that "The loud, exultant call to arms," the "patriotic blare of band, "was really a summons to 'Fratricide.'

"Fratricide," as the title indicates, is a poem about a brother killing a brother. It was inspired by a specific event in the Spring of 1914. On April 21, Admiral Frank T. Fletcher landed a force of United States Marines at Vera Cruz, Mexico, to interdict a shipment of German arms, because the Mexican president, Victoriano Huerta, would not apologize for detaining some American officials and would not salute the American flag. The Admiral's action smacked of the worst sort of American imperialism, and so aroused O'Neill's radical ire that he fired off his nineteen stanza poem in protest. "Fratricide" was published less than a month after the landing in a Socialist newspaper, *The New York Call* (May 17, 1914) (For more details, see Voelker in Liu & Swartzell, 1992, p. 100).

What had incensed O'Neill most about the occupation of Vera Cruz was that soldiers had died in the process. The poem, in fact, made it clear with whom O'Neill sided. His sympathy laid with the 'peons' and the poor American soldiers, who were dying to advance the cause of American economic interests, while the villains were 'The plutocrats' and the 'jingoese' who caused the woe and were the first to flee because they were 'arrogant' and 'cowardly.'

The poem had no heroes, only victims, the American soldiers, whom O'Neill saw as "The poor! The poor who must obey/ The poor who only live to die." This was the audience the poem was addressed to. They were the men who were playing "The skulking butcher's role. For every peon that you shoot A brother's death/ Will stain your soul" (ibid). O'Neill saw clearly that there was no worthy cause in that war at all; the cause was, in fact, "asinine," and the loot was rapacious "robbery of a brother's whole/ Store of a lifetime." In accordance with his championship of the poor in the poem, O'Neill believes that the peons were just as much victims of the self-aggrandizing Mexican generals as were the American soldiers, who were asked to "bleed and groan-- for Guggenheim!/ and give [their] lives- for Standard Oil!"

Consistent with his relentless denunciation of materialism and greed which lead, in his opinion, to a loss of human feeling and spiritual values (Murphy in Nastal, 2010, p. 4), O'Neill here is commenting on the commercial origins of wars. He criticizes the modern states for manufacturing wars and the greedy businessmen for turning it into a profitable enterprise. In the poem, he wrote of how the blaring bands call "Come, let us rob our neighbor's farms" to the "army of the poor," who must do the fighting for the 'plutocrats' and 'jingoese.'

It is for these reasons that the poem ends with the pacifist cry: "All workers on the earth/ Are brothers and we will not fight."

As a matter of fact, O'Neill firmly holds the view that problems of the world can not be solved by launching wars. The intervening years between the Two World Wars testify to this. The millions dead from World War I did not lead to an inspiring world democracy; rather, the devastation throughout Europe and destruction of hope for humanity led to the rise of fascism. This loss of innocence and sanity is what brings O'Neill to despair and makes him retain his grim outlook of life till the end of his life (Nastal, 2010, p. 3).

One of the most tormenting problems O'Neill found himself confronted with during and after the Two World Wars was the experience of ideals becoming illusions. For this reason, the relationship between ideal and truth, illusion and reality, proved to be of crucial importance for him (Egri, 1981, p. 2). In fact, the horrors of war filled O'Neill with dread and revulsion, and with its unbridled barbarity, it called into doubt the validity of human and humane ideals (Ibid). As Egri explains, in his yet unpublished *Work Diary (1924-1943)* a "great many entries describe his war obsession,..., spiritual disintegration and attempts at intellectual regeneration"(Ibid). Pointing out his viewpoint of the future of his country after the war, O'Neill wrote in a letter to Lawrence Langner on July 17, 1940: "To tell the truth, like anyone else..., I have been absolutely sunk by this damned world debacle...I can not foresee any future in this country or anywhere else to which I could spiritually belong" (as cited in Raleigh, 1968, p. 19).

In another letter to Langner, O'Neill wrote a true representation of the feelings that would cause him to seek a world apart from reality. He wrote on the war: "The whole business from 1918 to now has been so criminally, hoggishly stupid. That is what sticks in one's gorge, that man can never learn but must always be the same...damned greedy, murderous, suicidal ass! I foresee a world in which any lover of liberty will continue to live with reluctance and be relieved to die" (as cited in Winn, 2005, p. 11).

These feelings of disgust and revulsion, Falk explains, made O'Neill go through a period of overwhelming depression and anxiety before World War Two as he did in 1911-1912 when he attempted suicide. As a result, he stopped work on his ambitious eleven-play cycle tracing American history, "pending a return of sanity and future to [this] groggy world" (in Nastal, 2010, p. 3).

To sum up, O'Neill maintains the same attitude toward the two international wars. He laments the spiritual death and the collapse of values which wars cause. World War I had proved to O'Neill that the world was shrinking. Moreover, the utter destruction throughout "The War To End All Wars" should have instilled in the young dramatist an overwhelming sense of concern for humanity. O'Neill witnessed the atrocities and hideous crimes committed by both parties involved and was shocked. In writing *The Sniper*, his main aim is to protest against the futility of war and its disastrous impact on the lives of ordinary people who only want to live peacefully.

3. *The Sniper* as an Anti-War Play

O'Neill wrote *The Sniper* in 1915 before the actual entry of United States of America into World War I. Unlike his other one-act plays of the period, O'Neill in *The Sniper* demonstrated that "his artistic vision embraced the affairs of the world" (Voelker, 1992, p. 99). Of course, what motivated O'Neill's attention was the outbreak of the international armed conflict in Europe which, no doubt, aroused his deepest emotions and disgust. Like his anti-war poem, "Fratricide," the immediate event that inspired the writing of *The Sniper* was Germany's invasion of the neutral Belgium which began on August 4, 1914. According to a letter to Beatrice Ashe, by November 8, O'Neill had finished both a "detailed scenario and a dialogue draft" (Ibid, 1992, p. 104).

The importance of *The Sniper* lies not only in the topicality of its subject matter. In fact, the play is important on more than one level. First, it shows the nature of the initial reaction of the American people in general and O'Neill in particular to the horrors committed in the war. Second, it shows in its content recognizable features of the news of the day, not only in its Belgian locale, but also in its reflection of the actual horror of shooting civilians caught with arms and erasing whole cities and villages (ibid). In fact, the horrifying images of destruction and devastation portrayed in the play mirror the American press coverage of what was happening in the invaded areas. Third, on the human level, the play indicates O'Neill's understanding of the costly nature of wars, as Rougon, the French peasant tries to shoot Germans in return for the destruction of his family and farm (Bloom, 2000, p. 92). In relation to this, Bloom observes, the play is insightful in its pacifist questioning of the values epitomized by World War I (Ibid). Fourth, the play, Sheaffer (1968, p. 302) notes, is most interesting as a piece of discourse in the American political climate of the fall of 1914, when President Wilson was still arguing for the neutrality of his country. In this respect, the play does not appear as 'pro-neutral.' In fact, in its emotional and effective depiction of the consequences of neutral Belgium's invasion by the Germans, *The Sniper*, Voelker (1992, p. 104) observes, could have served, if produced, to stimulate 'war fever.' However, at bottom, *The Sniper* is an anti-war play, much more, it is also a protest against warmongering human nature. Fifth, although O'Neill's primary concern is to protest the atrocities of war, the play gains in further importance as an early example of his concern for the family as a social unit. The Rougon family which contains only a son, Charles, is destroyed by political forces, in this case, the outbreak of World War I and the German invasion of Belgium. The son is killed in the fighting before the play begins. Later, both his mother, Margot and his fiancé, Louise, are killed off stage, caught in the crossfire of the opposing armies. Consequently, in its complete devastation of the nuclear family, *The Sniper*, Voelker (1987, p. 4) explains, "marks, symbolically at least, a transformation in O'Neill's concern with family drama in his first plays." Noteworthy is the strong and warm father-son relationship in the play, something rather unusual in the light of the nervous and overwrought father-son relationships in his later plays.

The sniper of the play's title is Rougon whose life is turned upside down as it is evident in the long introductory stage direction in which O'Neill provides us with a series of shocking images that depict the telling amount of damage that befell the poor Belgian family. Wars usually do not destroy areas only, but also their inhabitants. Rougon's cottage and farm are considerably ruined. The rear wall of his cottage "has two enormous breaches made by the shells of the artillery . . . The ceiling slants drunkenly downward toward the right, ending abruptly in a rugged edge of splintered boards and beams which forms a fantastic fireworks against the sky. The floor is littered with all kinds of debris" (O'Neill, 1988, p. 295). (All subsequent quotations are from this edition and are parenthetically stated).

This appalling description of the cottage is immediately followed by the first reference to religion which is to play a major role in the development of Rougon's character from a simple peasant into a 'killer.' The stage direction tells: "*Over the door a large black crucifix hangs from a nail*" (p. 295). The word 'black' here is significant in the light of Rougon's later denunciation of the "good God" who had made him suffer so; a denunciation that ultimately, makes the play "distinctly antichurch and antireligion" (Voelker, 1992, p. 104).

Material loss is not as important for Rougon as the loss of "Charles, [his] little one!" as he calls him. After his son's death, "There is nothing left but death" for Rougon. (p.301) In fact, the visual focus on the strong father-son relationship which characterizes the play makes Charles's death more poignant and painful. Rather than a relationship that is fraught with tension and conflict, Rougon-Charles relationship is characterized by warmth and love. Charles is the centre of his parents' life. In a touching passage that tells of the amount of loss and pain he feels, Rougon says:

...it was for him that we worked and saved, his mother and I; that he might never have to know, as we had known, what it is to be poor and hungry. (despondently) And now- we are old- What use to work? (p. 301)

More significant Charles was killed on the same day he was supposed to marry in. So instead of beginning a new life, his life is abruptly and cruelly wasted. It is no consolation for Rougon to tell him that he should be proud of his son and should not mourn his death since Charles has given his life for the sake of his country. As an ordinary man who has nothing to do with the complexities of politics, Rougon says that he did not raise his son to be a soldier; he raised him to be peasant like him, to raise a family and have children. Here, Rougon's feelings of loss and pain seem to echo the mother in the title- song. The song, indeed, is worth quoting in full:

*Ten million soldiers to the war have gone,
Who may never return again.
Ten million mother's hearts must break
For the ones who died in vain.
Head bowed down in sorrow
In her lonely years,
I heard a mother murmur thru' her tears:
I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier,
I brought him up to be my pride and joy.
Who dares to place a musket on his shoulder,
To shoot some other mother's darling boy?
Let nations arbitrate their future troubles,
It's time to lay the sword and gun away,
There'd be no war today,
If mothers all would say,
"I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier"
What victory can cheer a mother's heart,
When she looks at her blighted home?
What victory can bring her back
All she cared to call her own?
Let each mother answer
In the years to be,
Remember that my boy belongs to me!
("I Didn't Raise My Boy To Be A Soldier", 2009)*

The song purports to be a lament of a lonely mother whose son has been lost in the war. She comments on the irony of war being between different mothers' sons, killing each other with muskets. Victory is not enough to console a mother for the loss of her son, and the blighting of her home. However, talking about arbitration and laying guns away is of no use. Instead of peace, war broke out all over the world with millions of people engulfed in its bloody

mires.

In a heart-rending passage, O'Neill describes in detail Rougon's reaction to and treatment of Charles's dead body. In the stage direction, Rougon

lays the body down carefully in a cleared space between the table and the left wall, pillowing the soldier's head upon his knapsack. . . He [i.e., Rougon] stands looking down at the still form, his attitude one of abject despair. A heavy sob shakes his round shoulders. He murmurs brokenly: "Charles! My little one!" . . . He sits down on the chair, and stares at the ruins about him with an expression of dazed bewilderment on his broad face, his round, child-like eyes wandering dully from one object to another. . . , and suddenly overcome by a flood of anguished horror, he hides his face in his hands, . . . , moaning to himself like a wounded animal. (pp. 295-296)

'Abject despair,' 'brokenly,' 'dazed bewilderment,' and 'anguished horror,' are significant for they indirectly translate not only O'Neill's attitude toward the war, but also the general attitude of the Americans who were shocked by the atrocities committed in the war.

O'Neill fully understands the dark and ugly nature of war whose consequences affect all parties involved. In *The Sniper*, it is not only the Belgians whose lives and properties are wasted. As in all wars, both sides of the conflict- the Allies and the Central Powers in this case- suffer loss and devastation. O'Neill makes this clear through the German Captain's dialogue with the Priest:

The Captain- (entering and turning to the Priest)

Are you the- (seeing [Charles's] body on the floor)

I beg your pardon.

The Priest- (Coldly) What is your wish?

The Captain-(twirling his blond mustache fiercely to hide his embarrassment) Again, I ask pardon, I meant no disrespect. (Taking off his helmet impressively- he is a very young captain.) I honor the brave dead on whichever side they fall.

The Priest-(indicating Rougon who has slunk off to the other side of the table and is controlling his hatred and rage with very apparent effort) It is his son.

The Captain- Ah! Too bad! The fortunes of war. Today, him; tomorrow, me, perhaps. (p. 302)

As a result of the outbreak of war, life in Rougon's village changes rapidly and dramatically. It is now characterized by the heavy presence of the military forces of both sides of the conflict. In other words, life will never be the same for Rougon, the "great hulking old man of sixty-five or so" (p. 295), and the other villagers.

The impact of war on Rougon's life is not only confined to the waste of lives and properties; the nature of daily life itself is altered. In order to cope with the situation, Rougon and other villagers have to resort to new adaptive strategies. Rougon, for example, can not talk openly or give vent to his inner feelings toward the 'cursed Prussians' who kill his son and destroy his life. The Priest who comes to console Rougon suggests submission and silence as the best possible way to stay alive and avoid danger. More than once, he advises Rougon to keep his inner thoughts for himself. He says "Ssshh! (after a pause) Such thoughts may rest in the heart, but to let them rise to the lips is hardly wise- now" (p. 296), and "Be careful what you say in so loud a tone. Their soldiers are everywhere" (p. 299).

Rougon's reply to the Priest's advice is typical of many who had a first hand experience of the sorrowful consequences of the war. He says "What matter if they should hear? I am finished, me! They can do no more but kill me"(pp. 296-297). Saying this, ([Rougon] *sits on the edge of the table. A heavy sob shakes his bowed shoulder*).

Another example of wartime dislocations is shown in the evacuation of war-stricken areas. Charles's mother, his fiancé and the fifteen years old boy, Jean have to leave the village to a safer place since the village "will be no place for women if there be fighting,"(p. 298) according to Rougon. The irony is that Brussel to which Margot and Louise go in search for security turns out to be as dangerous an area as the village since both were killed there.

In his dialogue with his father before he dies, Charles sheds light on the merciless nature of war. In wars, man either kills or is killed by the other side. Man's life, in other words, has no value. Charles decides to join the regiment to

defend his family. He asks his father not to participate in the fighting because if he does, the German “will shot [him] like a dog” (p. 298).

This reminds us of O’Neill’s opinion concerning the real victims of wars in his poem “fratricide.” The victims are the ordinary people or the ‘peons’ as he calls them who want only to lead a normal life with their darlings. As a result of war, Rougon’s dreams of a happy and normal life in his old age are shattered. More significant is the fact that Rougon, throughout the play, seems to understand the real nature of war better than the Priest. When reminded by the latter that “Someone must gather in the harvest if [they] are not all to starve” (p. 298), Rougon replies:

Rougon- (fiercely) The harvest? What is there

left? First it is the French who take away my two fine horses that I have saved up every centime two years to buy-and leave me a scrap of paper; then-

The Priest- The French are our friends; in due time you shall be paid.

Rougon-Bah, promises!

The Priest- (earnestly) At a time like this all must bear their share of sacrifice.

Rougon- All who wanted war, yes; but we who desired nothing more than to be left in peace to till our fields? Look you, my father, why should we be robbed and plundered and our homes blown apart by their accursed cannon? (p. 298)

To this question, the Priest has no definite answer. Shaking his head sadly, he says, “God knows. Our poor country is a lamb among wolves” (p. 298). Here, Belgium, metaphorically speaking, is turned into a poor and weak lamb devoured by the wolves-or the opposing belligerent forces: the Allies and the Central Powers.

After the death of his son and the ravaging of his farm, “there is nothing left to harvest,” for Rougon, “but dirt and stones!” (p. 299). Two of his “cows one of which [he] was to have given Charles, with half of [his] farm, as a wedding present, have been killed by the first shell that burst in the village” (p. 298). All the hay he has gathered for the winter has been burned. Not only that, the cavalry ride over his field, trampling his grain beneath their horses and the cannon blows his home to pieces (p. 299). In a fine commentary on the nature of life in Belgium after the invasion, Hasley (1919, p. 352) reports:

The whole life of the nation has been arrested. Food supplies which would ordinarily reach the civilian population are being taken by the ... troops for their own support. The peasants and poor are without the necessities of life, and conditions of starvation grow more acute every day.

The arrival of the news of Margot and Louise’s death marks a new stage in Rougon’s life. This tragic event is considered the last blow to Rougon’s stamina and fortitude. Before it, he was convinced by the Priest not to take a vengeful action against the Germans and to stay alive for the sake of his old poor wife, Margot (p. 297). After it, he was bent on revenge.

Undeniably, Margot and Louise’s death is important on more than one level. Dramatically speaking, it constitutes the climax in the fateful development of Rougon’s character from a simple man of peace to a sniper, or, in other words, a killer. Furthermore, it sheds light on the essential change that befalls Rougon’s relation to his God. In this context, the conversation between Rougon and the Priest as to who is responsible for the outbreak of war gains in more importance. Just as the Priest who regrettably says “Alas! The Laws of Men!” (p. 308) at the end of the play in an attempt to explain the real causes of mankind’s suffering, Rougon asserts that it is all the fault of the “cursed Pruss-!” (p. 296). In the light of this rather secular explanation, Rougon refuses to accept the concept of ‘God’s will’ which the Priest introduces. He says: “His will? Ha! No, the good God would not punish me so, --I, who have harmed no one” (p. 296).

The turning point in Rougon’s development in relation to his attitude toward ‘religion’ occurs during the prayer which the Priest suggests for the repose of Charles’s soul. As the Priest commences the prayer, the stage direction informs us that

A sense of the crushing irony of this futile prayer penetrates the sorrow-numbed brain of Rougon and proves the last straw which breaks down his self-control; for he interrupts the droning supplications of the priest with a groan of agony, throws himself beside the young soldier’s body, and sobs brokenly: “Charles, Charles, my little one! Oh, why did not God take me instead!” (p. 302)

Here O’Neill’s makes evident his attitude toward religion. His views are manifest in the words “futile prayer,” and in the connotation of “mumble of sing-song,” and “droning.” Moreover, the last sentence in the stage direction clearly echoes his very first speech in the play, “Charles! My little one!” In fact, Rougon is unimpressed by the

Priest's reiteration of his belief that "God's will be done!" (p. 302). As the dialogue that follows the prayer demonstrates, it is not the vision of a "good God" that defines Rougon's sense of reality, but his son's dead body.

The Priest: ...Come, come, it is hard, I know, but you must bear it like a man. God's will be done! He, too, had a Son who died for others. Pray to Him, and He will comfort you in your affliction.

Rougon: (*placing his hand gently on his son's face*) Cold! Cold! He who was so alive and smiling only this morning. (p. 302)

It is important to note that Rougon makes no further references to the "good God" after this dialogue. It is clear that he finds no consolation in religion and, though he is not fully conscious of it, his attitude toward religious faith has considerably changed.

Predictably, Rougon dies before an ad hoc firing squad. As the German Captain prepares for Rougon's execution, he says to him: 'If you have a prayer to say, be quick!' (p. 307). To the Priest's astonishment, Rougon refuses to pray, and ultimately dies with a curse on his lips; he has died hating and denouncing his religious faith. In the conventional Christian terms, the outcome of the change in Rougon's attitude toward God must be considered tragic. Yet, as Voelker (1992, p. 106) points out, the full significance of this tragedy only becomes clear when the real causes of Rougon's damnation are recognized. According to him, the two most important factors, besides the external events of war, are Rougon's own human nature and the Priest. In the first part of the play, the Priest does everything he can to keep Rougon from endangering his life. He reminds him of God's will. Moreover, Rougon must be careful for the sake of his poor old wife, "if for nothing else" (p. 297). To this motive for living, the Priest adds duty to country: "You must realize well, that in its time of stress, your country has need of you... You must live and help and bear your part of her burden as best you can. It is your duty" (p. 301). When Rougon begins to object, the Priest attempts a compromise; by staying alive, Rougon will not only "best serve" his country, but also revenge his "personal wrongs" (p. 301). However, the Priest's effort were in vain for Rougon "has lost much more than his life. He has lost his soul" (Voelker, 1992, p. 106).

In the play, O'Neill seems determined to make it clear that the real cause behind the ultimate change in Rougon's attitude toward religion is not his wife's death. Rather this cause can be found in two earlier incidents; in Rougon's description of his immediate reaction to the devastation of his farm early in the play, and in his desire to revenge on the Germans. Concerning the two incidents, Rougon says respectively: "this finger itched to press the trigger and send at least one to hell for payment" (p. 299), and "I would love to slaughter them, to grind my heel in their fat faces, to-, to-" (p. 297).

By making Rougon say these statements, O'Neill wants to comment on the ultimate causes of war and its unavoidability. War, in O'Neill's viewpoint, is the product of human nature and its attendant weaknesses (Voelker, 1992, p. 107). Here Rougon's interaction with and treatment of the traumatized half-witted Jean in the second half of the play is of special importance. In fact, despite our considerable sympathy for Rougon and his personal plight, O'Neill wants us to realize that Rougon himself is also a factor in his tragedy; and it is from this fact that "the deepest and most pessimistic of the play's metaphysical implications arise" (Ibid.). Rougon, as the play shows, is a choleric man, quickly moved to anger. The Priest, more than once, tries to bring him under control. In fact, the possibility of Rougon's resort to violence is suggested in the Priest's advice to him "[do not] allow your temper to force you to violence" (p. 301). Had it not been for his old age, Rougon himself expressed his desire to use his 'little rifle' to kill the German. Charles himself wanted his father to leave the village with his mother because he was afraid Rougon "would do something rash if [he] stayed" (p. 299).

Rougon's treatment of Jean is far from being sympathetic. Indeed, it is rough and brutal, characterized by "brusque interruptions, a condescending attitude, and threats of violence" (Voelker, 1992, p. 107). When we first see Jean, he is presented as

an awkward peasant boy of about fifteen with a broad face...His clothes are mud-stained and ragged and he is trembling with fear. He breathes in great shuddering gasps. There is a cut on his forehead beneath which the blood has dried in reddish-brown streaks. (pp. 303-4)

Jean reports to them what has happened to Charles's mother and fiancée on their way to Brussels. There was intense fighting between the opposing forces and the women began to scream and cry. While they were running away from the fighting area, Jean and the two women came upon "lots of bodies-men from our army and others dressed in grey" (p. 305). The Belgian soldiers who were hiding in a long ditch shouted at them to leave the place immediately. However, as every thing around them blew up, "there were bodies all around including Mother Rougon" (p. 306).

Jean is only a messenger, and he is not very conscious of his role at that. He is full of intense fear, and when Rougon threatens him, he is only, as the Priest points out, "frightening the poor fellow" (p. 304) further. It is clear that

Rougon's effect on Jean is the same as that of the soldiers; all of them frighten him. This identification is important because O'Neill believes that people all over the world are responsible for the course their lives take. It is clear that Rougon's bad temper is an innate characteristic, and it is just such a temperament that leads to war rather than peace, to revenge rather than forgiveness. Thus, although Rougon is victimized by forces beyond his control, he is also a victimizer. The guilt, in O'Neill's view is universal, and that is the ultimate tragedy (Voelker, 1992, pp. 107-8).

The Sniper, then, is an anti-war play in the deepest sense of the term. It is not a protest against just a particular war, but a protest of all war. Noteworthy, in this respect, is O'Neill's treatment of the German which was rather unconventional. In his portrayal of them, O'Neill was not driven by chauvinistic feelings. Although Rougon presents a demonized picture of them through repeatedly describing them as "cursed Prussians," (p. 297) "Those dirty beasts!" (p. 298) "those pigs," (p. 299) "dog[s]," (p. 303), O'Neill, through the character of the Captain, shows his sympathy for the plight of both sides. The Germans and the Belgians alike were victims of the cruel mechanism of war. The lives of both were endangered.

Finally, *The Sniper*, offers a vision that is ultimately political and pessimistic. Politically, it reveals young O'Neill's underlying sympathy, at that time, for the peasant class, as its members are victimized by the military, the state and the church. Moreover, in addition to being a tragedy with profound religious implications, the play is also a discourse of social criticism that reveal O'Neill's growing disbelief in the possibility of true social and political progress, a disbelief that would be fully voiced in his later plays; prominent among them is *The Iceman Cometh* (Voelker, 1992, p. 108).

4. Conclusions

World War I was a turning point in the history of mankind. It was the greatest political and military event of its time. It altered the ways in which people thought not only about war, but also about the world and culture. Hynes (1991, p. 4) believes that no one—no writer, or painter or thinker—could ignore its historical importance or frame his thought as though the war had not occurred.

However, in his commentary on O'Neill's treatment of the two World Wars in his writings, Engel (1953, p. 298) writes that "O'Neill paid little heed in his plays either to specific circumstances of world catastrophe or to significant occurrences of two intervening decades of turbulent peace." He concludes that "A consideration of the details of [O'Neill's] private life is far more illuminating than a study of contemporary political and social history."

I believe that *The Sniper* is a good example to the contrary. Completely topical in terms of locale and narrative content, the play shows O'Neill as an extremely responsive dramatist to the social and political movements of the early twentieth century. However, it is evident that O'Neill's primary concern in the play is not with war per se; rather he seems more interested in studying and commenting on the real causes that make people go to wars. As a tragic event, the war is just a means through which O'Neill is able to comment on the inner forces that tear man apart. In so traumatic experience like war, ordinary people, like Rougon, experience not only psychological dislocation, but social, economic as well as territorial dislocations. In relation to this, *The Sniper* is a good reminder of the costly and tragic nature of war especially for those whose life, like Rougon's, turn out to be, in O'Neill's words "ironical, ... indifferent, [and] splendidly suffering bit of chaos" (Bigsby, 1983, p. 46).

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Note

'I Didn't Raise My Boy To Be a Soldier' is Written collaboratively by lyricist Alfred Bryan and Composer Al Prantadosi, "I Didn't..." was one of the most popular anti-war songs in the United States of America in 1915 before the declaration of war on Germany.

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