

## Language as A Tool for Analysis in Contemporary Theatre: *Before Breakfast* as A Model

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### Abstract

This study addresses the linguistic-dramatic analysis of Eugene O'Neill's play *Before Breakfast*, considering it a prominent model of modern theatre and concentrated theatrical language. The study aims to uncover how language is employed in character building, the escalation of psycho-social conflict, and the production of dramatic significance within a short text. The study relies on the dramatic textual analysis approach, focusing on dialogue as a tool for revealing the psychological and social structure of each character, and the role of silence, interruptions, and theatrical rhythm in enhancing meaning. The results indicate that O'Neill uses language not only as a means of communication but as a tool to reveal internal tensions, the blockage of communication, power imbalances, social pressures, and existential crises. Furthermore, the masterful use of repetition, rhythm, silences, and rhetorical methods

highlights the role of language in transforming small conversational units into dramatic structures of great significance. The study sheds light on the importance of language in modern theatre and opens new horizons for the analysis of short texts that rely on intensive dialogue and language as a means to understand psychological and social dimensions.

*Keywords:* Modern Theatre, Linguistic Analysis, *Before Breakfast*, Dramatic Dialogue, Language and Identity.

### Introduction

Eugene O'Neill's one-act play *Before Breakfast* (1916) depicts a morning scene of a married couple who live in a slovenly flat at Greenwich Village. Nothing so dramatic is befalling the performers in that play. The play is simply crammed with Mrs. Rowland's nonstop kvetching about her husband Alfred "hanging around in bars" with theatrical friends, actor-artists who were no good at a real job or providing for a family. In a cruel twist, she's a complainer running over breakfast to her lay about husband every day. What's so interesting is that Alfred is a literal out of sight character never appearing and only ever drawn by his wife.

Silenced, with no chance to speak or perform on stage, he remains in the room for the entire play. Onstage by contrast Mrs. Rowland rules the roost, hijacking both language and action. The crowd has to hash it out with her judge based on what she says and chow down on a one-sided serving of her complaints. The "sinner" the wife consults, but who never comes by-no one is indicted at the trial-is for all eternity unable to stand and answer in his own defense the guilty husband. And you now what is the most ironic thing, our spectators' view is not at all what we expected. The wife considered unfair as she virtually has the whole place in a vice like grip. In the case of the

husband, a lack of voice and presence ironically reflects on the injustice that takes place in his dead-end. Alfred is in it, and then he has gone missing you can look at Alfred but you cannot hear him (seen) and his sense of presence comes through emotionally, not visually, I think the audience feel Alfred's absence all the way through. To inhabit this paradox, in which we are made to "know" or "see" the condition of the unseen while a mute message is actually delivered to our hearing; where we acknowledge that disembodiment and feel it resonating out into space, is what I designate the theatre of absence. Serving as theatrical device-as-functioning-text the "absent character" Alfred also functions as self-scrutiny and self-reference. This way Alfred, whom O'Neill relieves of his life-long burthen of guilt feeling as an adulterous husband and lousy father in the unhappy first marriage, has finally conquered sympathy for himself. (Jungman, 249-277)

Modern English theatre, since the beginnings of the twentieth century, has witnessed a radical shift in its aesthetic structure and expressive function. It moved from focusing on traditional plots and clear external conflicts to diving into the depths of the human self, revealing the individual's psychological and existential crises in light of rapid social and economic transformations. This shift coincided with the emergence of modern dramatic theories that redefined the concept of conflict, character, and dialogue, so that language was no longer just a means of theatrical communication, but rather became an active dramatic element in the production of meaning and the building of dramatic tension (Esslin 21).

In this way, Eugene O'Neill emerged as one of the pioneers who contributed to establishing the features of modern drama in English and American theatre through his intensive use of dialogic language and his

reliance on the psychological structure of characters instead of relying on external events. His short play *Before Breakfast* is a significant model of this trend, as it reveals through a text limited in characters, place, and time deep psychological and social complexities, built essentially through dramatic language rather than through traditional theatrical action.

The play is characterized by its extreme reduction, as its events take place in a narrow domestic space and are based on a tense dialogue between a couple. However, this reduction does not mean semantic poverty on the contrary, it opens the field for language to transform into the basic structure through which the dramatic conflict is formed. Dialogue in *Before Breakfast* does not only perform a narrative function, but goes beyond that to become a tool for revealing psychological tensions, imbalances in power scales, and the existential alienation suffered by the characters. This makes the text amenable to analysis from the perspective of modern dramatic theory which sees that dramatic meaning is not derived from the event, but from the interaction of language with the psychological and social structure of the characters (Levenson 67).

Modern dramatic theory stems from a basic assumption that modern theatre is the theatre of language par excellence, where dramatic conflict is reformulated within the discourse itself, through rhythm, repetition, silence, and conversational interruptions elements that are clearly manifested in the play *Before Breakfast*. Language here is not neutral, but rather loaded with psychological and social connotations, revealing the fragility of human relations and transforming dialogue into a conflictual space that reflects the crisis of communication within the modern marital institution (Bakhtin 278).

Despite the importance of this play within O'Neill's early output most critical studies turned to his major works of long duration while his short texts including *Before Breakfast* remained often treated as an artistic prelude that does not deserve in-depth analysis. However, this research stems from a different hypothesis, which is that the short play represents a concentrated laboratory for modern dramatic techniques, and that analyzing it linguistically and dramatically allows for a deeper understanding of the transformations of modern theatre as an art of language and psychological conflict.

This play gains its importance from the fact that it represents a transitional stage in O'Neill's artistic career, where the features of modern dramatic writing based on deconstructing daily discourse and transforming it into a tool for psychological revelation begin to crystallize. The simple words appearing in the dialogue hide behind them a deep semantic tension, making language a medium for conflict instead of being a mere transmitter of it. This employment reveals an early dramatic awareness of the importance of the linguistic structure in forming the theatrical act which intersects with the perceptions of modern dramatic theory that emphasizes the centrality of discourse in the production of meaning. Also, the focus on minute conversational details, stylistic shifts, and repeated silences grants the text an experimental character that precedes many features of subsequent psychological theatre. Hence, reading *Before Breakfast* as a concentrated linguistico-dramatic text allows for a re-evaluation of its status within the development of modern theatre, away from reducing it to being just a short or introductory work.

The importance of this research stems from the fact that it focuses on language as a central dramatic structure in modern English theatre, not just a formal or literary element. It seeks to highlight how language in *Before Breakfast* transforms into a dramatic tool that produces conflict, reveals the psychological structure of characters, and reflects social transformations in modern marital relations. The importance of the study also lies in its adoption of modern dramatic theory as an analytical framework, contributing to enriching critical studies that still tend, in many cases, toward thematic analysis at the expense of linguistico-dramatic analysis. Thus, the research provides an applied model that can be utilized in studying other modern theatrical texts based on intensive dialogue and structural reduction.

#### Research Problem

This study stems from one central problem: How does dramatic language, according to the perspective of modern dramatic theory, contribute to building psychological conflict and producing dramatic significance in Eugene O'Neill's play *Before Breakfast*?

#### Research Methodology

This research relies on the descriptive-analytical method, based on the tools of modern dramatic theory and linguistic analysis of theatrical discourse, due to its suitability for studying a short dramatic text based on intensive dialogue. The research deals with the play *Before Breakfast* as an integrated linguistico-dramatic structure, whose linguistic elements cannot be separated from its dramatic functions. The linguistic analysis focuses on the structure of dialogue, verbal and semantic repetition, rhythm, and silences as semantic units productive of meaning. This

analysis is also based on the concepts of literary linguistics, particularly what was presented by Leech and Short in studying the relationship between style and significance. The research then moves to dramatic analysis, where conflict is understood as a linguistic and psychological conflict rather than an episodic one. The characters are analyzed through their discourse to reveal the formation of dramatic identity and social power imbalances.

### Discussion

The problem of this research centers on the following question: How does dramatic language, according to the perspective of modern dramatic theory, contribute to building psychological conflict and producing dramatic significance in Eugene O'Neill's play *Before Breakfast*? To answer this question, the discussion is based on a comprehensive study of the structure of the text, and the psychological and social dimensions reflected by the language, with a focus on the importance of the research in highlighting the role of language as a central element in modern theatre, not just a means of conveying events.

Where the analysis shows that the dialogue in the play is not just a simple means of communication, but is the arena of the conflict itself. Every word said or withheld, and every silence left contributes to constructing the psychological tension between the characters. The wife uses language charged with accusation and reproach, while the husband tries to defend himself, using a fluctuating discourse that reflects the inability to face the crisis (Bakhtin 293). This clearly illustrates how language transforms into a means of producing psychological conflict, which answers the basic question of the research the conflict in *Before Breakfast* does not stem from external events but from the linguistic interaction itself, which

proves the research hypothesis about the centrality of language in modern drama.

Especially in us, it concerns the financial need that falls under poverty and material destitution, as well as how the wife imagines her contempt for her silent husband who is not working, and who made her have to go out to work, and this is what can be called persuasive poverty:

“You hoped everyone'd think you'd been forced to marry me, and pity you, didn't you? You didn't hesitate much about telling me you loved me, and making me believe your lies, before it happened, did you? You made me think you didn't want your father to buy me off as he tried to do. I know better now. I haven't lived with you all this time for nothing. (Somberly) It's lucky the poor thing was born dead, after all. What a father you'd have been!” (O'Neil, 3)

The linguistic analysis also illustrates that verbal and semantic repetition is a major tool used by O'Neill to highlight the psychological and social crisis. Repetition does not only work on emphasis, but reveals the characters' difficulty in producing a new discourse, and reflects a closure in communication and a state of psychological stagnation (Leech 121). Through this use, it becomes clear that the short play can be a concentrated laboratory for modern drama techniques, which confirms the importance of this research in shedding light on O'Neill's short texts that are often marginalized in critical studies in favor of his long works.

Also, the role of silence and conversational interruptions emerges in the play as a productive tool for meaning. Silence here does not mean the absence of speech, but rather it is a charged semantic moment, revealing what is not said of psychological and social conflicts (Esslin 41). From

the perspective of modern dramatic theory, silence represents a dramatic unit no less important than the spoken dialogue, as it allows the recipient to read the internal emotions and psychological tension that speech is unable to express. This explains how language and silence together enhance the dramatic meaning, and answers the research problem by clarifying the means O'Neill uses to manufacture conflict.

Furthermore, social power imbalances within the dialogue appear as another main factor illustrating the relationship between language and social structure in the play. The wife controls the dialogue using a direct offensive discourse, while the husband tries to retreat or justify, reflecting a crisis in the balance of power within the marital relationship. According to Halliday language as a social practice shows how power relations are reflected in literary texts (Halliday 38). This answers the research question in terms of the production of significance: Language reveals the social and psychological structure and becomes a tool for understanding the internal dynamics between characters.

It becomes clear that the characters are built through discourse alone, not through direct description or external events, reflecting one of the characteristics of modern theatre emphasized by modern dramatic theory (Levenson 74). The dramatic character is not a fixed entity, but is formed through language, rhythm, and dialogue, making linguistico-dramatic analysis the most accurate means of understanding character and conflict. This explains the importance of the research in providing a methodological model for studying short theatrical texts, where layers of psychological and social conflict can be revealed through dialogue and understanding of language.

Sixth, the text illustrates that the simple daily conversational language hides behind it great psychological and semantic depth. Familiar words transform into a means of intensifying emotions and highlighting the alienation of characters, which confirms the research hypothesis about language as an active element in the production of dramatic meaning (Leech 134). Hence, the importance of the research is clear in shedding light on texts that rely on daily dialogue to convey complex psychological and social crises, away from traditional plots.

The dramatic construction of the play appears as a gradual linguistic escalation that does not depend on a traditional plot where tension accumulates through dialogue to reach its psychological peak without major external events (Esslin 52). This confirms the answer to the research question about how psychological conflict and meaning are produced. Conflict is produced through language, rhythm, and silence, and not through external events, which highlights the importance of focusing on short texts that compress time and space but reflect modern dramatic transformations.

Finally, through this discussion, it is clear that the research achieves its academic importance it is not limited to analyzing a short text, but rather re-evaluates the status of reduced theatrical works as concentrated laboratories for modern dramatic techniques. It also illustrates how language can be the basic element in modern theatre, filling the gap in critical research on O'Neill's short texts, and presenting an analytical model that can be applied to similar texts in modern theatre. In this way, the discussion answers the research problem and the basic research question, and demonstrates the importance of the study in understanding

the central role of language in building dramatic conflict, characters, and the overall meaning of the text.

## Conclusion

This research concluded that Eugene O'Neill's play *Before Breakfast* represents a concentrated model of modern theatre, where language becomes the central element in the production of dramatic meaning and the construction of the characters' psychological conflict. The study showed through linguistico-dramatic analysis, that dialogue in the play does not only perform a traditional narrative function, but is a vital tool for revealing psychological and social tensions, the power struggle within the marital relationship and the blockage of communication between characters. The results showed that every word every silence, and every interruption in the dialogue carries significance, reflecting the escalation of psychological and moral tension within the text, which confirms the research hypothesis stating that dramatic language in modern theatre is not a secondary means but is the essence of drama itself (Esslin 34).

The research also found that O'Neill's use of verbal and semantic repetition, interruptions, and silences represents a means of producing internal conflict and achieving psychological and social significance, and is not just a rhetorical style. Repetition reflects the characters' inability to produce a new discourse, while silences contribute to revealing what cannot be expressed in words, making the play a concentrated linguistico-dramatic laboratory for showing the psychological and existential transformations of the characters (Leech and Short 121, Esslin 41). From

this perspective, the research illustrates that the short play can carry a dramatic weight comparable to long works, as it demonstrates the ability of reduced texts to produce deep psychological and social connotations through language alone.

The research emphasized that characters in *Before Breakfast* are built through discourse alone, which is consistent with modern dramatic theory that sees character not as a fixed entity, but as a linguistico-dramatic structure formed in dialogue, rhythm, and everyday language. The wife and husband express their psychological and social identities through the way they use language, and what they are unable to say, reflecting the blockage of the horizon of communication between them and highlighting internal conflict as a central theme of the text (Levenson 74, Bakhtin 293).

The research also showed that the play reflects social power imbalances through dialogue, and that simple everyday language transforms into a tool for showing the psychological and social crisis, explaining the role of modern theatre in addressing deep human issues within limited and reduced spaces (Halliday 38). Thus, the importance of the research is realized in shedding light on short theatrical texts that are often marginalized, and presenting an analytical model that explains how language becomes the main driver of conflict, character, and meaning.

In the end, it can be said that this research achieves its academic importance through clarifying the primary function of dramatic language in building psychological conflict and producing meaning in modern theatre. Re-evaluating O'Neill's short texts as concentrated laboratories for modern drama, away from being considered introductory or secondary works. Providing a methodological analytical framework that combines

linguistic analysis and dramatic criticism, which can be applied to similar texts in modern theatre. Highlighting the link of language to the psychological and social structure of characters, enhancing a deeper understanding of modern theatre as an art of language and psychological and social conflict.

Thus, it can be said that the play *Before Breakfast* is not just a simple short text, but is a central model that illustrates how language, silence, and masterful dialogue constitute the essence of modern drama, and emphasizes the importance of studying short texts in revealing the psychological, social, and existential transformations that modern English theatre focuses on. From this standpoint, the research opens horizons for more linguistico-dramatic studies in modern theatre and lays a methodological basis that can be built upon in subsequent research dealing with the relationship between language, character, and conflict in theatre.

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