

UNIT – 4

BEFORE BREAKFAST

4.0 Introduction

Before Breakfast is a short and gloomy play by Eugene O'Neill. O'Neill was the first American dramatist to treat the stage as a literary medium and the only American playwright ever to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. *Before Breakfast* is set in the Greenwich Village area of New York City, in a small one room flat on Christopher Street. The flat consists of a kitchen and dining space. There are only two characters in this play. The married couple, Mrs. Roland who is the only speaking character and her husband Alfred who is silent all through are the two characters. It is just once that Alfred's hand is seen in the play, not much else. This is symbolic of an absentee husband or a non-existent marriage. Although, Alfred is not seen, he seems to provoke a great deal of conflict. With only Mrs. Rowland on stage, O'Neill allows the plot to revolve around her. The play is a kind of monologue ending in the supposed death of the husband.

4.1 Unit Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand how a short play in a single Act is performed.
- Appreciate the terms related to play as a genre such as stage setting, characterization, dialogues, monologues, etc.
- Understand the important concerns in the earlier American drama.

4.2 About the Playwright

Eugene O'Neill was born into the theatre. His father, James O'Neill, was a successful touring actor in the last quarter of the 19th century and his mother, Ella, accompanied her husband across the country. Eugene, who was born in a hotel and even spent his early childhood in hotel rooms, on trains, and backstage. He later condemned the unpleasant and insecure early years of his life and blamed his father for the difficult life the family led. Eugene had the theatre in his blood. He was experienced the twin influences of his parents' ideology as a child. He was steeped in the peasant Irish Catholicism of his father and the more genteel, mystical piety of his mother. These two divergent strains were recreated as dramatic conflict in many of his works leading to themes such as the high sense of drama and struggle with God and religion.

The following is a list of all the published and produced plays of O'Neill with the year in which they were written:

Bound East for Cardiff (1914), *Before Breakfast* (1916), *The Long Voyage Home* (1917), *In the Zone* (1917), *The Moon of the Carabbees* (1917), *Ile* (1917), *The Rope* (1918), *Beyond the Horizon* (1918), *The Dreamy Kid* (1918), *Where the Cross is Made* (1918), *The Straw* (1919), *Gold* (1920), *Anna*

Christie (1920}, The Emperor Jones (1920), Different (1920), The First Man (1921), The Fountain (1921-22), The Hairy Ape (1921), Welded (1922), All God's Chillun Got Wings (1923), Desire Under the Elms (1924), Marco Millions (1923-25), The Great God Brown (1925), Lazarus Laughed (1926), Strange Interlude (1926-27), Dynamo (1928), Mourning Becomes Electra (1929-31) , Ah, Wilderness (1932), Days Without End (1932-33).

Eugene O'Neill has often been censured for his choice of characters, for their deviant psychologies, and for their excessive emotionalism. Certainly his plays dealt with emotions, but he did so because he believed that emotions were a better guide than thoughts to probe truth. The struggles of his characters frequently take place, therefore, within themselves, so that there is little external action performed on the stage. Victories and defeats are in the mind. The message is driven home through a bitter sense of self-realization and even self-pity.

The popularity of O'Neill's work, however, has grown over time. His plays have been performed throughout the world and transformed into film and opera. Through his efforts, the American theatre in the 1920s, developed into a cultural medium which earlier consisted largely of contrived melodrama and farce (apart from musicals and an occasional European import of quality). O'Neill saw the theatre as a valid forum for the presentation of serious ideas. Imbued with the tragic sense of life, he aimed for a contemporary drama that had its roots in the most powerful of ancient Greek tragedies--a drama that could rise to the emotional heights of Shakespeare. For more than twenty years, with such masterpieces as *Desire Under the Elms*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and *The Iceman Cometh* and by his inspiration to other serious dramatists, O'Neill set the pace for the flourishing of the Broadway theatre.

4.3 The Play

4.3.1. MRS. ROWLAND—(In a low voice) Alfred! Alfred! (There is no answer from the next room and she continues suspiciously in a louder tone) You needn't pretend you're asleep. (There is no reply to this from the bedroom, and, reassured, she gets up from her chair and tiptoes cautiously to the dish closet. She slowly opens one door, taking great care to make no noise, and slides out, from their hiding place behind the dishes, a bottle of Gordon gin and a glass. In doing so she disturbs the top dish, which rattles a little. It this sound she starts guiltily and looks with sulky defiance at the doorway to the next room.) (Her voice trembling) Alfred! After a pause, during which she listens for any sound, she takes the glass and pours out a large drink and gulps it down; then hastily returns the bottle and glass to their hiding place. She closes the closet door with the same care as she had opened it, and, heaving a great sigh of relief, sinks down into her chair again. The large dose of alcohol she has taken has an almost immediate effect. Her features become more animated, she seems to gather energy, and she looks at the bedroom door with a hard, vindictive smile on her lips. Her eyes glance quickly about the room and are fixed on a man's coat and vest which hang from a hook at right. She moves stealthily over to the open doorway and stands there, out of sight of anyone inside, listening for any movement.)

(Calling in a half-whisper) Alfred! (Again there if no reply. With a swift movement she takes the coat and vest from the hook and returns with them to her chair. She sits down and takes the various articles out of each pocket but quickly puts them back again. At last, in the inside pocket of the vest, she finds a letter.)

(Looking at the handwriting—slowly to herself) Hmm! I knew it.

Explanation: These are the initial dialogues of the play. The married couple led a dissatisfied and unhappy life together although the response of the husband is not shared with the reader. Mrs. Rowland is not afresh and happy in the morning and calls for the husband to get up. The husband is named Alfred. She tip toes in order to avoid any noise. She gets a drink ready for herself and feels uneasy at the noise she is making. She feels rejuvenated and animated and starts searching the pockets of the husband's coat which is hanging on the peg. She finds something inside the pocket which makes her perky and alert.

4.3.2 (In a loud, shrill voice) Alfred! (Still louder) Alfred! (There is a muffled, yawning groan from the next room) Don't you think it's about time you got up? Do you want to stay in bed all day? (Turning around and coming back to her chair) Not that I've got any doubts about your being lazy enough to stay in bed forever. (She sits down and looks out of the window, irritably) Goodness knows what time it is. We haven't even got any way of telling the time since you pawned your watch like a fool. The last valuable thing we had, and you knew it. It's been nothing but pawn, pawn, pawn, with you—anything to put off getting a job, anything to get out of going to work like a man. (She taps the floor with her foot nervously, biting her lips.)

Explanation: The wife is irritated that the husband refuses to leave bed although it is rather late in the day. She also shows her annoyance that the husband has pawned away his watch which was costly and now she cannot tell the time. She is equally disturbed as the man refuses to take up any responsibility nor does he have a steady job. The whole extract records the woman's complaints and anger in the given situation.

4.3.3 (After a short pause) Alfred! Get up, do you hear me? I want to make that bed before I go out. I'm sick of having this place in a continual mess on your account. (With a certain vindictive satisfaction) Not that we'll be here long unless you manage to get some money some place. Heaven knows I do my part—and more—going out to sew every day while you play the gentleman and loaf around barrooms with that good-for-nothing lot of artists from the Square. (A short pause during which she plays nervously with a cup and saucer on the table.) And where are you going to get money, I'd like to know? The rent's due this week and you know what the landlord is. He won't let us stay a minute over our time. You say you can't get a job. That's a lie and you know it. You never even look for one. All you do is moon around all day writing silly poetry and stories that no one will buy—and no wonder they won't. I notice I can always get a position, such as it is; and it's only that which keeps us from starving to death.

Explanation: Mrs. Rowland continues her tirade against the husband. She reminds him that unless he finds a proper job, they might have to starve. She also rants about how she has to do odd sewing jobs to make the both ends meet. She accuses the man of lazing around and indulging in pass time hobby of writing poetry. It is unproductive to roam around with people who call themselves artists and earn nothing, the wife feels. She reminds him of the pending dues, especially the house rent as the landlord would not give them any more time. Thus the ranting of the wife continues with little response from the husband.

4.3.4 (Suddenly with great anger) What on earth are you doing all this time? (She goes over to the door and looks in) Well, You're almost dressed at any rate. I expected to find you back in bed. That'd be

just like you. How awful you look this morning! For heaven's sake, shave! You're disgusting! You look like a tramp. No wonder no one will give you a job. I don't blame them—when you don't even look half-way decent. (She goes to the stove) There's plenty of hot water right here. You've got no excuse. (Gets a bowl and pours some of the water from the coffee pot into it) Here.

(He reaches his hand into the room for it. It is a sensitive hand with slender fingers. It trembles and some of the water spills on the floor.)

(Tauntingly) Look at your hand tremble. You'd better give up drinking. You can't stand it. It's just your kind that get the D.T.'s. That would be the last straw! (Looking down at the floor) Look at the mess you've made of this floor—cigarette butts and ashes all over the place. Why can't you put them on a plate? No, you wouldn't be considerate enough to do that. You never think of me. You don't have to sweep the room and that's all you care about. (Takes the broom and commences to sweep viciously, raising a cloud of dust. From the inner room comes the sound of a razor being stropped.)

(Sweeping) Hurry up! It must be nearly time for me to go. If I'm late I'm liable to lose my position, and then I couldn't support you any longer. (As an afterthought she adds sarcastically) And then you'd have to go to work or something dreadful like that. (Sweeping under the table) What I want to know is whether you're going to look for a job today or not. You know your family won't help us anymore. They've had enough of you, too. (After a moment's silent sweeping) I'm about sick of all this life. I've a good notion to go home, if I wasn't too proud to let them know what a failure you've been—you, the millionaire Rowland's only son, the Harvard graduate, the poet, the catch of the town—Huh! (With bitterness) There wouldn't be many of them now envy my catch if they knew the truth. What has our marriage been, I'd like to know? Even before your millionaire father died owing everyone in the world money, you certainly never wasted any of your time on your wife. I suppose you thought I'd ought to be glad you were honorable enough to marry after getting me into trouble. You were ashamed of me with your fine friends because my father's only a grocer, that's what you were. At least he's honest, which is more than anyone could say about yours. (She is sweeping steadily toward the door. Leans on her broom for a moment.)

Explanation: Mrs. Rowland persists with her angry outburst against the husband but is rather surprised to see him all dressed up. She finds him untidy and unshaved and asks him to groom himself in a better way so that people take him seriously. She offers him coffee and he extends his hand for the cup. In fact this is the only encounter with the character of Alfred that the reader has in the entire play. She finds his hand trembling and asks him to drink less. She is more angry as she has to clean the cigarette stubs lying around which tells he cares neither for her nor for the house. She seems to be getting late for the job and blames the man for any future trouble. She reminds him that he was the son of a millionaire who died deeply in debt. Alfred was considered to be a great catch by her friends as he had refined tastes and studied at Harvard. However all this came to nothing. On the other hand she was the daughter of a grocer, an object of ridicule for the genteel husband and his friends. Now she feels that at least her father was an honest man and she was more reliable partner than the husband.

4.3.5 I knew all the time you were running around with someone. Your lame excuses about spending the time at the library didn't fool me. Who is this Helen, anyway? One of those artists? Or does she write poetry, too? Her letter sounds that way. I'll bet she told you your things were the best ever, and you

believed her, like a fool. Is she young and pretty? I was young and pretty, too, when you fooled me with your fine, poetic talk; but life with you would soon wear anyone down. What I've been through!

Explanation: The wife has also come to know about the escapades of the man . She had an idea that he was having an affair with a girl named Helen . He had been pretending all the while that he was busy in the library. She is sure that the young girl must have been duped by him with his poetic expression just as she had been some time back. But as he was a good for nothing fellow, living with him could tire anyone.

4.3.6 I'm sorry for this Helen, whoever she is. Haven't you got any feelings for other people? What will her family say? I see she mentions them in her letter. What is she going to do—have the child—or go to one of those doctors? That's a nice thing, I must say. Where can she get the money? Is she rich? (She waits for some answer to this volley of questions.) Hmm! You won't tell me anything about her, will you? Much I care. Come to think of it, I'm not so sorry for her after all. She knew what she was doing. She isn't any schoolgirl, like I was, from the looks of her letter. Does she know you're married? Of course, she must. All your friends know about your unhappy marriage. I know they pity you, but they don't know my side of it. They'd talk different if they did.

Explanation; The wife is sorry for the stranger named Helen although being an adult she must know what she is doing. She asks the husband in a sarcastic way whether the girl will have his child or go for an abortion . The wife also feels bad for her parents who have been mentioned by the girl in the letter seized by the wife from his coat. He had been talking about their unhappy marriage but the fact was that the wife was the only victim whereas the man enjoyed his life at her expense.

4.3.7 Did you cut yourself again? Serves you right. (Gets up and takes off her apron) Well, I've got to run along. (Peevishly) This is a fine life for me to be leading! I won't stand for your loafing any longer. (Something catches her ear and she pauses and listens intently) There! You've overturned the water all over everything. Don't say you haven't. I can hear it dripping on the floor. (A vague expression of fear comes over her face) Alfred! Why don't you answer me?

(She moves slowly toward the room. There is the noise of a chair being overturned and something crashes heavily to the floor. She stands, trembling with fright.) Alfred! Alfred! Answer me! What is it you knocked over? Are you still drunk? (Unable to stand the tension a second longer she rushes to the door of the bedroom.)

Alfred!

(She stands in the doorway looking down at the floor of the inner room, transfixed with horror. Then she shrieks wildly and runs to the other door, unlocks it and frenziedly pulls it open, and runs shrieking madly into the outer hallway.)

Explanation: All this while, the wife had been hurling accusations, queries and sarcastic comments at the man .Suddenly she listens to the noise of water falling all over and then the crashing noise of someone falling down. The playwright does not tell as to what happened to Alfred but when the wife peeps in she is shocked and terrified at what she sees. She runs out in fear and confusion. With this action the play concludes.

Check Your Progress

1. Why is Mrs. Rowland so disturbed?
2. What is the name of the husband?
3. What is his reaction to the wife's charges?
4. Who is Helen?
5. What is the difference between the family background of both the partners?
6. Why is the wife shocked at the end of the play?

4.4 Summary

The play suggests that life cannot be sustained with poetic lines and that aspirations and dreams are dashed down by hardships in life. "Before Breakfast" is a one act play written by Eugene O'Neill. What makes this short drama unique is the fact that it consists mainly of the female lead, Mrs. Rowland, talking to and rebuking her husband. All through the play, not once does her husband appear on the stage (other than a brief glimpse the audience get of his hand) nor does he make any clear and coherent statement. The play might be termed as "a one character play". Yet despite the presence of the single character, the drama manages to convey all the necessary elements of the usual drama, such as the setting, the plot, and the conflicts—even if we only see it from Mrs. Rowland's point of view. From the first few dialogues, it is apparent that Mrs. Rowland is dissatisfied with the life that she leads right now, and wishes everything would change, especially her husband. She blames all of their misfortune on her husband, and in her verbal onslaughts she seems to think of herself as a martyr—because despite all of her husband's flaws, she still sticks by him, providing him breakfast, instead of just leaving him to fend for himself. The playwright does not indicate as to why she clings on to him despite her extreme annoyance and frustration. The reader is told that the man was a graduate from Harvard and a rich and sought after lad. He had wooed her with lines of poetry and genteel manners which had ultimately yielded nothing. On the contrary, the woman was from a decrepit family.. Possibly she marries him only for his wealth, since she is only a grocer's daughter. But then the reader is told that he read out poetry to woo her. Later on he seems to be involved in an illicit relationship and could also be the biological father of the unborn child. The wife discovers the truth when she lays hands on a letter in th man's pocket of a coat. She is sure he would not take responsibility of this new relationship as well. The most surprising of all is perhaps the ending, where it seems to be implied that the husband has committed suicide as the painful grunts emerging from the room and Mrs. Rowland's own hysterical reaction at the end is any indication. As to why he does that, the playwright does not disclose. Perhaps being a worthless oaf all his life, he opts for the easy way out even in his death leaving behind all the problems unresolved.

4.5 KEY WORDS

- **Reassured:** at ease
- **Defiance:** unyielding
- **Sulky:** complaining
- **Vest:** undershirt
- **Animated:** alert

- **Muffled:** not clear
- **Pawned:** something given as security for a loan
- **Vindictive:** revengeful
- **Loaf around:** move around aimlessly
- **Tramp:** aimless person
- **Sarcastically:** mockingly
- **Grocer:** one who sells food and other items
- **Peevishly:** showing irritation
- **Transfixed:** numb with shock

4.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Mrs. Roland is so disturbed because her husband shows no interest in household and she is left to fend for herself as well as him.
2. The husband's name is Alfred.
3. He seems to pay little heed and answers in grunts.
4. Helen is allegedly the love interest of the husband.
5. The husband belongs to a well-off family and has been educated at Harvard. He has the trappings of the upper strata. The wife has a humble lineage and her father is a grocer.
6. She is shocked because she supposedly looks at the dead husband in the room.

4.7 IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

- **Mrs. Rowland:** She is the only woman character in the play. In fact all the dialogues are spoken by her addressed to the husband who hardly responds. Throughout the play she keeps on complaining and regretting her alliance with the man. She seems to be under a lot of pressure as she is the only bread earner of the family. She is suspicious of the husband and her fears regarding his affair with another woman come true when she comes across a letter in the pocket of his coat. She belongs to an ordinary family and was lured onto marriage by the man who wooed her by reciting poetry.
- **Albert:** He is the husband in absentia. He never comes before the reader nor does he utter any dialogue. He seems to be a philanderer and a carefree debonair. His sole appearance is when his hand emerges from the room to fetch a cup of coffee. He appears to commit suicide at the end because the wife shrieks when she looks at him inside the room.

4.8 QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

Short-Answer Questions

Q1. Justify the title?

Ans : The title of the short play is *Before Breakfast*. The entire play takes place before the first meal

of the day is served. The atmosphere of early morning languor and lethargy is present. Hence the title is justified.

Q3. What is the narrative technique used in the play?

Ans: It is in the form of a dramatic monologue. There is primarily only one speaker, the wife, who keeps on talking to a shadowy husband. He responds in grunts and monosyllables.

Q4. What is the nature of inter personal relations in the play?

Ans: There is hardly much contact between the two protagonists on the play. Although they are married, they share no bond of mutual faith and love. The marriage is non-existent.

Q5. How convincing is the conclusion of the play?

Ans: It is very convincing because the kind of turbulence and rancor which the two partners show, it is possible that the man could have committed suicide. That is what the wife looks at when she peeps in the room and shrieks loudly.

Q6. What is the tone of the play?

Ans: The tone is depressing and pessimistic. The wife gets up in the morning only to start the blame game against the husband. She is unhappy and dissatisfied. The man seems least interested in the home and lacks enterprise and initiative. So the tone is rather despondent.

LONG-ANSWER QUESTIONS

Q1. How does O'Neill bring out the tragic element in the play?

Ans: The play is a tragedy of life in a small household. Both the partners face a reality that is ugly, unromantic and stark. It is a world which gives no value to aesthetic and delicate tastes such as poetry. It is a bitter battle for survival. Ultimately the one who cannot be realistic has to succumb. The husband, Alfred, is intentionally kept off stage because Eugene O'Neill wanted the plot, action, and conflict in "Before Breakfast" to revolve around Mrs. Rowland. The plot is not intended to show the life story of the Rowlands. Instead, the plot brings out powerful and pointed opposition and conflict which Mrs. Rowland is faced with. O'Neill wants to bring about disturbing emotions of pity and horror. We experience pity for Mrs. Rowland when the author writes "What is she going to do-have the child-or go to one of those doctors?" And the horror is at the end when the author writes "Did you cut yourself again? ... Alfred! Alfred! Answer me! What is it you knocked over? Are you still drunk? ... Alfred!" In the end, without seeing Alfred the reader knows that he has cut his throat. This changes the scene from one of violence and blood to one of horror and despair.

We all know from our own experiences that there is always and perpetually two sides to every story. The audience learns of Alfred from comments made by his wife. We never get to hear Alfred's side of the story. Alfred makes moaning and grunting sounds from the bedroom but never speaks a word in self defense. The audience can for them selves draw a conclusion that Mrs. Rowland's point of view is distorted to a detrimental degree. By only using Mrs. Rowland point of view O'Neill was able to focus the audience's feelings of pity and fear in the direction of Mrs. Rowland. With the focus on Mrs. Rowland O'Neill was able to bring a tragic plot in dramatic form a "tragedy" to stage.

Q2. Comment on the play as a social drama.

Ans: The play deals with a social theme with family as the basis of attention. It portrays the aspirations and dreams of a married couple and how they are dashed by hardships and cold reality. A couple entangled in a lengthy struggle seems destined to end in tragedy. The conflict begins long before we meet Mr. and Mrs. Rowland. The couple was married when Mrs. Rowland became pregnant at a young age. Alfred's father tried to buy the young mother off. Family and friends disapproved of the young girl, because of her social status. The child, the reason the couple married, was born dead. Alfred is unable to sell his poems and turns retrogressive and depressed. His depression contributes to a self-destructive lifestyle, tagging along his wife with him. It becomes obvious that the marriage would fail. The play revolves around a social theme and depicts social concerns through the life of the young couple.

Q3. Draw a character sketch of Mrs. Rowland?

Ans: Mrs. Rowland, the protagonist, is depicted as the stereotypical nagging wife. While a flat character, she is very realistic. Her language shows she lacks good education and fine tastes. She is also bitter towards her husband. Her bitterness is not unfounded. Alfred is of no help. He has been a huge disappointment as he earns nothing and is unprepared for family responsibilities. Added to it, he is an adulterous man who cannot find himself a vocation. Mrs. Rowland seems to be in love with her philandere husband, although she does not like the way he treats her. Her nagging could be a sign of her frustration as she is stuck in an unrewarding relationship.

ESSAY TYPE QUESTION**1. Would you consider *Before Breakfast* a realist play?**

Ans: The play is based on the tenets of Realism in all the facets. As a literary type, the realist movement has greatly influenced twentieth century theatre and cinema. Under the principles of Realism, characters are believable, even everyday types. Their attire is ordinary and props are often indoors and believable. The realist play drama is typically psychologically driven, where the plot is secondary. The primary focus is placed on the interior lives of characters, their motives, their psychological reactions to others etc. The realistic plays often depict the protagonist (main character) rise up against the odds to assert him/herself against an injustice of some kind as seen in the persona of Mrs. Rowland. Realistic dramas quickly gained popularity because the readers could identify with the situations and characters on stage. The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (*A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*) is considered the father of modern realism in the theatre. Realism was suitable for the depiction of many themes of the American playwrights so it became a popular style over there. *Before Breakfast* is a Realist play as its theme, characterization, plot and narrative pertain to a common theme of family, interpersonal relations, human dilemma, challenges of a commoner and so on. There is no idealizing or romanticizing of institutions of marriage, love, livelihood, femininity etc. The focus is less on external action than on internal turmoil. There is minimal conversation between the two characters and it is more of a monologue. The dramatist has used minimum props in stage setting and it is a sparsely constructed plot. The conclusion is equally realistic.

Q2. Give an assessment of Eugene O'Neill and his primal dramatic concerns.

Ans: Eugene O'Neill is called the father of American drama. He demonstrated to the world that the American theater could be serious, moving, artistic, and truthful. Many critics believe that the O'Neill canon towers above all other twentieth century dramatists. In both his personal relationships and his work, O'Neill embodies the flawed American character: alienated, isolated, guilty, and yet unable to sever ties from the family. Although he expresses concern with American vices such as greed, materialism, extravagance, and hypocrisy, he also probes deep into his own fixedness with family values. He introduced psychological and social realism to the American stage and was among the earliest to use American vernacular, and to focus on characters marginalized by society. Before O'Neill, American theatre consisted of melodrama and farce. He was the first American playwright to take drama seriously as an aesthetic and intellectual expression. O'Neill's plays seem like a Sisyphean endeavor, struggling up the mountain of human grief. There is a real heroism in his obstinate, perpetually strained thought, trying to come to terms with suffering. He once said that he hoped to "convey the quality of understanding that is born only of pain and rises to perception to reach the truths of human passion. For life to be felt as noble, it must be seen as tragic."