

ANALYSIS

Strange Interlude (1928)

Eugene O'Neill

(1888-1953)

"O'Neill climaxed his efforts with his novelistic nine-act drama *Strange Interlude* (1928), one of the most ambitious works written for the modern theatre. Striving to present the complex inner life of a woman from girlhood to middle age (that is, the 'strange interlude' of her sexual awakening and maturity), he invented the device of the 'interior monologue,' a bold and elaborate variant of the old-fashioned 'aside.' Each character spoke both his conscious and unconscious thoughts, thus revealing himself more completely than ordinary dialogue permits.... American playgoers came to expect almost anything from him... To see the nine-act stream-of-consciousness drama...[audiences] arrived for the performance at 5:30 in the afternoon, had dinner during an intermission, and then dutifully returned to their seats to await the conclusion of the longest interlude they had ever known....

The procedure of presenting the story on two complementary levels amplified modern dramatic technique and gave *Strange Interlude* the same status in the history of the modern drama that James Joyce's stream-of-consciousness narrative *Ulysses* occupies in the history of the modern novel. But O'Neill did not expend this technical virtuosity and psychological method on humdrum material. Nothing less than the substance of an extensive life history involving other life histories went into *Strange Interlude*. If the technique was complex, so was the life of O'Neill's heroine, Nina Leeds. Frustrated by the jealousy of her father and the death of the lover who might have fulfilled her, she is driven to complete herself through simultaneous attachments to three men, who are for her, respectively, father image, husband, and lover."

John Gassner

A Treasury of the Theatre: From Henrik Ibsen to Arthur Miller
(Simon & Schuster 1935-57) 787, 817

"*Strange Interlude* (almost three times normal play length) has as its central character a beautiful woman who blames her emotional sterility on the death of a lover killed in the war, but nevertheless manages to dominate the lives of three men—her husband, a lover, and her feebly genteel bachelor uncle. The method is realistic except for the fact that long soliloquies are employed to reveal the unspoken thoughts of the characters.... *Strange Interlude* could be interpreted as the study of a Freudian complex...

Strange Interlude is the demitragedy of a group which neither believes in God, like Old Ephraim in *Desire Under the Elms*, nor even, like Dion Anthony, wants to believe in God. In so far as the individual members believe in anything larger than themselves, that thing is the Freudian subconscious, some awareness of which seems to haunt them, very much as others have been vaguely haunted by an awareness of God. In so far as they 'belong' to anything, they belong to the 'complexes' which force them into actions of which their reason would not approve. And, whatever else may be said for or against Freudianism, *Strange Interlude* does demonstrate that it is capable of adding a dimension to drama. Plays which deal only with the relation of rational man to rational man are usually thin. One in which the passionately irrational aspects of life are recognized to the extent which Freudianism makes possible in *Strange Interlude* has already recovered something of the psychological truth which, in some very real sense, makes *Hamlet* more convincing than *Man and Superman*.

Strange Interlude is indeed completely absorbing. In many respects its effect resembles that of a good psychological novel. But it ends 'not with a bang but a whimper.' There is no satisfactory catastrophe, only a diminuendo, as the characters, who have neither solved their personal problems nor made defeat heroic, subside into the quiescence of age. They do not seem very important; they have failed to achieve tragic stature because neither intellectually nor emotionally are they convinced of their own importance either to

themselves or to anything else. They are more interesting and complex than the characters in even the best problem plays, but they are nevertheless interesting rather than tragically important....

Strange Interlude served to demonstrate that modern characters can play out a richly interesting drama even though Freudian psychology furnishes the only spiritual universe, the only large thing outside their rational consciousness with which they are willing to admit relation. Only one question remains to be answered. Can such characters satisfactorily fill the roles, not in a psychological study, but in a tragedy? Can they be made to take on the necessary stature, can they work their way through to a catastrophe of tragic proportions?"

Joseph Wood Krutch
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1245

"*Strange Interlude* is an ambitious work, consisting of nine acts and taking over four hours to play. In addition it uses experimental techniques never before attempted on the modern stage. Nina Leeds, the central character, is a personification of the female productive instinct ('God the Mother'), and the conflicts of the play arise out of the characters' efforts to find outlets for their erotic and reproductive impulses. The nine acts, each consisting of a single scene, extend over a wide period in time.

I

In the first act Nina, daughter of a puritanical professor, has become morbid over the death of her fiancé Gordon Shaw in the First World War. Gordon was a superb athlete and universally admired, yet Nina's father, secretly jealous, had prevented their marriage until after Gordon had gone overseas. Now Nina feels cheated of her natural satisfaction of reproduction. Also present is Charlie Marsden, a family friend and novelist who is secretly in love with Nina; she treats him with a playful condescension, calling him 'good old Charlie.' At the end of the act Nina, obsessed with the memory of her dead lover, departs to become a nurse in a hospital for invalid soldiers.

II

In Act II Professor Leeds has died, and Marsden, still secretly lustful toward Nina, awaits her return. But she enters with Sam Evans, a college friend of Gordon, a weak and immature youth who worships the memory of his more virile dead classmate. Sam, thinking of Marsden as Nina's 'guardian' now that her father is dead, asks for her hand in marriage. Next enters Ned Darrell, doctor in the hospital where Nina works; he is a cool and competent scientist who prides himself on his objective attitude. He hints that Nina has been promiscuous with the wounded soldiers in the hospital out of a subconscious desire to atone for Gordon, and suggests a remedy in a marriage with Evans. Marsden agrees to help arrange the marriage.

III

In Act III Sam Evans and Nina are married and visiting Sam's mother; Nina is exultant to learn she is pregnant. But Mrs. Evans warns her that insanity is congenital in the Evans family; the baby must never be allowed to come to life.

IV

In Act IV Nina, still obsessed with a desire for a child, begs Darrell to provide her with one. This he agrees to do as a 'prescription' which he, as her doctor, orders for her.

V

In Act V Nina's child by Darrell has been born and named Gordon in honor of the dead hero. But the afternoons of love with Darrell have had their effect: The two have become infatuated with each other in spite of Darrell's pose of scientific objectivity. Darrell, aghast at the results of his 'experiment,' sails for Europe.

VI

In Act VI Nina is happy with her baby, but Marsden, jealous, upsets her by reporting Darrell's philandering in Europe. Evans, proud of 'his' child, is working hard and is on his way to success. Later in the act Ned Darrell returns from Europe and Nina sees he is still in love with her; she exults over her possession of three men, her husband Sam, the 'father' Charlie, and the lover Ned.

VII

Act VII takes place nearly eleven years later. Gordon quarrels bitterly with Darrell, whom he subconsciously realizes to be his mother's lover. Marsden, devoted to his own aged mother, is unhappy and ineffectual.

VIII

Act VIII, ten years later, shows Gordon as a college senior. The rest of the characters, along with Gordon's fiancée Madeline Arnold, have gathered on the yacht to watch him row in a regatta. All now realize that Gordon is a sort of reincarnation of the dead Gordon Shaw; thus Nina and Sam root for him to win but Darrell and Marsden, who have always resented the ghost of Shaw which has hung over Nina's life, hope young Gordon's boat will lose. Gordon wins, but Sam becomes so excited that he suffers a heart attack.

IX

In Act IX Sam has died. Nina is bitter that Madeline is taking her son from her. But before the act ends the characters arrive at something like contentment. Darrell, reconciled with his illegitimate son Gordon, agrees with Nat not to reveal the secret of the boy's birth; and Nina, her passions now dead, turns to a comfortable marriage with her old suitor Marsden. She concludes that the middle years of life, the years of passion, frustration, and bitterness, are only a 'strange interlude' between the happiness of childhood and the serenity of old age.

The chief technical device of *Strange Interlude* is the 'interior monologue' or spoken psychological aside, by which O'Neill attempts to reveal the inner thoughts of his characters. In the printed version of the play these asides are indented and set in smaller type than the outward dialogue. Unlike the asides of Shakespearean drama, O'Neill's are intended as totally unspoken, in some cases subconscious, expressions; they are interspersed with ordinary dialogue to indicate the contrast, often ironic, between spoken and unspoken thoughts.

The central figure of the play is undoubtedly Nina. Happy in her youth, she spends the middle years of her life as a tormented instrument of the reproductive instinct that lives within her; she is simultaneously virgin, priestess, mother, prostitute, and wife. More powerful than the men around her, she demands the love of all of them simultaneously. Yet this power brings her little happiness; it is only when her passions die with age that she finds contentment in marriage with the placid and 'sexless' Charlie. The effectiveness of the play lies in its technical originality and in the powerful characterization of Nina; the main defect is O'Neill's tendency toward sentimental and mawkish inner dialogue."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 347-49

"I do not find *Strange Interlude* boring. Though not lowbrow, it is soap opera, and soap opera doesn't have to be boring, it only has to be foolish. Soap opera larded—or should one say lathered?—with would-be serious and up-to-date ideas is doubly foolish. The solemn farce got its deserved come-uppance when Groucho Marx—was it in *Animal Crackers*?—did an imitation of its manner. Groucho used the comedian's privilege of attacking the weakest spot, which was the device of asides placed at the service of psychologism. The things that people think and don't say were written into the dialogue as long and numerous asides, delivered while everyone on stage stood petrified. The petrification would have been bearable had the monologues been bearable. But the principle behind the latter was simple-minded. It was that when a man is saying to a woman: 'I love you!' he is murmuring to himself, 'No, I don't, I hate you,

you bitch!' Of which the reverse form, even commoner in O'Neill, is: 'I hate you, you bitch!' followed by: 'Oh, what a cad I am, I don't hate her at all, I love her!' If, as one might certainly maintain, ambivalence is the main theme of O'Neill's writing, as of his life, this is no adequate way to present it."

Eric Bentley
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 565

"This sensational and very popular drama opened on Broadway Jan. 30, 1928, closed June 15, 1929. The performances began at 5:30 and were adjourned for dinner; Part Two of the play was performed in the evening. The plot concerns the emotional, especially the sexual, reactions of Nina Leeds, who hates her father, a college professor, because she regards him as responsible for preventing her marriage to her fiancé, who was later killed in France. She becomes a nurse, marries good-natured Sam Evans, but when she learns she is about to have a child resorts to abortion because there is a strain of insanity in his family. However, she has an affair with Dr. Darrell, and their child is very fond of his supposed father but hates his real father. When Evans dies Nina marries a childhood admirer who reminds her of her father.

To make clear the thoughts, reactions, and inner yearnings of his characters O'Neill effectively revived the asides and soliloquies of Elizabethan drama, and made them a means of revealing the stream of consciousness, which novelists at about that time were beginning to use in eager imitation of James Joyce. The play also greatly appealed to the current interest in Freud, and echoed Schopenhauer's ideas on love, women, the sex impulse, human happiness, and the denial of the will to live."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)