

ANALYSIS

The Great God Brown (1926)

Eugene O'Neill

(1888-1953)

"O'Neill went even further in the direction of subjective drama with *The Great God Brown*. This remarkable, if somewhat puzzling, tragedy of dual personality expressed the anguish of divided souls by means of masks worn and exchanged by two complementary characters. Three other symbolic plays followed this tantalizing exploration of the inner self."

John Gassner

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

"*The Great God Brown*...is contemporary in setting, fantastically 'Expressionistic' in method, and as completely subjective as the previous play [*Desire Under the Elms*] was objective in its treatment of characters and fable. Dion Anthony, a genius, is dogged through life by Brown, a mediocrity, who assumes his mask and thus deceives his wife, appropriates the plans which he has drawn for a great public building, and all but usurps his identity. All the characters wear masks which they sometimes remove in soliloquies when they reveal their private, as opposed to their public, personalities. The symbolism becomes extremely confused; O'Neill's own explanation of his intentions is rather more obscure than the play itself; and one is left in doubt whether Anthony and Brown are not actually the two aspects of a single individual..."

The Great God Brown, incomprehensible as much of it was, seemed, after its own fashion, to constitute a satire on the American ideal of 'success' and thus to have some sort of relation to the novels of Sinclair Lewis and his imitators...concerned with moderns who have lost their faith, and the key is furnished by the early scene in which Dion longs first for an earthly father and then for a heavenly one, though he can find only a sensible parent and the now trivial legend of an 'old gray beard' in the sky. As art *Desire Under the Elms* is strikingly successful, *The Great God Brown* conspicuously unsatisfactory, in part because one has a tragic hero, the other has only a hero who is aware of his inability to give his failures tragic significance."

Joseph Wood Krutch

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

"*The Great God Brown* is a remarkable experiment in the problem of multiple personality, another subject which O'Neill derived from modern psychology. The two chief characters are William A. Brown, symbolizing the soulless and materialistic modern man, and his friend Dion Anthony (suggesting 'Dionysus' plus 'Saint Anthony'), a creative and pagan artist-type, unhappy and out of place in modern civilization. The dramatic development of the play depends heavily on the device of masks, which O'Neill uses to symbolize the outward and superficial aspects of personality and which the characters frequently remove or change. Dion and Brown are partners in a building enterprise, and Dion's wife Margaret (who represents conventional married love) imagines that she loves him, but actually loves only his mask, which he wears to protect his sensitive inner nature from intrusion.

Dion finds his insipidly virtuous wife unsatisfying, and consoles himself with Cybel, a prostitute (an 'earth-mother' figure or symbol of elemental physical love). When Dion, drained of his creative imagination by Brown, weakens and dies, Brown takes possession of his mask and passes himself off as Margaret's husband. For a while he manages to fill both identities, but after a while he is accused (as Dion) of his own murder; he flees and is shot down by a police volley. Before he dies he is told by Cybel that 'there is only love'; after he is dead she tells the audience 'Always spring comes again bearing life.' This simple and rather vague paganistic hedonism, however, does not express the real importance of *The Great*

God Brown as a play; it is its radical Expressionistic technique and its original approach to characterization that mark the drama as an important landmark in the American theatre.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 346-47

“What about the mask? It is the very prototype of theatrical devices, and it was O’Neill’s idea that it could be used to express ambivalence. For example, a mask may express innocence, while the face is haunted with guilt; a mask may exude confidence, while the face exudes timidity. This is one of a very few ideas by which *The Great God Brown* stands or falls. It proved more interesting in discussion than effective in the theater. So did the idea of having two actors play opposing sides of the same may in *Days Without End* (1934)... [O’Neill’s] vision was of a release from realism, a release upwards, as it were, toward the sublime and downwards toward the instinctual....

O’Neill liked to see life as a conflict between the ascetic and the pagan spirit. Hence the name of the hero of *The Great God Brown*, Dion Anthony—Dionysus the drunken God and Anthony the ascetic saint. Closely related to Dionysus is ‘the great god Pan,’ with whom O’Neill contrasts the American businessman of the Babbitt era—the great god Brown....

When we confront *The Great God Brown* and *Lazarus Laughed!* So little are the ideas of these plays sunk in the action and the characters that neither have any effective existence except to illustrate the ideas. And if there are obscurities, as in *The Great God Brown* there certainly are, they are cleared up, not by more work on action or character, but by a letter to the newspapers explaining the philosophy and the symbolism.”

Eric Bentley
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 565-66

Michael Hollister (2015)