Innovations in Dramaturgy: A Study of O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude*

M. Siddique Awan

Abstract

The stage directions introduced by the American dramatist Eugene O’Neill in his plays are quite unique in their scope and effectiveness. This article examines O’Neill’s play *Strange Interlude* in order to exhibit the different facets of the dramatist’s stage directions bringing out how they illuminate the theatrical aspects of this play’s production besides exposing the psychological make-up of his characters. The cumulative significance of his stage directions is highlighted. Elaborate stage directions, it is argued, do not compensate what his detractors call “O’Neill’s lack of poetry” (Brown 40) but are a cleverly wielded device which enables him to illustrate rather than describe dramatic action.

“It’s the biggest ever. I’m tremendous[ly] pleased with the deep scope of it. Nothing like it has been done before” (Sheaffer 239). This remark embodies O’Neill’s exultation about his work *Strange Interlude*. Being his seminal work, its unique experimental significance in dramaturgy will be illustrated. This play was produced in 1928 and earned O’Neill his first Pulitzer Prize. It was an inventive play in terms of its technical affinity with the novel. It has been divided into two parts, which are spread over nine acts, encompassing a time-span of twenty-five years. Sheaffer comments about this play:

---

In striving for novelistic qualities O’Neill broke with conventions not only in the extraordinary length of his new drama but in its ‘thought-asides,’ as he called them, an extension of the old technique in which the characters spoke directly to the audience, supposedly out of the earshot of the others on stage... Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which O’Neill read about the time he began writing *Strange Interlude*, probably inspired him to make such prominent use of a stream-of-consciousness pattern (Sheaffer 239).

After the list of characters in the play, there is a plan, which delineates the act division of the two parts of the play. Each act is described in fragments rather than complete sentences. The description highlights the venue, its connection with one of the characters, and the time when the action takes place in a particular act. For instance, the description of Act Seven states: “Sitting room of the Evans’ apartment on Park Avenue. Nearly eleven years later. Early afternoon.” (VII, 396) In a few cases, the season, in which the events in a certain act transpire, is also stated. For example, the first act is described as: “Library, the Leeds’ home in a small university town of New England – an afternoon in late summer” (I, 285). This plan seems to prepare the reader for the unusual length of the play. It instantaneously indicates that the time-span between various acts is added up to twenty-five years. This piece of information is, primarily, meant to assist the reader. However, it is not insignificant for the actors and directors of the play either. The description helps them conceive the lapse of time and its impact on their portrayal of various characters during the course of the play.

The next set of stage directions depicts the scene on stage. The most outstanding feature of the stage directions, in general, is their relevance to the actor, spectator, and reader. They set a specific path for the theatrical performance of the actors. In case of O’Neill, stage directions are not exclusively meant for the consumption of actors. They have a much wider scope. Take, for instance, the opening line of the scenic description: “The
library of Prof. Leeds’ home in a small university town in New England” (I, 285). Apparently, the line indicates the venue (the library in Prof. Leeds’ home) and place (a small university town in New England) where action will take place in the first act. However, there is much more to it than what meets the eye. How will this bit of information be shown on the stage? A library can, no doubt, be shown; but the small university town in New England cannot be reflected on the stage. How will the spectator discover that the library in the opening scene is located in a house situated in a small university town in New England? The setting cannot convey it to the spectator. An indication to this effect may be made in the expository dialogues for the benefit of the spectator. In fact, the first dialogue of the first act refers to it:
Marsden: “How perfectly the Professor’s unique haven! … Primly classical … when New Engander meets Greek! … What memories on such a smiling afternoon! … this pleasant old town after three months …” (I, 286).

The audience can gather from this dialogue that the piece of action is a small town in New England and that it is a pleasant afternoon. In this case, the first stage direction does not address the spectator. It can certainly assist a reader and an actor. A reader is assisted to envisage the place where action is destined to take place before he reads on. The actor will take clue about origins of the characters and bring them to life keeping in mind the peculiar traits of New Englanders. This analysis indicates right at the outset that the play has been created with the view to facilitate its readers besides actors, directors and indirectly spectators. This is also the first indication that the play has been devised with traces of the technique of novel writing. One cannot ignore that such scenic descriptions are quite frequent in novels. However, this is neither the only indicator nor the significant one pointing out O'Neill's adoption of a few ways of novel writing in this play.

In the next few lines, O'Neill has described the room in which Prof. Leeds’ library is housed. It is revealed that the room is located in the front part of the house. The room's windows open on "the strip of lawn between the house and the quiet residential street" (I, 285). While detailing the
physical aspects of the room and the house of which it is a part. O'Neill has appealed to the audio-visual sense perceptions. It is shown to the reader/actor how the room appears. In addition to it, the sounds of their absence in the surrounding area have been described. Thus, the residential street is "quiet". The careful delineation of the different aspects of the room is significant since it affords the reader/actor to imagine the kind of environment in which the subsequent action will take place. The atmosphere of the place, in turn, will reflect on the nature of characters placed in it. The bearing of the nature of surrounding on the characters is not just left to the reader/actor's to imagine. O'Neill has clearly pointed out at various places in these stage directions as to what connection do various objects have with the nature of the characters. The following line illustrates this point: "The furniture has been selected with a love for Old England pieces"(I, 285). It has been explicitly shown as to what symbolic relevance a certain object possesses.

The next significant description pertains to the variety of books in the library. The portrayal of books is yet another indicator about the taste and temperament of Prof. Leeds’ character. The descriptions of the books specify three points: one, the books are old and rare; two, they are not restricted to English language only- there are books written in Greek, Latin, Italian, French and German languages; three, the books represent three ages i.e. the classical period of Greek and Latin literature, the classical age of French and German literature, and all the literary giants of English literature up to Thackeray. In an attempt to refer to the particular age in which a certain brand of literature was created, O'Neill has made an interesting observation: "...of all the English authors who wrote while s was still like an f..."(I, 285). Can this stage direction be some assistance for the spectators? Can he see anything on stage, which might be reflective of this stage direction? Obviously, a reader can seek pleasure out of it while he is reading it. This is yet another piece of evidence to establish that this play has been written while the perspective of the prospective reader was predominant in O'Neill's mind. Likewise, the actor can enjoy this line while reading it. It can help him build an idea about Prof. Leeds’ reading preferences. He cannot show it to his spectators through his stage performance.
There is another significant stage direction about the interior decoration of the room. It confirms that O'Neill has not only depicted various objects reflective of some aspects of a character's personality, he has gone a step further and stated the link himself. For instance, "The atmosphere of the room is that of a cozy, cultured retreat, sedulously built as a sanctuary where, secure with the culture of the past at his back, a fugitive from reality can view the present safely from a distance, as a superior with condescending disdain, pity and even amusement" (I, 285). O'Neill has categorically mentioned what the atmosphere in the room stands for. One is inclined to wonder as to what purpose this explanation serves from a theatrical perspective. The placement of the furniture and books can conveniently insinuate what O'Neill has explicitly stated. This is perhaps not the singular attempt to reflect on Prof. Leeds’ attitude towards life. It is indicated in the expository dialogues. Marsden: "How perfectly the Professor's unique haven!... Primly classical... where New Englander meets Greek!... He hasn't added one book in years..." (I, 286). Besides, the dialogues attributed to Prof. Leeds himself reveal this aspect of his personality.

Prof. Leeds: "Although you must acknowledge, Charlie, that college heroes rarely shine brilliantly in after life. Unfortunately, the tendency to spoil them in the university is a poor training-" (I, 291).

Thus, the personality traits attributed to Prof. Leeds in the opening stage directions are shown to the audience through his conversation with others and other's comments about him. This audience cannot immediately assimilate an idea about his personality through the scene decorated on the stage in accordance with the stage directions. The actor/director can seek help from these stage directions while conceiving Prof. Leeds’ character. However, they too are compelled to show it to the audience through the dialogues later in the play and not simply through the appearance of the actor and the atmosphere of the scene. What, after all, is the point in writing these stage directions if they are not quite crucial for the actor or the audience? The obvious beneficiary of these insightful stage directions is the reader of this play crafted on the pattern of a novel.

* * * *
The description of furniture on the stage is quite significant. Apparently, it is meant to assist the play's director to create the atmosphere required for the scene. The first glance at the stage directions describing furniture seems to confirm this notion. It states: "There is a fair-sized table, a heavy armchair, a rocker, and an old bench made comfortably with cushions. The table, with the Professor's armchair at its left, is arranged towards the left of the room, the rocker is at centre, the bench at right" (I, 285). The peculiar placement of furniture on stage serves certain conventional purpose. On one hand, it mirrors the various aspects of the characters in the play. For instance, it reflects on the social status of the people owning the place in the play; and, it also indicates the culture and age in which the action has been conceived. On the other hand, the description of the furniture placed in the scene also facilitates the actors to determine their movement on stage during their performance. O'Neill's stage directions definitely serve these purposes. Besides, it is significant to note the minute details, which he has mentioned while describing furniture. Most of his predecessors would have made a passing reference to these matters. On the contrary, O'Neill offers a sensitive portrayal of these apparently lifeless objects. He notes that the element of 'comfort' is added to the 'bench' by adding 'cushions' to it. His insistence on such minute details owes its origin to the fact that he wants his readers, actors and spectators to watch his character in the mirror of the choice of furniture and room decoration. Thus, he has used these conventional instruments of stagecraft to have a bearing on his art of characterization.

The most outstanding feature of O'Neill's description of furniture comes to light if we compare the stage directions about furniture and room decoration at the beginning of various acts. The stage directions describing the furniture in Prof. Leeds' study room in Act I have already been quoted in the proceeding paragraph. The stage directions about furniture and its setting at the commencement of Act II are:

*The same as scene one, Prof. Leeds' study, It is about nine o'clock of a night in early fall, over a year later. The appearance of the room is unchanged except that all the shades, of the color of pale flesh, are drawn, giving the windows a suggestion of lifeless close eyes and making the*
room seem more withdrawn from life than before. The reading lamp on the table is lit. Everything on the table, papers, pencils, pens, etc., is arranged in meticulous order (II, 302-3).

A quotation from the stage directions about furniture etc. from the scene description of Act-IV is quite revealing:

An evening early in the following winter about seven months later. The professor's study again. The books in the cases have been touched, their austere arrays show no gaps, but the glass separating them from the world is gray with dust, giving them a blurred ghostly quality. The table, although it is the same, is no longer the professor's table, just as the other in the room, by its disarrangement, betrays that Professor's well-ordered mind no longer trims it to his personality. The table has become neurotic. Volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica mixed up with the popular treaties on Mind Training for Success, etc., looking startlingly modern and disturbing against the background of classics in the original, are slapped helter-skelter on top of each other on it (IV, 337).

The description of furniture and books etc. links various episodes in the lives of the characters through time. It maps out the passage of time and its impact on the characters. For instance, the stage directions depict that after a lapse of one year the situation in Prof. Leeds family has undergone a considerable change. The quality of 'lifeless close eyes' reflected in the 'shades drawn down on the windows' of the Professor's study room are meant to prepare the audience and the readers to receive the news of his death shortly after the stage directions give way to the dialogues. The influence of time on the atmosphere, the surroundings and, above all, the characters is represented through the peculiar description of furniture. The glaring contrasts in the state of furniture and books in the stage directions pertaining to Acts IV and I reinforce this point. The study room, which reflected the taste and personality of Prof. Leeds in Act I has now undergone a drastic change after a lapse of almost two years and a half. Earlier it reflected the meticulous ways of the Professor. His reading preferences were illustrated through the volumes of various classics. In Act IV, the room is inhabited by the Professor's daughter, Nina Leeds, and
his son-in-law, Sam Evans. While earlier on, the room reflected the Professor's meticulousness, it now mirrors Evan's nervousness and his struggle to be successful in life. Such an innovative use of stage directions by O'Neill is unquestionably unprecedented. He has breathed a new life into this particular facet of stage directions, which was previously lifeless, mechanical and one-dimensional. At the most, the playwrights in the past offered brief description of furniture on the set in order to create the situation required for a particular performance. It would show the character's social status. The intent of this category of stage directions ended here. O'Neill expanded their scope to mirror time movement and its impact on the lives of various characters through the setting and choice of furniture shown on stage.

* * * * *

The next important point revealed through opening stage directions is in the introduction of characters that appear on stage right at the outset. O'Neill has described the characters according to their relevance to the plot. The Maid – a minor character – is described summarily with no details about her personality. Interestingly, the maid does not appear on the stage. Her voice is heard while she is talking to a visitor. However, the impression O'Neill wants his readers, actors and spectators to draw from her voice is quite meaningful. It depicts his mastery as a playwright who would never neglect even a minute character. The one-line description of the Maid's voice communicates three points of information: her age, the fact that she is courteous and that the visitor whom she is attending is well acquainted with her – it implies that he visits frequently and is well known to Prof. Leeds’ family. "The sound of a Maid's voice – a middle-aged woman – explaining familiarly but respectfully from the right and Marsden enters" (I, 285). From the perspective of an actor, this stage direction could not be more helpful. All that is required of an actor, who is assigned this minor role, has been encapsulated in one sentence. If the female actor can put across the three points mentioned above through her voice, she would have done her job well. The audience might not even notice these finer points watching the play. However, they cannot escape the attention of a keen theatergoer. Similarly, an ardent reader would not
neglect this minor description. He might be inclined to contrast this with the description of major characters.

The major characters are described in great detail in the stage directions. Marsden, who is the first one to set foot on the stage, is described in the body of opening stage directions. The other characters are described before their entrance on the stage during the act. Each description of various major characters offers a comprehensive view about the character's origin, attire, body and facial features, personality traits and his bent of mind. It is as if a novelist has offered the pen-picture of an important character at great length. Take, for instance, the character of Marsden, "He is a tall thin man of thirty five, meticulously well-dressed in tweeds of distinctly English tailoring, his appearance that of Anglicized New England gentlemen" (I, 285-6). The first sentence about Marsden is packed with exact information about his age, height, physique, attire, taste, origin and social standing. The information offered in this sentence is quite useful for the actor and director. They can easily show these features to the audience by their choice of actor and his wardrobe. A director does not have to bother too much while casting a suitable character in this role. All the requirements for this character have been enumerated explicitly in the stage directions. It is pertinent to note that these directions are not arbitrary and abrupt. Indeed, they contribute to draw an image of the character, which is later substantiated through various events in the plot. The features mentioned here constitute the character's personality, which in turn leads him to behave in a peculiar manner and influence the events in the plot accordingly. O'Neill has not confined himself to the description of the character's attire. He has also pronounced the implications of the particular attire he has chosen for this character. He has informed his readers that Marsden's clothes distinctly reflect English tailoring. After having stated the piece of information, he has drawn the conclusion that his appearance divulges that he is an anglicized gentleman. The reader/audience could not have missed out on his obvious conclusion. O'Neill would still want to make it crystal clear. Besides, he has contrasted Marsden's anglicized attire with his New England origin.
The description of Marsden's features is not simply restricted to his outlook. He has dropped instructive hints about his mindset. For instance, "His face is too long for its width, his nose is high and narrow, his forehead broad, his mild blue eyes those of a dreamy self-analyst, his thin lips ironical and a bit sad"(I, 286). The term dreamy self-analyst delineates his temperament. He has created a dream world around him, which is detached from the harsh realities of life. He is quite conscious of himself and frequently resorts to reviewing his personality and compares it with the other characters around him. This observation is substantiated in the course of the play where in several thought-asides Marsden exposes this aspect of his personality. The expression on his lips is ironical and a bit sad. A reader might not be quite attracted towards the pointless description of a character's facial features. However, the features assume special significance if they are made to reveal certain attributes of his personality. These stage directions are quite invaluable for both the reader and the actor. Both the stakeholders enjoy an insight into the characters' mind through these directions. The actor will use this information to make his portrayal of the character convincing and life-like. Besides, an actor will be able to bring his portrayal close to the imagination of the playwright. The reader, on his part, will get clue from these observations to build an image of the character in his mind. In fact, the reader's image can be much more appealing to his sense than an actor's portrayal on stage. It is quite challenging for a seasoned actor to show it on stage without resorting to any of the two obvious aides, namely peculiar wardrobe or mannerism. It establishes O'Neill as a hard taskmaster.

The last stage directions about Marsden's character in scene description deserve a comment. "The main point about his personality is a quiet charm, a quality of appealing, inquisitive friendliness, always willing to listen, eager in sympathies, to like and be liked"(I, 286). This appears to be a concluding remark O'Neill has penned down in his pen-picture of Marsden's character. It is quiet similar to a novelist drawing a sketch of his character in his novel. From the perspective of a play, this direction seems to be abstract because the character’s attributes mentioned in this stage direction cannot be portrayed as some direction about attire or mannerism might be portrayed. These attributes can be shown through Marsden's
dialogues, while he is pitted in a particular situation in the play. It might be argued that O'Neill could have spared mentioning these attributes at this stage since they do not have an immediate utility from the theatrical perspective. It could have been revealed at a time when Marsden displayed this attribute through his dialogues or action in the play. The objection seems to be quite a valid one. However, one must not forget that O'Neill set out to write this play while amalgamating the novel writing techniques with playwriting. His script was not meant for the actors only, it was meant for the readers too. A reader would get an all-encompassing view of his personality right at the outset. It would help the reader to look at his words and actions in the light of these introductory observations made by the playwright. Besides, these stage directions are not at all useless for the actors either. An actor is supposed to develop a thorough understanding of the character and the play before he starts the rehearsal. The lines under review contribute to his understanding of Marsden's character.

The first introduction of each of the major characters is significant from particular perspective. Later in the play, as the plot progresses and the time changes, the corresponding changes in the appearance and attitude of a character are established by contrasting it with the first depiction of the character. The first introduction of the Marsden's character has been reviewed in the preceding paragraphs. It can be compared with a few observations about his character when he appears in the subsequent acts after a certain amount of time lapse. The change in Marsden's personality and attire marks the journey of his life during the play sketched over a time span of twenty-five years. In the second act, which takes place after one year, Marsden is described thus:

Marsden is seated on the chair at centre. He is dressed carefully in an English made suit of blue serge so dark as to seem black, and which, combined with the gloomy brooding expression of his face, strongly suggests one in mourning. His tall thin body sags wearily in the chair, his head is sunk forward, the chin almost touching his chest, his eyes stare sadly at nothing (II, 303).
The description suggests a few significant points about Marsden. Firstly, there is no significant change in him after a lapse of one year. His taste for clothes is the same. He is wearing an English made suit of blue serge. However, his mood is not the same as it was in the first act. This mood change is not permanent though. It has occurred on account of Prof. Leeds’ death. Following is an excerpt from the stage directions about Marsden in the third act, which shows him after a gap of a year. "Marsden enters from the rear. He is spruce, dressed immaculately, his face a bit tired and resigned, but smiling kindly" (III, 324). Still there is not significant change in his attire or attitude. His habits and mannerism is the same as was shown in the previous acts. However, signs of resignation to his fate have emerged on his face coupled with a mild element of weariness. Seven months later, in the fourth act, Marsden has been described thus: "Marsden's manner is preoccupied and nervous. His face has an expression of anxiety which he tries to conceal. He seems a prey to some inner fear he is even trying to hide from himself and is resolutely warding off from his consciousness. His tall, thin body stoops as if a part of its sustaining will had been removed" (IV, 343). This stage direction about Marsden reveals two points about his condition: one, he is visibly disturbed by Nina's abortion and harbors doubts about the reasons why it was conducted; two, the events in his life and the lives of the characters around him have adversely affected his will power. While the first point has a temporary influence on him, which is bound to pass away, the second one seems to last for a longer time. On the whole, there is no foremost change in his personality. In the fifth act, after a gap of seven or eight months, Marsden is portrayed through the following stage directions:

"Marsden appears in the rear, walks slowly and woodenly like a man in a trance into the room. He is dressed immaculately in deep mourning. His face is pale, drawn, and haggard, with loneliness and grief. His eyes have a dazed look as if he were still too stunned to comprehend clearly what has happened to him. He does not seem conscious of Darrell's presence at first. His shoulders are bowed, his whole figure droops" (V, 363).

Even a cursory glance at these stage directions show that they are rather detailed as compared to his descriptions offered in the last three acts. The
reason is offered immediately after these stage directions are over. Marsden has had to face the death of his mother with whom he had a very strong emotional association. Although he seems to be a man who is broken down by the intensity of grief, his dress - though reflective of his deep mourning – is still immaculate. It established that his personality traits are quite the same as shown in the previous act. Nonetheless, the grief has taken its toll on his body. Previously, his body *stooped* a bit. Now, it is shown *drooping*. Marsden's mourning state at his mother's death occasions a contrast with his state of mourning depicted at Prof. Leeds’ death in the second act. Both the conditions have been shown through the stage directions. Of course, the intensity of the grief is much higher in case of his mother's death. In the sixth act, which frames the actions after a year's gap, O'Neill has described Marsden thus: "Marsden has aged greatly. His hair is grey, his expression one of a deep grief that is dying out into a resignation resentful of itself. He is dressed *immaculately in dark tweed*(VI, 374). The directions reveal his consistency of character and that he has learnt to live with his fate though not without an element of bitterness. Time has come out as the usual healer of all wounds inflicted on human souls, in the seventh act; Marsden is shown after a gap of eleven years. This stage direction describes him:

*Marsden comes in from the rear, smiling, immaculately dressed as usual. He looks hardly any older except his hair is grayer and his tall figure more stooped. His expression and the general atmosphere he gives out are more nearly like those of Act one. If not happy, he is at least living in comparative peace with himself and his environment (VII, 404).*

O'Neill has compared Marsden's state of mind in this act with the first act while there is a lapse of 15 years in between the first and the seventh acts. The existing circumstances do not produce an unusual stir in his emotional state as was seen at three occasions in the previous acts. However, his aspirations about his life have not materialized during these years, which is why he is not quite happy. Nonetheless, he has reconciled with the turn of events in his life. All this while his manners and choices about his attire are unaltered. In the eighth act, Marsden appears after a long gap of ten
years. At this situation, O'Neill has drawn a comparison of his existing condition with that of the fifth act:

Marsden has aged greatly. The stoop of his tall figure is accentuated, his hair has grown whitish. His is an older image of Marsden in Act Five, who was so prostrated by his mother's death. Now it is his sister's death two months before that has plunged him into despair. His present grief, however, is more resigned to its fate than the old. He is dressed immaculately in black, as in Act Five (VIII, 414).

O'Neill has compared his physique and impression with that of the fifth act with particular reference to his mourning state now and then. The comparison has brought out the change in his reaction to his life and fate. The aging process has not influenced one aspect of his personality, that is his taste for clothes. O'Neill has consistently used one adjective for it: immaculate! Whether he has adorned a mourning dress or a normal one, it has to be reflective of refined anglicized taste. Seven months later in the ninth act, Marsden makes his last appearance. "He looks younger, calm and contended. He is dressed in all black, meticulous, perfectly tailored mourning costume" (IX, 438). This time around he has visibly overcome his grievances of life. He is attired in a mourning costume yet again. This time, it marks the death of Sam Evans, Nina Leeds' husband and one of the three contenders of her love, which includes Marsden too. No wonder, Marsden is wearing a mourning costume without matching sentiments of mourning. The calm and contentment reflected in his attitude towards life has reached its zenith during last few years. It is also reflected in his last 'thought-aside' of the play where Marsden says: "No, God bless dear old Charlie (i.e. Marsden) … who, passed beyond desire, has all the luck at last! …" (IX, 450); he has finally overcome his desire to have a physical union with Nina Leeds.

Having shown the evolution of Marsden's physical, emotional, and psychological condition by way of the stage directions describing him through the first act to the last, it is pertinent to consider the utility of this portrayal for the reader and actor. A reader is heavily indebted to O'Neill for offering such discerning marks of gradual change in different aspects
of his personality through the device of stage directions. The reader finds himself in a better position to appreciate the dialogue in the context of the information imparted to him about a certain character in the stage directions. The actor finds himself fortunate to have had such explicit guidelines for his portrayal of a particular character. However, it also poses a great deal of challenges to his acting prowess. Meeting the expectations of a playwright like O'Neill, who is quite demanding, is a Herculean task for any capable actor. After all, it is not child's play to depict anguish, nervousness, bitterness, resignation, and contentment in a character who has been exposed to inimitable emotional stress at different occasions in his life.

* * * * *

Another category of stage directions found throughout the text of the play deals with the stage movements, mood, mindset and body language of various characters. In terms of their length they may be as brief and precise as a single word spread over one or more sentences or fragments. This category of stage directions stands apart from the ones which describe the scene at the commencement of each act. While the opening stage directions found at the outset of each act present an overview of the scene, the setting, the milieu and the characters, the stage directions found within the dialogues show the external as well as internal situation of the character while he or she is right in the middle of dramatic conflict. A few examples from the different parts of the play will be presented to review the attributes of this category of stage directions.

Prof. Leeds: - You will find Nina changed, Charlie, greatly changed! (He sighs – thinking with a trace of guilty alarm) ... (Suddenly blurting out resentfully) She dreams about Gordon (I, 289).

The italicized sentence fragments inserted in this dialogue by way of stage directions show Prof. Leeds’ mood, tone, mindset and manner quite effectively. His sigh gives out that he is in a sad mood. While talking about the change in Nina's personality, his tone reflects sadness. However, it reflects resentment when he mentions that Nina has still not taken her mind off Gordon. His mind set is still quite hostile about his daughter's amorous inclination towards Gordon. He has yet to reconcile with his
daughters' love for Gordon even after latter's death. No wonder, he resents Nina's association with Gordon who is not alive any more. His manner is an amalgamation of gloom and bitterness. These stage directions are equally instructive for a common reader as well as an actor; it will not be quite out of place to think about the impact of this dialogue in the absence of the relevant stage directions. Are the dialogues not powerful enough to convey their situational significance to the reader or actor? The dialogues are definitely charged with meaning and emotion. A perspective reader will make out its value from the context in which it has been penned down. However, different actors may choose to deliver these dialogues in a variety of ways. O'Neill's has brought forth his own perception of these dialogues, making the actor's job quite trouble-free. As the creator of the play, his perception about the dialogue delivery ought to be most authentic. The stage directions inserted in between this dialogue do not add something to our knowledge, which was lacking in the body of the dialogue. Rather they offer additional assistance, which is quite valuable for a reader as well as an actor.

Following is a dialogue attributed to Charlie Marsden. It contains one or two word stage directions.

Marsden: Europe has "gone west" – *He smile whimsically* to America, let's hope! *Then frowningly* I couldn't stand it. There were millions sitting up with the corpse already, who had a family right to be there – *Then matter-of-factly* I was wasting my time too. I couldn't write a line. *Then gaily* But where's Nina? I must see Nina! (I, 289).

The two-word fragments map out the change in his tone during this dialogue. There are as many as four tonal changes in just one dialogue. He is recalling his feelings about his stay in Europe from where he has just returned to America. He smiles whimsically, which is replaced by a frown in his tone. This is then replaced with a matter-of-fact tone. The sentence is uttered with gaiety. O'Neill seems to lead his reader and actor through these lines like a benign father who habitually guides an inexperienced child about the intricacies of life. Both the reader and actor are sincerely indebted to O'Neill for this valuable piece of guidance, which is not what a playwright is usually expected to offer.
The following stage direction illustrates how Prof. Leeds tries to regain his composure after an intense showdown with his daughter Nina. "Blows his nose, wipes his eyes, sighs, clears his throat, squares his shoulders, pulls his coat down in front, sets his tie straight, and starts to take a brisk turn about the room. His face is washed blandly clean of all emotion" (I, 301). O'Neill has resorted to illustration and has successfully discarded narration in this piece of stage directions. The audience should see how the Professor is making an effort to suppress the emotion that has surfaced unwittingly during his confrontation with his daughter. A classical playwright would have written a passionate soliloquy at this point to capture the Professor's state of mind. One does not doubt O'Neill's ability to compose a wonderful piece of emotionally charged rhetoric. He intentionally opted to keep his portrayal down-to-earth since it suited his brand of drama reflecting the lives of ordinary mortals quite unlike the Greek mythical characters of the Elizabethan tragic figures hailing from the royalty. Silence coupled with body movements in this situation is much more eloquent than a couple of powerful dialogues. The utility of these stage directions from the perspective of an actor is quite considerable. O'Neill has not just traced the body of movements of the character on stage; he has also indicated the desired impact that these movements are meant to achieve. The last line has explicitly stressed that the preceding movements have to culminate in a state where all emotion has been washed off from his face. Thus, he manages to regain his usual composure wherein there is no room for displaying his personal emotions. He has to create a smoke screen, which would hide his true colors from the world. He would successfully remain detached from his surroundings with an air of intellectual superiority. The last cluster of stage directions in this act substantiates this analysis: "he turns to the bookcase and pulls out the first volume his hands come on and opens it at random and begins to read aloud sonorously like a child whistling to keep up his courage in the dark" (I, 302). Here too, O'Neill has laid down the Professor's movements in his study room with the objective that the emotional state of the character could be represented through his body movements. For the convenience of his readers and actors, he has also drawn an analogy to indicate the symbolic significance of these movements.
Following is an excerpt from the end of Act-IV where Nina and Dr. Darrell are finalizing their plan to let Nina bear a healthy child by Darrell, something that her husband Evans is incapable of on account of the prospect of bearing an insane child – insanity runs in Evan’s family.

Nina: (gently) And I am Nina, who wants her baby. (Then she reaches out and turns his head until his face faces her but he keeps his eyes down – she bends her head meekly and submissively - softly) I should be so grateful Ned. (He starts, looks up wildly, makes a motion as though to take her in his arms, then remains fixed for a moment in that attitude, staring at her bowed head as she repeats submissively) I should be so humbly grateful.

Darrell: (suddenly falling on his knees and taking her hand in both of his and kissing it humbly with a sob) Yes – yes, Nina – yes – for your happiness – in that spirit! (Thinking – fiercely triumphant)

I shall be happy for a while! ...

Nina: (raising her head – thinking – proudly triumphant) I shall be happy! … I shall make my husband happy! …(IV, 356).

There is a stark resemblance of this scene with some primordial wedding ritual. The intensity of passion packed in this situation is manifestly clear. It is worth noting that a greater part of the passion is revealed through the stage directions rather than the dialogues. This illustration provides convincing evidence for O'Neill's masterstroke as a playwright to have taken the stage directions to a level where they can communicate much more effectively than dialogues could ever do. The modus operandi adopted in this regard implies that the passion let loose between the two characters should be demonstrated and not narrated. O'Neill has evidently succeeded in achieving his target. The actors assigned these roles will enact this scene with remarkable ease solely because of the constructive assistance these stage directions offer. The reader can extract no less benefit from these directions. Indeed, these stage directions provide the necessary impetus to the reader's imagination so that he could visualize the scene forcefully. A perfunctory review of the stage directions inserted in between the dialogues discloses the peculiar use of adverbs in them. Especially, the stage directions, which consist of small fragments rather than complete sentences with subject and verb, contain adverbs. Some
examples of these adverbs are as follows: guiltily, instinctively, determinedly, frightened, slowly, judicially, sharply, worriedly, anxiously, pleadingly and timidly etc. (IV, 354). This specific trend is not restricted to any particular portion of the play. Rather, it is to be found throughout the play. According to Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, an adverb is "a word belonging to one of the major form classes in any numerous languages, typically serving as a modifier of a verb, an adjective, another adverb, a preposition, a phrase, a clause, or a sentence, expressing some relation of manner, or quality, place, time, degree, number, cause, opposition, affirmation, or denial, and in English also serving to connect and to express comment on clause content,"(Mish 17). In the context of this play, O'Neill has employed adverbs to characterize the nature of action, gesture, facial expression, body movement, and thought etc. The use of adverb creates the texture of word images, which these stage directions create in the mind of the reader and actor. For instance, consider the following thought – side assigned to Nina.

Nina: (thinking determinedly) I must have my baby! … (IV, 354).

In case O'Neill had restricted the stage direction to the word thinking, it would have failed to convey the manner in which Nina is shown thinking. The adverb determinedly defines the manner of her thinking, which is quite consequential for the reader and especially the actor.

* * * * *

Another significant aspect of this play is the use of 'asides'. Asides have been in frequent use in stage plays since the Renaissance. Shakespeare, for instance, has used asides in quite a few of his plays. Martin Gray defines an aside as “a common dramatic convention in which a character speaks in such a way that some of the characters on stage do not hear what is said, while others do. It may also be a direct address to the audience revealing the character's views, thoughts, motives, and intentions so as to create dramatic irony"(Gray 34). Asides are usually brief as compared to soliloquies which are long speeches uttered by different characters when no other character is around them on stage. The purpose of a soliloquy is similar to that of an aside. O'Neill chooses to call this theatrical device 'thought-aside'. Louis Sheaffer writes: "in striving for novelistic qualities
O'Neill broke with conversation not only in the extraordinary length of his new drama but in its 'thought-asides', as he called them, an extension of the old technique... they constitute over a third of what the audience hears – to give voice to the character's secret thoughts" (Sheaffer 239). The thought asides facilitated him to incorporate the stream-of-consciousness technique in this play. O'Neill has used thought-asides to convey expository information to his readers and audience. As a result, thought-asides also provide implicit stage directions that are quite valuable. This is a unique function of asides, which was not employed by O'Neill's predecessors in their theatrical works. For example, Sam Evan's thought-aside at the beginning of Act-IV not only reveals his state-of-mind, but also exposes to us that he has failed to produce impressive work at his office. It is a significant clue for the readers and actors to imagine his situation. The actor will have to enact Evan's role at this stage in the light of the expository information provided in this thought-aside:

Evans: No use ... can't think of a darn thing ... well, who could dope out a novel ad on powdered milk, anyway? ... all the stuff has been used already ... Tartars conquering on dried mare's milk ... Metchnikoff, eminent scientist ... been done to death ... but simply got to work out something or ... Cole said, what's been the matter with you lately? ... You started off so well ... I though you were a real find, but your work's fallen off to nothing... Couldn't deny it ... been going stale ever since we came back from that trip home ... no ideas ... I'll get fired ... sterile ... in more ways than one I guess!... (IV, 338).

This thought-aside exposes Evan's imagination, which is gradually drying up. It might cost him his job. He connects it to his trip to his ancestral home after which his wife had undergone abortion. She has not been able to conceive ever since then. Thus, he insinuates that his barrenness is not connected to his creative self; it has probably been extended to his procreative self. After realizing his predicament through this aside, an actor will be better placed to enact his role particularly in this situation in Act – IV. Another thought-aside assigned to Prof. Leeds may be reviewed at this juncture to fully assimilate its significance from the perspective of
the stage directions. The thought-aside along with the preceding stage direction is as follows:

Prof. Leeds: *(Looking away from Marsden a moment, his face now full of selfish relief as he thinks)* Fortunate, his coming back… always calming influence on Nina… (I, 289). It has already been disclosed to the reader and actor that Marsden is Prof. Leeds’ old student, his friends’ son and quite close to the Professor’s family particularly his daughter, Nina. What is not known up till now is the reason why Marsden is quite welcome in the Professor's house. The stage directions in the italics hint that the Professor has felt a selfish relief to find out that Marsden is back. In other words, he is not happy for the sake of Marsden that he is back. There is something that the Professor expects of him to do. This is the cause of the Professor's relief upon his return. What exactly it is, stage direction is silent about it. O'Neill exposes it to his readers, actors and audience in the thought-side. It states that Marsden is a calming influence on Nina. Nina is quite upset after her lover Gordon's death during the war. She believes that her father has done her grave injustice by dissuading Gordon from marrying her before war. Thus, she has fallen out with him. In this background, Prof. Leeds expects Marsden to calm her down for the Professor's sake. The thought-aside, therefore, presents valuable expository information about Marsden's position in Prof. Leeds’ motive to welcome Marsden. The peculiar significance of this excerpt arises from the fact that the stage direction preceding the thought-aside complements it. The reader and actor get a complete picture of Prof. Leeds’ selfish relief only after they have read both the stage directions and the thought-aside. One may be intrigued by a question about the stage direction complementing the thought-aside. Why did O'Neill split this particular information in the stage direction and the aside? Could he not incorporate all of it either in the stage direction or in the though-aside? Had he packed all the information about Marsden's role in the Professor's family in the stage direction, the audience could not have learnt about it. The part of information injected in the stage direction is meant to be shown through the actor's facial expressions. The remaining part, included in the thought-aside, will be spoken out to the audience. It is a perfectly suitable division
in which the two theatrical devices, namely stage direction and thought-aside, balance each other.

The expository importance of thought-aside can not be denied. However, it must not be ignored that this is not the most important benefit of thought-asides. They are primarily commissioned to let the readers and audience peep into true colors with no traces of pretence or duplicity. At times, characters delve into their past in their thought-asides. Such trips down the memory lane are also quite instructive for the reader and actors to analyze a particular character and develop an idea about their involvement in the play's plot accordingly. For example, Marsden recollects the cold relations between Prof. Leeds and Nina shortly before the former passed away, in a thought-aside. "Poor Professor! He was horribly lonely… tired to hide it … always telling you how beneficial the training at the hospital would be for her… poor old chap! … Will she feel any real grief over his death, I wonder? … I doubt it!… But why I am so resentful? … The two times I've visited the hospital she's been pleasant enough… pleasantly evasive! … Perhaps she thought her father had sent me to spy on her … Poor Professor! … at least she answered his letters… he used to show them to me… pathetically overjoyed… newsy, loveless scripts, telling nothing whatever about herself…" (II, 303). Both the readers and actors can reap benefit from this thought-aside to fathom the depth of Nina's reaction to her father's involvement in obstructing her marriage to Gordon. Her unconsummated love for Gordon haunts her throughout the play.

* * * * *

In summing up, it can be said that O'Neill’s stage directions generally fall into three categories: the explicit stage directions, the implicit stage directions enshrined in the dialogues, and thought-asides. He has skillfully used each of the three categories in this play to achieve maximum impact. His explicit stage directions outline various aspects of the play at the outset of a scene, and act or whenever a character enters the set. They are the ones, which are most elaborate. They are commissioned to describe the setting of the stage, including furniture, doors, windows, cupboards, books, crockery, eatables, beverages, and decoration pieces. The objects shown on stage reflect the social, intellectual, psychological and
professional inclinations of the characters. Secondly, the explicit stage directions establish the personality of the characters. The explicit stage directions also reflect on the conflict existing between various characters in the play. Thirdly, the explicit stage directions record the imaginative use of light and sound in the play. This entails a figurative significance. It exposes the moods of various characters and the peculiar nature of a given situation.

The implicit stage directions are found in the expository dialogues. They are meant to illumine various aspects of the dramatic situation or the characters that utter those dialogues. The information encapsulated in the expository dialogues usually reinforces what has been revealed in explicit stage directions. However, implicit stage directions have a specific dramaturgical purpose. They are meant to impart that information to the audience which cannot be shown to them on stage. Thus, the same information contained in the explicit stage directions may only serve the purposes of the readers, actors and directors. The audience – the foremost target of any playwright – is enlightened about a certain point through implicit stage directions. It can, therefore, be concluded that the explicit and the implicit stage directions supplement each other.

The thought-asides are a peculiar kind of dialogue, which O’Neill has evolved from the age-old tradition of asides and soliloquies. Apart from other theatrical purposes, they are meant to provide clues about the mindset of a certain character and his/her real motives for his/her action and attitude. A variation of the explicit stage directions is found in between the dialogues. They may be as precise and brief as a word or two, or spread over a fragment or a complete sentence.

O’Neill’s innovative use of stage directions has lent credence to his dramaturgy. From the above, it is manifestly clear that he has elevated the stature of this mechanical theatrical device to new heights where they are impregnated with vivid insights into a character’s mind, heart and spirit.
Works Cited