CHAPTER - IV

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

And what if I was having thoughts about Joel? He is a handsome man. It was only what every woman thinks at times in her heart - Was any one of us ever content with one man?

(Sara Melody in More Stately Mansions)

"No one can help love". This is perhaps what O'Neill may say in defence of those who seek love outside wedlock. Though adultery is still a matter of great anxiety and concern and sometimes arouses violent passions, it has come to be viewed with much greater tolerance and understanding than before. In defence of himself presented as a fictitious character who commits adultery, John Loving in Days Without End tells his wife, "You mustn't condemn him entirely until you've heard how it came to happen."

Nina's adultery is sought to be justified on the super claims of the need to be happy over the demands of conventional morality. The conventional Mrs. Evans advises Nina to get a child through someone other than her husband. In defence of her suggestion she says, "Being happy, that's the nearest we can ever come to knowing what's good! Being happy, that's good! The rest is just talk!" (SI 64) The promiscuous Nina feels that adultery is wrong. But she is advised by Darrell to "throw overboard all such irrelevant moral ideas" (SI 87) as it is "the moral scruples that cause so much human blundering and

1 Eugene O'Neill, "Strange Interlude", The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol III, p 186 (Subsequent references to this play will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses, preceded by SI).

unhappiness" (SI 88). Nina herself veers around to this view when she asks Darrell to be her bed mate. Now to her, "nothing about love seems important enough to be revolting" (SI 149). Her justification is that it will not hurt her husband as "he'll never know" (SI 128). So far as they get happiness out of their love and so far as her husband does not get hurt, adultery is acceptable.

The romantic idea of complete fidelity in marriage, as raised by Elsa, is now generally rejected as being 'an impossible ideal'. Instead of thinking infidelity as a rigid moral category, modern American dramatists tend to think of it in terms of what it does to the personality and to the web of relationships. Compulsive adultery, like that of Hickey or Rosa Parrit is still treated as a crisis matter. But casual adultery is no longer considered an adequate reason for seeking divorce, though Elsa may think otherwise. Many of O'Neill's women show an inclination towards adultery. The very suggestion of Simon Harford to Sara to act as a whore excites her and she ends up lusting for her brother-in-law. Her defence is that no woman is content with one man. When Elsa hesitates to call her husband her lover, Lucy retorts, "Lover. Say it. How incredibily Mid-Victorian you can be! Don't you know that's all we married ladies discuss nowadays? But you're lucky. Usually the men discussed aren't our husbands, and aren't even good lovers. But never say die. We keep on hoping and experimenting!" ¹ Deborah Harford, for all her pretences, is called by Sara a greedy, contriving whore. In her fantasies she is the mistress of a man of supreme power - Louis XIV or Napoleon. In her fantasy she walks with her lover in the garden at Versailles, attracting all eyes and, triumphing over the ruler by leading him to the Summer House, 'a temple of love' which

³ Ibid., p.518.
he has built for her. There she permits him to make love to her. Occasionally she even behaves as if she were a royal whore. She is fascinated by the gallant Cornelius and when he tries to kiss her, she cannot help responding. It is the smell of whisky from Cornelius that makes her turn away from him. Mrs. Ruth Robert Mayo tries to turn her sex act on Andrew without success. Lucy seduces John Loving, her friend’s husband, to get even with her flirting husband. Eleanor goes to John to revenge her love for her husband.

Wherever O’Neill introduces adultery he gives elaborate defense to justify adultery. Jimmy in The Iceman Cometh carries on the pipe dream that it is his wife’s infidelity that drove him to drink. Hickey makes him see the truth for himself. Jimmy was a drunkard even before the marriage and it was his drinking that drove her to adultery. A guilty Jimmy admits:

Why Majorie married me, God knows. It’s impossible to believe she loved me. She soon found I much preferred drinking all night with my pals to being in bed with her. So naturally, she was unfaithful. I didn’t blame her. I really didn’t care. I was glad to be free, even grateful to her, I think, for giving me such a good tragic excuse to drink as much as I damned well pleased.4

It is as though the man in O’Neill tries to understand and sympathize with the motivations of these characters. But the artist in him who believes in sin and retribution cannot let these characters escape unpunished With even handed justice, he metes out justice, taking into consideration the severity of their actions. In an earlier One Act play,

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