

The Woman's Cycle in *Strange Interlude*

Rosary O'NEILL

(Loyola University, New Orleans)

This paper evaluates *Strange Interlude* from the point of view of an American woman, then and now. Reference will be made to two films of the play featuring the Hollywood star, Norma Shearer in 1932 and the celebrated British actress, Glenda Jackson in 1985. The play, written almost seventy years ago, focuses on the search of a professor's daughter (Nina Leeds) to find an identity. *Strange Interlude* won Eugene O'Neill the 1927-28 Pulitzer prize for its penetrating examination of the vital, neurotic Nina Leeds cursed by her excessive desires. When O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* opened on Broadway in 1928, it was acclaimed as a radical experiment - a turbulent psychodrama that ushered Joycean modernism and Freudian theory into the American theatre. The challenge in staging O'Neill's woman's play is making real the intense, gripping journey of every woman as personified in Nina Leeds.

The cyclic play begins in the library of Professor Leeds' home in a small university town in New England and closes after nine acts with Nina deciding to return there. O'Neill describes the library as "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." Finding respite in age, Nina is seated alone, with her soon to be second husband, Charles Marsden, one of her father's old students. Resting her head on Charlie's shoulder, Nina says, "You're so restful Charlie. I feel as if I were a girl again and you were my father and the Charlie of those days made into one."¹

O'Neill chose the setting of a university town in New England because he knew about it having attended Harvard University (America's first institution of education - all male until

1977) and Princeton.² At Harvard, spiritually as well as geographically, the campus centers on the famed Harvard Yard, a classic quadrangle of Georgian brick structure whose walls seem to echo the voices of William James and Henry Adams and other intellectual male greats from centuries past.

Subconsciously, Nina feels restricted by the New England customs and the Ivy League traditions that surround her. Ivy League Universities are a group of colleges and universities in the northeastern U.S., consisting of Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, Dartmouth, Cornell, the University of Pennsylvania, and Brown, and having a reputation for high scholastic achievement and social prestige. Modeled on Oxford and Cambridge, they originated as all male centers for classical studies and didn't admit women until the 1970's. These universities were such male bastions of education. (For example, at Columbia University there used to be benches reserved for men where women couldn't sit.)

Nina's father, a celebrated classics professor basks gloriously in this protected male haven. O'Neill describes Professor Leeds as "temperamentally timid, his defense is an assumption of his complacent, superior manner of the classroom toward the world at large. This defense is strengthened by a natural tendency toward a prim provincialism where practical present-day considerations are concerned (though he is most liberal - even radical - in his tolerant understanding of the manners and morals of Greece and Imperial Rome."

The only child in a male universe, Nina, in 1927, is imprisoned in a world built for men. Of a passionate nature, she is described as "looking directly at her father with defiant eyes, her face set in an expression of stubborn resolve. She is twenty, tall with broad square shoulders, slim strong hips and long beautifully developed legs - a fine athletic girl of the swimmer, tennis player, golfer type... Her face is striking, handsome rather than pretty, the bone structure prominent, the forehead high, the lips of her rather large mouth clearly modelled above the firm jaw."

No doubt the claustrophobic college town where Nina finds herself is closely related to Princeton. Princeton is a university and also the name for a town surrounding it.

The university is described in *The Fiske Guide to American Colleges* as follows: "Like Porsche or Tiffany's, Princeton has become a cultural icon of affluent society. The name literally oozes prestige and every nickel-and-dime establishment within 100 miles of the campus claims to be in Princeton to cash in on the mystique. Guardian of two and a half centuries of American education, Princeton is imbued with a sense of tradition. In 1987 almost twenty years after women were finally admitted to Princeton, female Princeton students were finally included in the alma mater via gender-neutral lyrics that have replaced references to 'sons' and 'boys.' In a similar spirit, a number of Princeton's well known eating clubs - entrenched bastions of tradition - began to admit women; in 1991, a twelve-year lawsuit compelled the Ist of these social groups to become coed."

"Princeton's campus is self-contained, but those who venture outside its Gothic walls will find the surroundings quite pleasant. One side of the campus abuts quaint Nassau Street, which is increasingly dominated by chic and overpriced boutiques. The other side of campus ends with a huge manmade lake (financed by Andrew Carnegie so that Princetonians would not have to forgo crew.)

I can speak about Princeton having lived in the town for ten years (1973- 1983) and having directed at the professional theatre located at the University. It was during this decade that an upheaval occurred and women were finally admitted as students, replacing their male counterparts immediately as valedictorians, to the dismay of scores of male alumni.

In Princeton, one's status is ranked by affiliation with the university. When cashing a check, you are asked if you are "with the University". If not, you are viewed as an outsider. The town newspaper features University news because little else happens in the town.

Living in a town with a superior attitude about University affiliation and not belonging to that world can create a cancerous identity. This theme dominates another American classic, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Edward Albee's play is set decades later in the 1960's in a house on the campus of a small New England College. This play also exposes the frustrations of university life as experienced by Martha, a large boisterous woman of 52, unable to find relief in wife and motherhood.³

But in O' Neill 's play set decades earlier, the frustration of Nina is less articulate and therefore more maniacal. Nina, a tempestuous and imaginative girl, brilliant, and athletic never articulates an awareness that gender is ostracizing her from personal fulfillment. Instead we find her searching for an identity through coupling with the perfect man. Her fierce fantasy life is fed by her fairy-tale-like environment.

Imagine an idyllic almost monastic place with graceful trees and gracilous buildings. Cloistered in that secluded but upscale town, a university whose architectural trademark is Gothic. Inside castle like structures of learning are the golden boys. (Sometimes the men at Princeton are referred to as "the princes", since their professors view them as the intellectual princes of America.)

Throughout her girlhood, Nina was exposed to these dream boys. Young men living in lovely dormitories right on campus and eating in private halls, young men rarely coming into contact with women except for occasional dates, young men encouraged to be part of the Princeton family and visit the professor's home. Seated on her father's knee surrounded by "walls lined almost floor to ceiling with glassed-in bookshelves", Nina was raised on educated male conversation. Her favorite room was her father's library which was "packed with books, principally editions, many of them old and rare, of the ancient classics in the original Greek and Latin, of the later classics in French and German and Italian, of all the English authors... the most modern being Thackeray."

Surrounded by books, Nina nevertheless has no possibilities for a personal career. For in 1927, a woman's

identity was derived from a man's and her singular goal was to be a successful wife and mother. Given this slate, Nina doesn't seem to be able to make much sense of her life. In *Strange Interlude* she refers to adult life, the present, as being a strange interlude between the past and the future. She refers scathingly to God as God the Father.

Actress Glenda Jackson feels that the character's lack of self knowledge is partially due to the time. "I see her as someone without great inner resources of self sufficiency. She instinctively feels that some things are right that her teaching and environment say are wrong, and in some ways she rebels against the system in which she was raised, but the root of her problem is that she doesn't fully acknowledge that instinctive life and follow it through. Nina is very much a product of a time when women were expected to be good wives and mothers and that was that."⁴

Partially because of Nina's blindness, she attacks her needs with a primal ferocity. The structure of the play - nine acts in which all the incidents are discussed and viewed from various angles - sweeps forward with the speed of Greek drama as Nina manipulates the men around her ruthlessly to satiate her fierce emotions.

As Miss Jackson says, "Her desire to be a mother is a ravening need, but she's not what I'd call a very good mother. She doesn't want to let her son go. She wants to keep him, and her dependence on him is much, much greater than his on her. She's not a victim in the usual sense, but a victim of her own emotional capacities. So she goes through a huge amount of emotional bettering - and that's what makes her interesting to play."

In a construct of action underscored with Freudian subtext the characters, especially Nina, comment on their inability to contain their uncontrollable passions while attempting to parry with the appropriate New England social veneer.

Nina manipulates sex to meet various materialistic and emotional ends. She breaks boundaries invading shocking areas never discussed before on the American stage. Instead of

motherhood and apple pie, we have the inference of incest between father and daughter, the issue of a bloodline of insanity driving Nina to bear another man's child and pass it off as her husband's, the subject of promiscuity with Nina joining the nursing profession to expiate her guilt through outlawed sex. Nina's actions explode myths about American women, daughters, wives, and mothers.

Using a nine act structure encompassing a 25 year period, *Strange Interlude* defies the traditional format of a well made European play. O'Neill uses the challenging length, running a minimum of five hours, to show us the complexity and depth of what Nina and the men in her life were experiencing. O'Neill forces us to travel with Nina from the girlhood study of her father through her explosive life and back to the study again with her old maidish husband.

To intensify the audience's experience of the duplicity of Nina's situation, O'Neill introduced the radical device of aside soliloquies - the characters talking out loud their inner thoughts. The device of speaking a character's subtext is a rare construct. No other American play is so intricately involved in making the psychology of the characters apparent to the audience. Half of *Strange Interlude* is sub-text as the characters verbalize what they feel as opposed to what they are saying. This device lifts Nina's desperate search for fulfillment with a heightened energy and a richer truth as the audience witnesses how Nina and her male cohorts are inextricably and fatally interlocked.

Frank Rich in critiquing the 1984 Broadway production said, "Amazingly enough, the interior monologues are a major asset. As delivered by Mr. Hack's cast, the asides seem spontaneous not stagy and gimmicky ; if anything it's the play's conventional dialogue that seems contrived and intrusive. The confessional ramblings flow so trippingly together that they become discordant verbal chamber music-suffusing the theatre with the anxiety of characters who, as one life puts it hide from themselves "behind the sounds called words."

Nina pummels her way through six relationships in a desperate attempt at self fulfillment. Relationship number one is the father, Professor Henry Leeds. As the play opens, Nina, mad

with grief and resentment is living with the old professor. She is mourning the loss of a consuming, lustful ideal relationship - that with her deceased lover, the war hero Gordon. Succumbing to the Puritan mores of her father, Nina denied her bed to Gordon and now is seething with rage at her father. Her stunted sexual relationship with Gordon drives her explosive sexual passions throughout the play.

The search to replace the phantom Gordon in her life and punish her Puritanical father drives Nina throughout the play. Nina wounds four men in her search for identity. Unable to define herself as ideal wife and mother, she struggles to discover a relationship with a man capable of imbuing her life with meaning.

The four men Nina hurts in her attempt to find self fulfillment represent male images of success in the American consciousness : the businessman, the doctor, the friend, and the son hero.

After spending a year of debauchery, giving herself to wounded soldiers she nursed, Nina succumbs to the refuge of a loveless marriage. She marries the jovial *businessman*. Sam Evans, only to learn of the insanity in his bloodline prohibiting her from having children. Defiant, she succumbs to a devious plan condoned by his mother to have a child by someone else, a man who eventually becomes her lover. Her life with the simple minded, rich Sam while full of worldly goods is filled with duplicity and longing. Their superficial alliance is weakly cemented by their obsession with their only son, named Gordon, Jr. after her lover and Sam's hero friend. Throughout her marriage, the resentful Nina yearns to marry her lover and denounce their bitter secret. Battered emotionally by his wife's cruel domination of Gordon, Jr., the middle aged Sam succumbs to a massive heart attack

Second in Nina's web of pain is the dashing *doctor*, Edmund Darrell. Nina longs to be his wife. (Being a doctor's wife, is the ideal for American women because doctors in America combine intellect with money.) Darrell impregnates Nina and is enslaved to her seductiveness. Although he is passionate, ambitious, deep, he places his loyalty to his friend above his

desire for Nina. Darrell leaves the country rather than placing a conventional marriage with Nina over friendship. Any identity that Nina has with Darrell must be a soiled one of secrecy.

Her sexual liaisons tarnished, Nina leans on the companionship of a third male character. She finds a special solace in her asexual childhood *friend*, the novelist Charles Marsden. Marsden, who has never been able to detach himself from his mother and sister, is both attracted and repelled by the ravishing energy of Nina. He passes his adulthood in idle fantasies and tedious tea time visits with her and her husband. Finally, Marsden replaces her husband as the fossil companion for Nina's declining years, deciding to write his lifeless novels in her father's library.

Perhaps the most disappointing male consort for Nina is her own *son*. Named after the phantom Gordon, Gordon, Jr. is the male child that Nina and her consorts have sacrificed for. Nina hopes that somehow Gordon has been reborn in her son. But at the end of the play, her son is in love with a young woman she despises. And Nina is surrounded by her three men (Evans, Darrell, and Marsden) all of whom seem to be in need of a strong dosage of progesterone.

Nina obsessed on destroying her virile son's love affair sees herself as the enemy. "My having a son was a failure, wasn't it ? He couldn't give me happiness. Sons are always their fathers. They pass through the mother to become their father again. The sons of the Father have all been failures ! Failing they died for us, they flew away to other lives, they could not stay with us, they could not give us happiness !"

The defiant Gordon, Jr. claims his love and leaves. And Nina is left alone watching nervously as he dives his plane through the skies like his father, who crashed to his death decades earlier. With tortured cries, she calls "Fly up to heaven, Gordon ! Fly with your love to heaven ! Fly always ! Never crash to earth like my old Gordon ! Be happy, dear ! You've got to be happy !"

Each of these four men tries to complement Nina. And Nina, in her attempt to find fulfillment as wife and mother,

manipulates them in a web of lies. Two distance themselves from her to maintain their integrity and sanity (Darrell and Gordon Jr.-leaving definitively at the end of the play). Two marry her (Evans and Marsden) succumbing to a lifeless, Puritan marriage to have the woman of their dreams.

Nina's raging sexuality is at the core of her identity crisis, and her actions shocked the audiences of O'Neill's time. Nina broke the code for sane women : volunteering as a nurse so she could indulge in reckless promiscuity, pursuing decadent encounters with war victims, seducing her husband's best friend to sire a child, continuing a reckless affair, her passions so fierce her lover is forced to leave the country to contain himself. Nina's desire to be the perfect mother to Gordon is the only image that allows her to support the web of lies she has woven around herself.

The search for identity for Nina is a fierce one. She must come to terms with the sort of Puritan juxtaposition of intellect and desire. Nina calculates and manipulates to get what she wants, ultimately conceding that "our lives are merely strange dark interludes in the electrical display of God the Father."

Of the two film versions⁵, the former with Norma Shearer appears the more successful. In its edited 1 hour 51 minutes version, the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer picture produced by Robert Z. Leonard features Clark Gable opposite Shearer in glorious black and white. O'Neill's pioneering "asides" - sidelong soliloquies which provide a glimpse of the characters' innermost secrets - lent themselves so well to film that numerous critics lauded the innovation. This condensation of the Nobel laureate's fivehour stage play garnered reviews like "the greatest work the cinema has undertaken, and its greatest triumph" and "More Impressive, More Gripping, Amoral Enthralling Than the Play from Which It has Sprung." (*New York American*) Emphasis in this film is on the emotions of all the characters as they struggle to adapt their desires to the confines of appropriate New England behavior in 1920's.

In the 1984 London and Broadway productions of *Strange Interlude*, the cast is predominantly British. The consciousness

of woman's needs in the 1980's hurls Glenda Jackson into a Medea like performance, the ferocity of Nina's rage and emotions almost overpowering the other characters. In speaking of the emotional weight of the role, Jackson said, " What makes it American is its energy. What we'd like to make audiences acknowledge is that the characters are not discussing their situation in literary, tea-party conversation ; they are fiercely experiencing huge emotional clashes." This works well on the stage but somewhat less well in the what often appears a wordy film version of the same production.

Frank Rich in the New York Times gave the production a qualified rave. "Whatever else this five-hour play has been called by its adherents and detractors since 1928... an inspired English revival has arrived at the Nederlander. Two awesome actors - Glenda Jackson and Edward Petherbridge - and a courageously impudent director, Keith Hack, have given the work fresh and unexpected life. While *Strange Interlude* happily emerges as the cosmic statement that O'Neill intended- and while some of it is, indeed, pretentious pulp - it often seems the most enjoyable not to mention deranged comedy... In outline, *Strange Interlude* sounds less like comedy than a dime-novel parody of Strindberg or Ibsen. Over nine acts stretching through 25 years, O'Neill unfolds the saga of Nina Leeds (Miss Jackson) as an angry, strongwilled woman determined to love, mother, and if need be, destroy the many men who intersect her orbit The plot is pure - and in its later stages laughable - soap opera. As Nina toys with the men around her, we are treated to a many course feast of lurid doings : nervous breakdowns, promiscuity and adultery, an abortion, cases of congenital insanity and disguised paternity, as well as enough sudden deaths to stock a season of Dynasty."

The emphasis in the 1984 Broadway production (British leads with American supporting cast) was on the whirlwind of emotions of Nina. Miss Jackson says that the important thing the cast realized was that there are more emotions than thoughts, more emotions even than reflective resumes of what the characters were feeling. They were the very real stages you go through when in the middle of some highly charged situation. "

The impression is that only by eventually wearing out can Nina contain her volcanic emotions and somehow find peace. At the close of the play, she and Marsden like two fossils remain onstage. Marsden puts his arm around Nina affectionately and speaks paternally to her in her father's tone. "You have best forget the whole affair of your association with Gordon. After all dear Nina, that was something unreal in all that has happened since you first met Gordon Shaw, something extravagant and fantastic. The sort of thing that isn't done really in our afternoons. So let's you and me forget the whole distressing episode regarded as an interlude of trial and preparation say in which our souls have been scraped clean of impure flesh and made worthy to bleach in peace."

Nina's final lines capsule the strangeness of her journey. (These were largely cut in the 1932 Norma Shearer film, creating a less wrathful Nina.) In the 1984 production, Nina's words, as interpreted by Jackson, land harshly in their full entirety. Jackson responds with a bent smile, resting against Marsden's shoulder, "You're so restful Charley, I feel as if I were a girl again and you were my father and the Charley of those days made into one. I wonder is our old Gordon the same ? We'll pick flowers together in the aging afternoons of spring and summer, won't we ? it will be a comfort to get home, to be old, and to be home again at last and to be in love with peace together. To love each other's peace, to sleep with peace, together." (She kisses him then shuts her eyes with a deep sigh of requited weariness) - To die in peace. I'm so contentedly weary with life."

NOTES

- 1 All quotes from *Strange Interlude* taken from *Strange Interlude in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill*. New York : The Modern Library, Random House, Inc., 1954, pp. 485-682.
- 2 All quotes from the *Fiske Guide to Colleges* taken from Fiske, Edward B. of the New York Times. *The Fiske Guide to Colleges 1992*. New York : Random House, pp. 364-68, 610-614.
- 3 Albee, Edward. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. New York : Pocket Books, 1974.
- 4 All quotes from the *New York Times* taken from Rich, Frank. "Glenda Jackson Grapples With O'Neill's Everywoman." *New York Times*. July 10, 1984. "Theatre : A Fresh Look for O'Neill's 'Interlude.'" July 19, 1984. "Stage : O'Neill's 'Interlude'" in London, July 17, 1984.
- 5 Films O'Neill, Eugene. *Strange Interlude with Norma Shearer and Clark Gable*. Hollywood : Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, produced by Robert Z. Leonard, 1932. *Strange Interlude with Glenda Jackson and Ed Petherbridge* directed by Herbert Wise from the 1984 stage production.