

# “HOPING AGAINST HOPE”: A MARXIST STUDY OF CAPITALIST FATALISM IN EUGENE O’NEILL’S WARNINGS

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**ABSTRACT**— “Hoping against Hope”: A Marxist Study of Capitalist Fatalism in Eugene O’Neill’s Warnings’ presents the problem of a lower-class family, the Knapps, who suffer under the fatalistic capitalist system. The Knapps, as a part of the society, and the society as a whole, become potential victims of the capitalists and the bourgeoisie who work only for their own interests even if on the account of the poor. In such a socio-economic system, human beings are viewed as productive machines and possible consumers. Once they become old or disabled, they will be dismissed and replaced by younger ones. The paper, therefore, aims to analyse and interpret the above-mentioned themes in O’Neill’s Warnings in light of Marxist criticism and class conflicts between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. It is concluded that as long as capitalism is solely based on material benefits and is negligent of humanitarian concerns, disasters befalling the proletariat in particular and the whole society in general will be an inevitable fate. Witnessing the calamities that inflict the lower-class people in the play could alert readers/audience, including the capitalists and the bourgeoisie, to the detrimental consequences of embracing a purely materialistic worldview.

**Key words**—Class conflict, Capitalism, Disaster, Fatalism, Marxism, O’Neill, Warnings

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is supposed that industrial and financial development would guarantee prosperity and happiness to humanity; however, the rise of industrial capitalism has created socio-economically discriminated classes in the society. Moreover, financial capitalism has introduced huge class inequality or injustice that have in turn caused a harrowing ordeal for the lower classes of the Western society. In Imogen Tyler’s words, the core problems with class are the “deepening inequalities of income, health and life chances within and between countries . . .” (2015, 496). Between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of

the twentieth centuries, American industrial production considerably increased. Consequently, the number of the American workers dramatically increased. The great pressure exercised by the employers on the workers for more production made the latter found their own union, namely, American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1897. The major aim of the AFL was to demand the rights of the workers. As a result, AFL’s membership, which was 264000 in 1897, increased to 1.6 million by 1904. These workers’ struggle for securing their rights and protest against being unfairly exploited by their employers enraged the latter into counteraction. The attack on the Ludlow Camp strikers in Colorado in 1914 known as the Ludlow Massacre claimed 25 lives, including 11 children and two women (Helgeson, 2016, 9). Thus, with the rise of industrial capitalism, the society had been split into two clashing classes, namely, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

“Hoping against Hope”: A Marxist Study of Capitalist Fatalism in Eugene O’Neill’s Warnings’ is a study of Warnings that was published in 1914 and thus significantly coincided with the outbreak of World War I, which made the economic problems yet worse. It was also a time when lower-class people were living in deplorable circumstances in the Western world. In Warnings, O’Neill showcases the situation of a lower class family, the Knapps, and presents the problems and anxieties they endure at the hand of the bourgeoisie who are empowered by the capitalist socio-economic system. There is little scholarly work on O’Neill’s early plays including Warnings and almost no work has investigated the topic of the present paper. Hence, this paper is an endeavor to fill in part of that scholarly gap. It claims that the disasters that plague the Knapps, and the society as a whole, are deterministically caused by capitalists and the bourgeoisie who are only after material gains for which they exploit the proletariat as long as they are capable of performance and production. Moreover, the paper argues that once those workers become old or unable to perform and produce for any possible reason, they will be replaced by others

and left jobless, hopeless, and helpless to face the hardships of life alone. Besides, technological advancements have been inevitably leading to the substitution of older workers with younger ones, especially with the more technically advanced ones among them. Thus, workers are discriminated based on their skills, age differences, and physical capacities (Wolff, 2005, 533).

In order to support and prove the above-mentioned claim in *Warnings*, concepts from classical and contemporary Marxist literary approach are used. Firstly, the paper establishes the two clashing classes of society in the play, i.e., the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Secondly, it displays the domestic problems that are caused by poverty and the inhumane capitalist system. Finally, the dire consequences of living under such a system are explained through exhibiting what happens to Knapp, his family and the society at large.

The conclusion of the paper corroborates the claim that capitalists and the bourgeoisie view human beings as machines that would be utilised so long as they can operate and produce. According to the same principles of performativity and productivity, the same workers would be fired and replaced by others once they are unable to work. The significance of the study and its conclusion is that it could make readers/audiences of different social classes more conscious of the calamities that afflict the Knapps and real workers on daily basis. Although not a very realistic aspiration, such an awakening might encourage the capitalists and the bourgeoisie to assimilate more and better humanitarian principles and practices into their socio-economic systems and institutions.

## II. CLASHING CLASSES

In setting the stage for a Marxist literary study, first the clashing classes should be identified. Hence, this section attempts to establish the two conflicting classes in *Warnings*. On one hand, the Knapps represent the lower class, i.e., the proletariat. On the other, the flat owner, the ear-specialist, the grocer, the butcher, and the owner of the S. S. “Empress”, Captain Hardwick, represent the upper class, i.e., the bourgeoisie.

The Knapps suffer from abject poverty. This is evident from the beginning of *Warnings* through the description of the setting, i.e., the rented flat in which the Knapps live. Through the use of the indefinite article “a/an” O’Neill stylistically demonstrates how poor the Knapps are. The extracts below indicate that the family has only one piece of each item:

a chair  
 a heavy green curtain  
 an alcove  
 a bedroom  
 a doorway  
 another chair  
 a window  
 a court  
 a gilt cage  
 a canary  
 a worn carpet  
 a mantle piece

a black marble clock  
 a black frame  
 a lamp

(O’Neill, 1914, 73)

Besides not being their own, the flat is too small for a big family like the Knapps to comfortably live in. For instance, O’Neill states that the main hall is partitioned with a curtain and that the separated area is “probably used as a bedroom” (O’Neill, 1914, 73). This suggests that the flat does not contain a bedroom. Also the table in the dining room is aligned to the middle wall to make room for passing between the kitchen and the front part of the flat. Furthermore, a small weak lamp can “flood” the room with light (O’Neill, 1914, 73-74). For a room to be flooded with light by a somewhat primitive means of lighting implies that it is too small. Arguably, the bright light should not be read as a positive sign; in fact, it makes the miserable tableau of the flat and the Knapps’ life much more vivid.

What renders this small flat yet a worse place to live in is the dilapidated furniture and the gloomy atmosphere. To demonstrate this, O’Neill mainly utilises adjectives, especially colour adjectives, and adverbs of manners to stylistically display how miserable the Knapps’ life is. The following excerpts from the description of the setting corroborate this point:

... a heavy green curtain

...

... a gilt cage in which a canary chirps sleepily

...

The walls of the room are papered an impossible green and the floor is covered with a worn carpet of nearly the same color

...

Several gaudy Sunday-supplement pictures in cheap gilt frames

...

... a black marble clock ticks mournfully

...

Above the mantle hangs a “Home Sweet Home” motto in a black frame.

(O’Neill, 1914, 73; emphasis added)

In addition to being worn out, the curtain, the walls, and the carpet are all green in colour. Thus, the prevalence of the green colour that is described as “heavy” and “impossible” creates an unbearably monotonous ambience in the flat.

Undeniably, other colours are used as well, but ironically. For example, the word “gilt” that describes the cage is a symbolic miniature of the prison-like flat. The canary, which is known for its melodious songs, represents the family members and perhaps particularly Mrs. Knapp. The canary, which is supposed to sing for life and love, is without power and energy and sings “sleepily”. “Gilt” is also used to characterise the “cheap” frames of the free-of-charge “gaudy Sunday-supplement.”

The clock that represents time and life is yet another instance.

It is made of marble, which is lifeless; and its colour is black, which is often a symbol of misery and sorrow (Olderr, 1012, 31-32). The black marble clock is expressively surrounded on both sides with photographs of the wretched family members. Hence, its pendulum is swinging melancholically from one group to the other. A further example is the slogan "Home sweet home" that is symbolically and ironically surrounded with a black frame. The "home" could relevantly signify both the flat as well as America. O'Neill himself equated the lives of the Americans with tragedy when he declared that "we [Americans] are tragedy, the most appalling yet written or unwritten" (qtd. in Bloom, 2007, 8). With such a descriptive pattern, He delineates the utterly miserable life that the Knapps lead at home and in the country under the capitalist system.

In addition to the depiction of the setting, the characterization of the family members also exhibits how poor the Knapps are. Mrs. Knapp, the central character who greatly affects the action of the play, is the first character sketched. Her appearance reveals signs of poverty and hardship. Physically, she is a "pale, thin, peevish-looking woman ..." (O'Neill, 1914, 74). There could possibly be many reasons for a person to look pale: fear, shock, surprise, illness, exhaustion, etc. However, Mrs. Knapp's pallid look is caused by overworking and suffering from the desolation of "a penny-pinching life" (O'Neill, 1914, 1914, 74). Leading such a life has made her physically emaciated and psychologically so imbalanced that any simple thing can irritate her unauthoritative and constantly grumbling character.

Although having children could be considered one of the greatest gifts of life, for Mrs. Knapp, it is calamitous. For her, any newly born baby is not a blissful gift, but metonymically a "mouth" that demands its share of the family's basic supply, which is already insufficient for the other members. This, besides several other difficulties she is worried about, has marred her once nice physique. Now she is thin with gray hair, and lips bent down on both corners as if crying, and blue eyes that have lost their brilliance. Consequently, although still young in age, she has been made old before her natural time.

O'Neill also exploits the characterization of the children in order to illustrate the Knapps' hapless life. Although Sue and Lizzie have blond hair, they wear "dark clothes" and "black shoes and stockings" (O'Neill, 1914, 74). It is commonly known that children, especially girls, mostly love to wear colourful clothes, shoes and stockings. Again the "blonde" hair should not be interpreted as a positive sign because this colour pattern has the same function as that of the "gilt cage" and the other patterns. Charlie, being a teenager, is in a process of constant physical growth. He is a "skinny" boy who has grown bigger than his old clothes, but he does not have money to buy new clothes (O'Neill, 1914, 78). Dolly is described as being "extremely thin". Like her younger sisters, she is wearing "dark blue" dress, black shoes, stockings and a black hat (O'Neill, 1914, 78). Her complexion is "sallow", which means yellowish and unhealthy.

The last member to be presented is Knapp, who is about fifty years old. The first time he appears on stage, he is exhausted, and sick. He has stooping shoulders, a sunken face, and a head

bald in the middle with thin lines of gray hair on both sides. His clothes are faded and his shoes are dusty, which is reminiscent of the colour patterns aforementioned. His moustache is gray and drooping, just like his wife's lips (O'Neill, 1914, 84). He seems to be the emblem of all the sorrows and worries that his family is encountering. With the introduction of Mrs. Knapp first and Knapp last, the tragic portrayal of the family's life is completely developed.

Evidently, poverty has badly affected all the members of the family. Thus, the Knapps can be considered a typical representative of the lower class people and their miserable life they lead under the capitalist system.

The other side of the conflict is the bourgeoisie: the grocer, the butcher, the landlord, the doctor and Captain Hardwick. Although absent characters except for Captain Hardwick, they play an influential role in *Warnings*. From the accounts above and those below, it is proved that they, willingly or not, afflict the Knapps with continuous physical and psychological agonies and consequently jeopardise their entire existence.

### III. TROUBLED HOME

One of the major conflicts in *Warnings* is between two classes: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This conflict has repercussions on different levels. It affects the Knapps on personal, familial, and social levels and the society as a whole, too.

The Knapps, who are at the bottom of the social ladder, are at the mercy of those who have properties. For instance, one of the major problems of the Knapps is that they live in a rented flat and are constantly in danger of being forced to evacuate it. It is evident that poverty is the cause of lack of one's own residence (Tunstall, 2013, 4). While conversing with Charlie and Dolly, Mrs. Knapp clarifies how they have managed to survive so far by multiplying their sources of income; but she particularly focuses on the importance of Knapp's salary as a fixed source of income:

He [Knapp]'s got to keep on workin' or we'd never be able to even pay the rent. Goodness knows his salary is small enough. If it wasn't for your brother Jim sendin' us a few dollars every month, and Charlie earnin' five a week, and me washin', we'd never be able to get along even with your father's salary. But heaven knows what we'd do without it. We'd be put out in the streets. (O'Neill, 1914, 83)

In an exchange with Knapp, Mrs. Knapp reiterates this fact saying that they "owe the grocer and the butcher now. If they found out you wasn't workin' they wouldn't give us any more credit. And the landlord? How long would he let us stay here?" (O'Neill, 1914, 92). The grocer, the butcher and the landlord, who have property and hence material power over the Knapps, represent the bourgeoisie. Being mentally shaped and existentially determined by the capital system, unless paid, they would not provide the Knapps with subsistence to keep them alive and the flat to shelter them. Marx believes that workers sell their labour in exchange for a wage, not a product. He

confirms that this exchanging activity is to secure their basic livelihoods. He actually sees this auctioning of labour as a sacrifice of one's own life that workers make (Capital, 1976, 6). Thus, Knapp sacrifices his own life and values for the sake of keeping his job and providing his family's basic needs. Likewise, Engels maintains that the proletariat's life is insecure and instable because their livelihood depends solely on the sale of their labour (1977, 1). Hence, once they fail to provide the required labour, they will be dismissed by their employers. It is this dilemma that Knapp suffers from and eventually becomes a victim of. In the capitalist system, Marx maintains, workers are mechanised and their lives' span is the same as that of machines that are used as long as they operate and announced 'dead' once they fail:

The lifetime of an instrument of labour is thus spent in the repetition of a greater or lesser number of similar operations. The instrument suffers the same fate as the man. Every day brings a man twenty-four hours nearer to his grave, although no one can tell accurately, merely by looking at a man, how many days he has still to travel on that road (Marx, et al, 1976, 311).

Accordingly, Koddenbrock, quoting Marx, asserts that it is money that determines people's "social power" and their position on the social ladder (2017, 3). Hence, human beings do not have intrinsic values and their values are contingent on the possession of money. That is why in such a system, human beings are seen either as functional, productive machines or as possible consumers. Moreover, it is this socio-materially powerful class represented by the grocer, the butcher, etc. that constantly poses threats to the Knapps, who lack such power because of their poverty.

The ear-specialist is regarded as a bourgeois opponent. He and all doctors are collectively accused by Mrs. Knapp of lying to and frightening their patients in order to manipulate them financially. When her husband affirms that the ear-specialist has assured him that he would become deaf at any moment, she claims:

All those doctors make things worse than they really are. He [ear specialist]'s just tryin' to scare you so you'll keep comin' to see him.

.....

You're not deaf now and even if that liein' doctor spoke the truth you'll hear for a long time yet. He only told you about that sudden stroke to keep you comin' to him. I know the way they talk.

(O'Neill, 1914, 91-92)

Although Mrs. Knapp's general accusation of doctors of being opportunists is not absolutely true, there really are doctors who, for their own material interests, lie to their patients. Such doctors think of their patients as possible consumers and rich sources of money making. Relatedly, Mrs. Knapp complains to Charlie and Dolly about Knapp for having gone to spend five dollars on seeing the ear

specialist: "So he [Knapp]'s gone to pay five dollars to an ear specialist when all he needs is a dose of quinine—" (O'Neill,

1914, 82). Employing such defense mechanisms as denial and intellectualization by her exposes the unconscious anxiety she is confronting because of Knapp's spending \$5 in minutes on seeing a doctor. She is experiencing thousands of concerns of a life wherein every cent matters. That is why she intellectualises that Knapp could have spared the \$5 by taking a dose of a natural remedy of quinine. It is worth mentioning that in 1914 when Warnings was published \$5 dollars were worth about \$136.78 today in 2021. Additionally, the \$5 dollars that Knapp has spent in minutes take Charlie a week to earn (O'Neill, 1914, 83).

In a conversation on job and employability, Mrs. Knapp reveals the nature of the relationship between the employer and employee. She implies that in the capitalist system priority is given to workers' performativity and productivity. From the Marxian perspective, it is believed that the capitalist system puts workers' performativity and productivity before anything. Consequently, the elderly's inability to work is devalued by the capitalist system. In this regard, Phillipson states:

The impact on the elderly of disturbances in the economy have hardly been lessened with the emergence of a mature capitalist economy. In the depression of the 1930s we find elderly people caught between the contradiction of inadequate pensions but intense social pressure to retire and make way for the young. (1982, 154)

In such a system, workers, as machines, are abandoned once they stop performing and producing. Mandel asserts that the capitalist economy is "a gigantic enterprise of dehumanization, of transformation of human beings from being goals in themselves into instruments and means for money-making and capital accumulation" (qtd. in Thorpe, 2011, 58). This is clearly averred by Mrs. Knapp when she explains to Charlie and Dolly their father's dilemma: "He [Knapp]'d be all right if he could get another job. But he's afraid if he gives up this one he won't be able to get another. Your father ain't as young as he used to be and they all want young men now" (O'Neill, 1914, 83). The pronoun "they" refers collectively to capitalist employers who are inconsiderate to the elderly who are no longer capable of working actively and hence forced to leave their jobs. Capitalist employers instead prefer young people, who will ironically be discarded once they become inactive. Knapp deplorably confirms the claim above as he tells his wife that "[i]f they knew my hearing was going back on me I wouldn't hold my job a minute" (O'Neill, 1914, 90). Moreover, the adverb "now" in the former quotation marks the early 20th century America where industrialization and capitalism were burgeoning side by side. These coexisting developments started after the U.S. civil war when the completed railroads had particularly opened up the land for further industrial and economic growth (Fogel, 1964, 799). This advance was definitely more in need of young skilled workers than in need of old dysfunctional ones.

The socio-psychologically desperate agony induced by living under the capitalist system is manifest in Knapp's speech with his son, Charlie. He ruefully remarks "I wish I could throw up

this job. I wish I was young enough to try something else” (O’Neill, 1914, 85). In the capitalist system, the elderly seem to be buried alive. As living-dead people, they nostalgically wish to be young again, not to enjoy life, but absurdly to be hired as workers again. Perhaps, the most horrible disaster that may befall a person under capitalism is to lose one’s job. That is why when Knapp tells his wife that something terrible has happened, she surprisingly enquires “What do you mean? You haven’t lost your job, have you?” (O’Neill, 1914, 89-90). She is clearly much appalled by the possibility of Knapp’s joblessness because it would result in the ruining of their family. Thus, in such a fatalistically materialistic system, without money, human beings would be deprived of life and dignity.

There are some incidents in *Warnings* that demonstrate how the Knapps’ austere economic conditions have deprived them of the tranquility and peace of mind that home is supposed to guarantee. Pertinently, the action of the play commences with a problem that is caused by the lack of very basic supplies of life. As Lizzie is trying to teach Sue how to write a “g” and asks the latter to give her the only pencil they have, Sue refuses. Lizzie takes the pencil forcibly from Sue and this leads to a commotion. Intervening to solve the problem, Mrs. Knapp orders Sue to stop crying and Lizzie to return the pencil to Sue several times; however, none of them heeds her. Consequently, Mrs. Knapp strikes Lizzie on her ears and takes the pencil by force from her. Although this may seem an ordinary situation, it shows that this family is too poor to afford two pencils; it also shows how harsh economic circumstances could complicate the most mundane of situations and create serious domestic problems.

Another instance of domestic disturbance is when Mrs. Knapp is told by Dolly that Charlie has spent 25 cents on buying a girl ice cream soda (O’Neill, 1914, 80). Infuriated, Mrs. Knapp reproaches and threatens Charlie:

You ought to be ashamed of yourself, you big grump, you, goin’ round with girls at your age and spendin’ money on them. I’ll tell your father how you spend the money he gives you and it’ll be a long time before you get another cent. (O’Neill, 1914, 80)

Mrs. Knapp is deeply distressed to see Charlie spend money on girls while they are living a frugal life. As a result of Charlie irresponsible act, she threatens to deprive him of his pocket money for a long period of time. To retaliate against Dolly’s blow, Charlie tells his mother that he has seen Dolly with a boy in a dark place. As the quarrel aggravates, they start to accuse each other of lying. Once more, Mrs. Knapp fails to solve the problem verbally and peacefully; that is why she slaps Charlie on the ear and threatens to beat Dolly if she is seen again with boys in dark places. Suffering from the absence of domestic peace, Mrs. Knapp bemoans her life: “I declare a body can’t have a moment’s peace in this house with you children all the time wranglin’ and fightin’” (O’Neill, 1914, 75). Thus, the capitalist system that has relegated this family to the bottom of the social ladder has deprived them of the peace of mind and domestic tranquillity. This is because in such a materialistic

system, money, which the Knapps lack, becomes the sole means of living with dignity and peace of mind and home.

Lacking necessary educational knowledge and having no time to raise the children in a proper way, the parents, especially Mrs. Knapp, have somewhat failed to edify their children. Although partially her fault, Mrs. Knapp is always grumbling about their children’s, especially Charlie’s, conduct. She criticises Charlie for behaving as if raised in a cowshed. She tells him that she is ashamed of going to places with him. Deeply offended by his mother’s remarks, he discloses his gloomy psychological reality that is concealed behind his seeming carelessness. He painfully comments “You’d needn’t worry. There’s no place for me to go—and if there was I wouldn’t go there with these old clothes on” (O’Neill, 1914, 86). As is commonly known, teenagers are too sensitive about their appearance. They often imitate celebrities to secure a socially accepted character for themselves. As has been noted before, Charlie has outgrown his small and patchy clothes and his appearance, with his long arms and legs, looks very awkward. So, he is experiencing an inferiority complex that could eventually destroy his personality if not treated properly and in time. When left alone with his father, he imploringly asks him to buy him a new set of clothes:

Please can I have a new suit of clothes? Gee, I need ‘em bad enough. This one is full of patches and holes and all the other kids down at the store laugh at me ‘cause I ain’t got long pants on and these don’t fit me any more. Please can I have a new suit, Pop? (O’Neill, 1914, 87)

“I need ‘em bad enough” tellingly communicates the amount of psychological torment Charlie is enduring because of poverty. Being ridiculed by his peers for his small patchy clothes, he is obliged to live an alienated life. Therefore, the detrimental economic crisis the Knapps are undergoing does not only destroy them physically, but it also devastates them psychologically.

Because of spending \$5 dollars on the ear specialist, Knapp cannot afford to buy the clothes for Charlie and, as a result, starts sobbing. When seeing his broken father and although himself sinking “into the depths of gloom” (O’Neill, 1914, 87), Charlie attempts to console his father by reassuring him that he can wait for another three months. In this way, the financial difficulties created by the capitalist system and the materialistic culture can change the father figure from the family’s provider and protector to a hopeless, helpless, pitiable person who is only capable of weeping. Moreover, readers are left to speculate about how living with the already too small and patchy clothes for another three months would aggravate Charlie’s psychological suffering.

Since the play’s onset, the Knapps have been moving from one quarrel to another. The last quarrel of Scene I is that between Knapp and his wife. The situation produced by the capitalist system is one of dilemma, i.e., characters are caught between two choices none of which is desirable. Mr. and Mrs. Knapp are faced with the options of either leaving the job that would cause the total destruction of the family, or alternatively

continuing the job and probably destroying the ship that is the symbol of the society as a whole. Dialectically, choosing one may lead to the destruction of the other. Hence, Knapp is painfully split between his familial obligations and his social responsibility.

Mrs. Knapp, who has been neglecting herself altogether and only striving to serve and save her family from the financial crises they have been encountering, chooses her family. She encourages Knapp to continue his job and to hide his imminent deafness from the ship crew. Disagreeing with her, Knapp believes that the professionally and ethically appropriate choice is to leave his job. Nevertheless, when asked by the ear specialist about his profession, he, too, lies by answering “mechanist” instead of “wireless operator” (O’Neill, 1914, 90-91). In spite of knowing that her husband may become deaf at any moment, Mrs. Knapp maintains that the ear specialist is a liar and that Knapp should not be scared by his warnings. It is worth noting that Mrs. Knapp is not an innately selfish and evil creature. It is rather the economic circumstances under which their life is being jeopardised that turns her into such a person who is ready to lie, cheat and even harm others in order to protect her own family. The same is true for Knapp and other members of the capitalist society as well. Thus, people’s severe financial circumstances could oblige them to ignore their ethical principles and act selfishly instead. After all, people’s consciousness and resulting behaviour, Marx asserts, are shaped by the economic forces in place: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness” (Marx, Contribution, 1904, 11–12).

As she finds her husband insistent on leaving his job, Mrs. Knapp resorts to different tricks to dissuade him. For example, she accuses him of idiocy and cowardice: “Give up your job? Are you a fool? Are you such a coward that a doctor can scare you like that?” (O’Neill, 1914, 91). In spite of his wife’s straight insult, Knapp does not defend himself but argues that he is concerned about his responsibility as a wireless operator, a job which almost entirely depends on hearing well. Having failed to convince him, she then belittles the importance of his job by claiming that it is only about sending and receiving few messages (O’Neill, 1914, 91).

Having failed to dissuade Mr. Knapp, Mrs. Knapp employs stronger weapons to attack and accuse him of irresponsibility and selfishness. She reemphasises that almost all members of the family are working in order to make their already thrifty life possible. Her speech refers implicitly to the conflict between the lower classes and the bourgeoisie by referring to the grocer, the butcher and the landlord. She ascertains that once Knapp loses his job, the family will be deprived of their sources of livelihood and shelter. Then she reminds him of the last time he tried to find a new job and failed after losing almost everything they had (O’Neill, 1914, 92). As is noticed, Mrs. Knapp is clinging desperately to Knapp’s salary, although small. This is because losing the salary, to her, means the destruction of the family, for which she has been fighting the forces of life with all her capacity.

After providing the socio-economic facts above and still

failing to logically persuade her husband, Mrs. Knapp then appeals to emotions. As she is weeping bitterly, she blames her husband for being ungrateful towards her although she has been working like a slave to provide for and protect their family. She also criticises him for being a bad father for her unfortunate children. Finally, she deploys her last and most powerful emotional weapon when she announces that she regrets marrying such a man because life with him has been full of anguish:

And this is all the thanks I get for slavin’ and workin’ my fingers off! What a father for my poor children! Oh, why did I ever marry such a man? It’s been nothin’ but worryin’ and sufferin’ ever since. (O’Neill, 1914, 92)

Being emotionally moved and unable to argue further, Knapp reluctantly agrees to return to his job; however, he confirms that this would be the last trip. While he is utterly convinced that his decision is wrong and may even be lethal, he wishfully hopes that everything in this last voyage would go smoothly without any serious problems as it has been before.

This section has delineated how poverty and living under the mercy of an industrial-capitalist system have deprived the Knapps of domestic peace and turned their life into a series of endless problems. The next section shows how the capitalist system may lead to the destruction not only of a family but also of a society as a whole.

#### IV. SINKING SHIP: DROWNED FAMILY AND DROWNED SOCIETY

Scene II starts with a description of the S. S. ‘Empress’, however, in a state of danger (O’Neill, 1914, 93). The ship has been traditionally used to symbolise the society and even humankind at large: “The whole of humankind might be thought of as launched upon sea” (Ferber, 2007, 194). So, S. S. ‘Empress’ could be read a symbol of the society in Warnings that is heading towards destruction under the capitalist system. In addition, this steam ship, as one of the emblems of the industrial revolution and the capitalist system, could symbolise the bourgeoisie that are going to be destroyed, although unintentionally, by the symbol of the proletariat in Warnings, namely, Knapp. Marx held that the capitalist system would ultimately incur its own destruction by decreasing the number of the capitalists and increasing the number of the working classes; this, on the one hand, takes place due to the concentration of money in the hands of an extremely small minority of capitalists and corporations as Mandel, in the Introduction to Marx’s Capital, states “the concentration of wealth and power in a small number of giant industrial and financial corporations has brought with it an increasingly universal struggle between capital and labour” (Marx et al, 1976, 13). Both interpretations could be valid and essentially interrelated because the society as a whole is a product of the base, i.e., of the economic system, as manifested in Marx’s historical materialism, in Donald Hodges words: “Man’s behavior is determined, even though unconsciously, by his

relationship to the means of production and that his religious, moral, and political principles are similarly conditioned" (1959, 16). Now that the ship is sinking, its passengers, regardless of their social classes, are facing the danger of death. This endorses the statement that almost everyone in the capitalist system could be a victim of the system in one way or another.

From the evidence provided in the play, Knapp has become completely deaf almost from the beginning of the trip (O'Neill, 1914, 96-97). Knapp fails to receive even one single message and also fails to answer Captain Hardwick's questions properly. Then he, with a voice choked by tears, confesses that he has become deaf. He apologetically says that he "was hoping against hope"; that is, he was certain that he was going to become deaf at any moment, yet he wished that nothing untoward would occur. He explains that, because of his wife's constant nagging, his promise to buy Charlie a new set of clothes, his attempt to protect his family, being very poor, and unable to find another job, he was compelled to hide the truth and continue his job although for the last time (O'Neill, 1914, 98-99). Thus, Warnings demonstrates that the survival of the lower classes under the fatalistic capitalist system is "hoping against hope", i.e., it is a desperate attempt.

Significantly related to the topic of this paper is the replacement of Knapp with a young wireless operator, Dick Whitney. Once he knows that Knapp has become deaf, Captain Hardwick takes him, who was crying, out of the wireless room saying "Brace up! Poor beggar!" (O'Neill, 1914, 100). This act of replacement corroborates the idea that, in the industrial-capitalist system, workers are treated as machines that are used as long as they work and dumped once becoming dysfunctional.

From the messages received by Whitney from the other ships, especially from 'Verdari', Captain Hardwick discovers that they have been warned about a derelict that has been on their line. However, they have not received the warnings because of Knapp's deafness (O'Neill, 1914, 101). Infuriated by the shocking revelation, Captain Hardwick is about to beat Knapp, but he recovers his composure and explains his great anger to Mason saying "that miserable, cowardly shrimp [Knapp] has lost my ship for me" (O'Neill, 1914, 102).

As Mason and Hardwick go to save the passengers, the latter gives the 'Verdari's' message to Knapp and, in a humanitarian gesture, asks him to leave the sinking ship with them. The greatly devastating revelation in the message traumatises Knapp completely. Now he realises that this disaster that would result in the sinking of the ship and may claim the passengers' lives is solely caused by him and his irresponsible decision of continuing his job. He walks staggeringly back to his room and shoots himself in the head (O'Neill, 1914, 103). The dire consequences of his choice have been the loss of his own life, the sinking of the ship, and jeopardizing the passengers' lives. Moreover, readers are left to foreshadow the destruction of Knapp's family. As Mrs. Knapp has reckoned, without Knapp's small salary, the shopkeepers would not sell them goods, and the flat owner would drive them out into the streets. As a result, they would be left at the mercy of the harsh life of pennilessness and homelessness. Actually, the constant anxiety indirectly instigated by the bourgeoisie has been looming large in the

characters', specifically Mrs. Knapp's, unconscious mind. Thus after Knapp's death, this fear could materialise and would, therefore, easily lead to the separation of the family members and even turn some of them into criminals.

Although Captain Hardwick loses his temper at some emotional moment, he, who can be classified as bourgeois, is not an antagonistic person. For instance, he treats Knapp humanely; he does not suspect that Knapp will act in an irresponsible manner and tries to find justifications for his strange behaviour; he even covers Knapp's crime; he pities him; and finally he asks him to go with them and leave the sinking ship. Thus, this bourgeois man is not essentially evil, but the capitalist system may easily turn him into a greedy person who would think only about his own material interests. Perhaps, his name, Hardwick, is symbolically used to refer to the two sides of his personality. On the one hand, he seems to be tough and stern, and on the other, a "wick" that burns smoothly to light for others. Thus, the man that sounds "hard" from outside is internally as soft as a "wick". However, living under the capitalist system with its inhumane acts and continuous pressures for material value could completely exhaust the "wick" inside the captain and turn him into a hardhearted person. After all, he replaces Knapp with another operator, which means dismissing him and depriving him of his salary and consequently endangering his whole family.

The capitalist system has tragically victimised all the members of the society represented by the ship, although in different degrees. Knapp, the innocent man, who wants to take the right decision of leaving his job, has been obliged by the harsh financial circumstances caused by industrial capitalism to keep his job although he knows that he is no longer qualified to do it. O'Neill implies that the situation would continue so long as the capitalist system favours the material value over humanitarian concerns. This is done through the character of Whitney. Not being a member of the crew of the S.S. 'Empress', Whitney, unexpectedly, returns to the wireless room to take Knapp to the lifeboats. He, "seized with sudden terror" (O'Neill, 1914, 104) of seeing Knapp's dead body on the ground, leaves the room immediately. The sense of terror that overwhelms Whitney is because he, in a futuristic vision, sees his own corpse on the ground. This would most likely be the destiny of all workers if the capitalist system continues to act as it is doing. Knapp could have gone with them and then killed himself on land or at home or in any other place. However, killing himself on the ship, especially in the wireless room, and falling on his face in front of his wireless machine is of great symbolic signification. The rise of capitalism that has been contributing much to the industrial revolution is the real killer; Knapp has really become the victim of industrial capitalism and his wireless machine.

#### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

As it has been argued throughout the paper, the capitalist system with its ceaseless efforts to guarantee material benefits victimises the members of different classes of the society although in different degrees. As has been noticed, this system

has affected people negatively on different personal, familial, social, and psychological levels. It has been the essential cause for the absence of domestic tranquillity and societal peace and security.

The tragic events that have befallen the Knapps and the ship could have cathartic effects on the reader/audience, irrespective of their classes. The calamities caused by capitalism in *Warnings* could be seen as an awakening alarm for the capitalists and the society as whole so that they might reconsider their principles and practices. If comprehended well, this cathartic message could make the capitalists value human beings as human beings, not as machines discarded once they stop working.

If capitalists instill humanitarian values into their economic systems and worldview, then they can also positively alter the mentality of people, especially, the bourgeoisie and the upper classes. This would, consequently, resonate positively in the social system and establish better relationships among the various fabrics of the society. Perhaps, this was the most wanted social change in the time the play was published and is in the contemporary life that is burdened with the lack of humanitarian concerns.

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