

Eugene O'Neill's Duality of Structure Reflected on *All God's Chillun Got Wings*

Rizki Nufiarni

Universitas Brawijaya Malang

nufiarni_rizki@yahoo.com; nufiarni_rizki@ub.ac.id

ABSTRACT

In Giddens's Structuration theory, the most important concept is duality of structure, where agent and structure affects each other and have equally important position. This article is written to find out the duality of structure in Eugene O'Neill drama entitled *All God's Chillun Got Wings*. The analysis is trying to examine the drama as one of O'Neill's power to change the structure that he has. The analysis unit for the structure is taken from the literature about the social background in American society in the late 19th century and early 20th century, while the analysis unit for the agent is taken from O'Neill's drama as a reflection of the action in which O'Neill implemented his power. Therefore, it is concluded that O'Neill duality of structure can be observed through his action in the drama to change the structure which shaped him as an agent. Some of his actions has resulted in an unintended consequences which will become an unacknowledged condition of actions for another action.

Keywords: Structuration theory, duality of structure, agent, structure, *All God's Chillun Got Wings*

INTRODUCTION

Society changes according to the social practices through time and space. The practice is done by the human as the agent of society. Some changes related to racism have become problems. The prejudice between races has triggered racism which becomes a global problem, whether in small or large scale. The fact that one of the President of the United States is an African descendant does not eliminate racism in the country.

Racism in the United States has begun some decades ago. The main doctrine which states that "...all members of the white race are superior to or 'better than' all the members of the nonwhite races" (McLemore, 1983, p. 83) has become the legitimation for the American descendants in the United States to put themselves in a higher position than other races. These other races includes as the Indians, who is actually the American natives; the immigrants from colony states, such as the Hawaiian; immigrants from Asia, which they called the yellow skin; and black immigrants from Africa. The racial prejudice between the

American descendants and the African descendants has happened since the age of slavery. The African descendants who were brought to the States as slaves are considered inferior and became the property of the American descendants. The different aspects of day to day life are one of the cause which triggered the prejudice between the races. According to the American descendants, the African descendants do not have a proper way of life. In order to 'help' the African descendants to have a decent life, the American descendants 'save' the African descendants by making them their slave.

In Januari 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued an *Emancipation Proclamation*, which abolished the slavery, especially in the South where slavery existed the most. This has caused some conflict between the American descendants who agreed to slavery and those who opposed to slavery. The different stands in slavery between the American descendants has become one cause of the Civil War. After the War ended, there were a lot of African descendant in America who freed themselves

from slavery. They try to have a proper life by getting work and a place to live. In response to this situation, the American descendants created *segregation* in the society. They separate the work, the house, and the public facilities of the African descendants from the American descendants. The condition which limits the rights of the African descendants is called the *Jim Crow Laws*. In such situation, there were some possible problems related to the interaction between the American descendants and the African descendants. Some possibilities for the African descendants included having the opportunity to have his own company, working as a government employee, and even marrying the American descendant (*miscegenation*). Eugene O'Neill uses the phenomena which occurred around 1920s as the background of his drama.

Eugene O'Neill is an Irish American. He was born in New York on October 16, 1888. O'Neill had written more than fifty drama since his debut in 1913 to 1943. Eugene O'Neill had received four *Pulitzer Prize*. He also received the Nobel Award for literature in 1936. One of his work which pictures the life of the White and the Black in America is his drama entitled *All God's Chillun Got Wings*. In this drama, O'Neill portrays the story in a segregated area. In one corner of the area, there is a place where children from both races meet and play together. As time passes, the children join the segregated community and live as the other people in the community live. The drama, portraying *miscegenation*, has caused a controversy ever since before it was first produced. This drama reflects the life of the American segregated society in the 1920s. The segregated society and the effects of segregation is presented in this drama. The action of the agents in segregated structure is an interesting part to be examined. This is because the problems depicted in this drama also might happen in real life. The drama shows that structure has a great part in individual life, and an individual who live in a social system also has the ability to change the structure. This

article is trying to examine the duality of structure which is represented in Eugene O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings*.

METHODOLOGY

In the concept of duality of structure, structure and agents has the same important part in social process. "According to the notion of the duality of structure, the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize" (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). Structural properties here, for example, are sets of norms which applies to a group of people called society. The society can be a village, a country, a nation, or race. This set of norms is produced from the agreement of the individuals of the society. The agreement is not an instant product of the society, but it is the product which has been shaped through time by the members of the society. Any members who do not agree to the norms, might want to change this product. The will and the repetitive act to change the norms is what Giddens called as 'agency'. With the power that an agent has, he can produce a modified norm in the society as a structure. This also means that man as an agent acts according to his experience in the society, and at the same time the society is shaped by man through his recursive actions. This also implies that the society has the ability to constrain and at the same time it is enabling (Giddens, 2010a, p. 40-41). In this condition, the changes in society could take place.

Giddens (1984) stated that, "All social systems, no matter how grand or far-flung, both express and are expressed in the routines of daily social life, mediating the physical and sensory properties of the human body" (p.36). The routines of daily social life mean the recursive interaction of individuals in the same space. The recursive interaction is the social practices done by the individual in a specific time. This shows that space and time is an important aspects in the Theory of Structuration, because changes in the society is a process which will take some time and space.

The space meant in the theory is what Giddens refer as local, where individual does his social practices. Giddens choose the term 'local' because it has more meaning than 'place' which only means a position in space. Local has the sense of meaning which connect the agents who perform the interaction in one or more occasion (Giddens, 2010, p. 183). It also shows the connection between the space and the agents.

Giddens stated that structure is rules and resources, or sets of transformation relations, organized as properties of social systems (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). This means that structure is a set of rules which is stored in the memory of the agents. System is the relation organized as social practices, where the interactions between agents take place. Structuration is the condition where social system is reproduced by the agents, and where structure transformed because of the changes done by the agents.

In the theory of Structuration, the concept of agent refers to individual. The agent has power which is called agency. If the agent is the subject who does the action, therefore the agency is the power to do the action. The power is the important aspect in the construction of structure. It is because "To be able to 'act otherwise' means being able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs" (Giddens, 1984, p. 14). This means that every agent in the society has the power to change the structure—the set of rules implemented in the society—with the power that he has, regardless his position in the society. By that, it can also be said that people have the power to escalate their position in the society depending on the time and space they belong to.

In the concept of agent and agency, action is an important factor, because the power of the agent can only be seen through his action. Recursive actions done by individuals in the society will cause the changes in social system. In doing his actions, an agent is affected by three consciousness, which are discursive

consciousness, practical consciousness and unconsciousness. Discursive consciousness is the ability of the agents to explain his knowledge. Practical consciousness is the agents knowledge which allow him to follow the social rules but cannot be explained by the agent himself. Unconsciousness has the components of motivation and memory which is not realized by the agent. The three types of consciousness cannot be separated. They will have meaning when the agent interacts with others, because this consciousness can only be seen through actions by three aspects which are reflexive monitoring of action, rationalization of action, and motive of action.

Reflexive monitoring of action is a process where an individual monitors his day to day actions continuously and expect other agents to do the same. The process is associated with the discursive consciousness. Rationalization of action is a process where the agent, "routinely and for the most part without fuss maintain a continuing 'theoretical understanding' of the grounds of their activity" (Giddens, 1984, p.5). This proses is associated with practical consciousness. Discursive consciousness is related to the goal of action, and practical consciousness deals with the reason or background of action. The unconsciousness is then associated to the motivation of action. The agent is usually able to explain the goal of his actions discursively and therefore reveal his reason in doing the action, but the motive of his action in particular is usually cannot be explained.

Moreover, quoting Loyal (2003), to Giddens, an agent is a rational being who act according to what he knows or believes to have his intended result. Nevertheless, the intended action is sometimes resulted in some unpredictable effects. The unintended consequences of actions will become the unacknowledged conditions of actions in the future (p. 56). The unintended consequence of actions is the effect which is caused by the previous unintended actions which might result

in changing the structure, as presented in the diagram below.

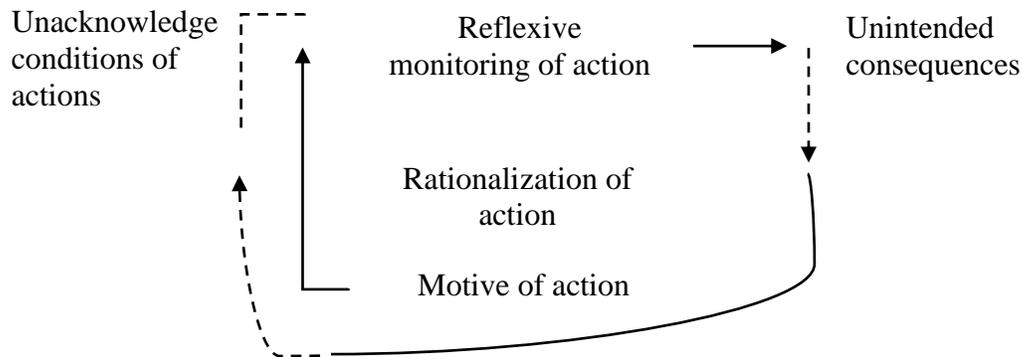


Figure 1. The act of an agent. Source: Giddens (2010a, p.8)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As stated in the background that the relationship between the American descendants and the African descendants after the Emancipation Proclamation, especially in the South, was driven by the segregation law which is known as Jim Crow Law. This condition had caused the African descendants to be in a difficult situation, as stated by McLemore (1983) below

[...] as the quest to reestablish white supremacy grew, Jim Crow legislation began to reappear. At first, only the right to vote and to use public transportation were very much affected. In time, however, every aspects of life—schooling, housing, religion, jobs, the courts, recreation, health care, and so on—was included (p. 276).

At first, Jim Crow Law was meant to limit the rights of the African descendants in two things, the rights to vote and to use public transportation, but it then developed into all aspects in the life of the African descendants. Furthermore, the Jim Crow Law had become the ethic which conducts the relationship between the American descendants and the African descendants. The ethic included the segregation between the American descendants and the African descendants. For the American descendants, the segregation could be

understood as a form of acceptance of the African descendants to the society they live in. Even though, for the African descendants, this had become a source of psychological problems, because in this situation, they have the same rights and obligations with the American descendants, but they had no freedom as what is stated in the Law. This condition was considered as the set of rules which became the structure for the agents in the American society in the early 20th century.

Eugene O’Neill had portrayed this condition in his dramas. O’Neill’s action to put the structure kept in his memory as the background of his drama is one medium to examine his duality of structure. O’Neill’s structure is a medium and outcome of his work. It means that he can write in the frame of the structure where he lives and at the same time his work has the power to influence this structure. In another word, that the social background that he used in his drama is influenced by the set of rules in the society where he lived in and at the same time he wanted to change the rules using his work.

In the process of writing *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*, O’Neill intended to present the tragedy of the main actors in acquiring their happiness. He intended to create the tragedy by using the racial differences of the main actors. As what is stated by Saughnessy (1984) below.

The play itself, as anyone who has read it with intelligence knows, is never a 'race problem' play. Its intention is confined to portraying the special lives of individual human beings...and their tragic struggle for happiness. To deduce any general application from 'God's Chillun' except in a deep, spiritual sense, is to read a meaning into my play which is not there (p. 89-90).

To show the tragic struggle for happiness in the drama, O'Neill portrayed the marriage of a woman of American descendant and a man of African descendant. This has resulted a great storm in the society at that time. The interaction between the American descendants and the African descendants in the drama had become a sensitive issue at that time; moreover O'Neill had portrayed miscegenation. According to the theory, O'Neill's intention is triggered by the three types of consciousness. He understood that the tragic effect will be produced by the miscegenation, because there is a huge gap between the two races. The early 20th century American society became the unacknowledged condition of O'Neill's action, while the reaction of the society is the unintended consequence.

The reaction of the local authority to O'Neill's drama production was written by Robert Wainscott in his article entitled Notable American Stage Production, as follows

What got more attention than the produced play was the opening scene written for and rehearsed with children in the leading roles. Local government would not allow this in a mixed cast show and refused to license the use of children (apparently hoping to stop the production)" (Manheim, 2000, p. 103-104).

It is stated that the local authority was trying to stop the production, which eventually lead to a more publication for the drama production. The reaction of the local government, which previously becomes the unintended consequences of O'Neill's action, had now become an unacknowledged condition

of action which resulted in an unintended consequence, which is the publication for the production.

The first performance of All God's Chillun Got Wings also had some constraint from the society, as Arthur Pollock wrote in *Brooklyn Daily News* on Mei 16, 1924 that the local authority had rejected the permission of including child actors in the performance, without any particular reason. In an article "Making It, Madness, and Motherhood: The Deep Structure of *All God's Chillun Got Wings*", it is said that the mayor tried to stop the performance by forbidding the involvement of children in the performance because there was a rumor that the black actor will kiss the hand of the white actress (Bernstein, 2006, p. 50). From these sources, it can be examined that the interaction between the American descendants and the African descendants at that time is a condition which is prohibited at that time. Therefore, it is not a proper thing to be shown to children. Meanwhile, O'Neill intended to include the children characters in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* to show how the interaction changes between the characters during their life. In the end, the production eliminated the use of child actors, and the act where there should be children was read by the director, James Light, at the opening of the drama. This action is considered as an action to overcome an obstacle. By overcoming the obstacle, an agent is considered as trying to find out an alternative or a way to deal with the structural constraint. This part is an important part for an agent as a control of his action to become a part of the structure.

O'Neill's duality of structure can also be seen from the setting of place in his drama. On the First Act, he used the segregated neighborhood in his society. "A corner in lower New York, at the edge of a cultured district" (O'Neill, 1970, p. 193). In this neighborhood, the American descendants and the African descendants live in the same area, but they were separated on blocks of houses. There is no interaction between the two.

People pass, black and white, the Negroes frankly participants in the spirit of spring, the whites laughing constrainedly, awkward in natural emotion. Their words are lost. One only hears their laughter. It expresses the difference in race (O'Neill, 1970, p. 193).

O'Neill used this local three times with a long interval of time in one Act to show the relation changes which occurred between the characters. This local can be seen as O'Neill's action in describing the segregated American society during the early 20th century. At that time, the African descendants was considered as an inferior, who did not have a proper way of life, but it can be noticed that the people of African descendants is described in a positive way compared to those of the American descendants. This description can be interpreted as an action to change the society's view towards the people of the African descendants.

In the next Scene, O'Neill describes the same local where nine years had lapsed from the first Scene. There are some changes in the society as described below

The same corner. Nine years have passed. It is late spring at a time in the evening which immediately follows the hour of Scene 1. Nothing has changed much. One street is still all white, the other all black. The fire escapes are laden with drooping human beings. The grocery store is still at the corner. The street noises are now more rhythmically mechanical, electricity having taken the place of horse and steam. People pas, white and black. They laugh as in Scene 1 (O'Neill, 1970, p. 197-198).

It can be observed that O'Neill used the era around the Industrial Revolution as the time setting by describing the technological aspects presented in the setting. The street was a lot noisier with the machines from the cars. Yet, the segregation in the society still existed. The segregation in the society is still used in Scene Three with minor changes in the atmosphere.

The next local in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* is the front of the church in the neighborhood where the wedding of Jim and Ella takes place. The wedding ceremony is pictured in gloom. Because this is a wedding between a white woman and a black man, which is taboo for the society at that time, therefore it should be hidden. Here, O'Neill wanted to show that even though the religious authority allows such marriage, the social norms in the society gives its own consequences. It can be seen from the relation between the local and the agents who interact in it. The segregation in the era is shown clearly by O'Neill in the scene of Jim dan Ella's wedding, as in the excerpt below

As if it were a signal, people—men, women, children—pour from the two tenements, whites from the tenement to the left, blacks from the one to the right. They hurry to form into two racial lines on each side of the gate, rigid and unyielding, staring across at each other with bitter hostile eyes (O'Neill, 1970, p. 211).

It can be seen that both races did not interact even though they are in the same local. The condition pictured by O'Neill is the reality of the society at that time, the segregated society.

The last local in the drama is in the house of the Harris. The house is located near the first local of Act One.

A flat of the better sort in the Negro district near the corner of Act One. This is the parlour. Its furniture is queer clash. The old pieces are cheaply ornate, naively, childishly gaudy—the new pieces give evidence of a taste that is diametrically opposed, severe to the point of sombreness. In the left corner, where a window lights it effectively, is a Negro primitive mask from the Congo—a grotesque face, inspiring obscure, dim connotations in one's mind, but beautifully done, conceived in a true religious spirit (O'Neill, 1970, p. 214).

The living room of the house is filled with two types of furniture. The old furniture is colorful and has some ornaments but looks cheap. The new furniture has no ornaments, looks monotonous and gloomy. The description of the furniture represents O'Neill's idea of the two generation lives in the house. The old furniture represents the older generation of the family, while the new furniture represents the younger one. The older generation is pictured as the African descendants with cheap furniture who maintains their culture, shown by the African mask hanging on their wall. The mask itself represents O'Neill's idea of the African descendants. It is said that even though it looks ugly and weird, the mask is made beautifully and used in religious ceremony. This is O'Neill's action to communicate his ideas of the African descendants to the society system as an action to change the American descendants' way of thinking about the African

descendants. He was trying to show that both the American descendants and the African descendants had the same quality of life, even though they were manifested in different kind of practices.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion, it can be observed that O'Neill, as a writer, had the power to change the structure which had shaped him. Through *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, he tried to describe the structure and used it as a way to communicate his ideas to the society. Some of his actions had resulted in an unintended consequence which had become unacknowledged conditions of actions for another agent in the society. This condition will be the agency for O'Neill and other agent in the society to control their actions as a part of reflexive monitoring activity to live in the same structure, to reshape the sets of rules which conduct the society's way of life.

REFERENCES

- Angle, P.M. (Ed.). (1957). *Abraham Lincoln's Speeches and Letters 1832-1865*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd.
- Bernstein, S.J. (2006). Making it, madness, and motherhood: The deep structure of all God's Chillun got wings. In *Eugene O'Neill Review*. Zander B. (Ed.), 28.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, A. (2010). *Teori Strukturasi: Dasar-dasar Pembentukan Struktur Sosial Masyarakat*. Translation Maufur dan Daryatno. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.
- Loyal, S. (2003). *The Sociology of Anthony Giddens*. London: Pluto Press.
- McLemore, S. D. (1983). *Racial and Ethnic Relations in America 2nd edition*. Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.
- O'Neill, E. (1970). *Five Plays*. Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Pollock, A. (1924). "....." in *Brooklyn Daily News* 16 May 1924.
- Shaughnessy, E.P. "Eugene O'Neill: The Development of Negro Portraiture". *MELUS*, 11(3), Ethnic Images in Popular Genres and Media (Autumn, 1984), pp.87-91. The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/467136>.
- Waincott, R. (2004). "Notable American stage productions". in *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill*. Michael Manheim (Ed). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.