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## The Theistic Problems in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill

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THE THEISTIC PROBLEM IN THE PLAYS OF  
EUGENE O'NEILL

BY

ROBERT C. DRESSMAN, S.J.

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER  
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## CHAPTER I

### PROBLEM AND PLAN OF THESIS

When the first Pulitzer prize for American plays was awarded in 1917, selection was based on requirements specified in the will of Joseph Pulitzer. The cash award was to be made

for the original American play performed in New York which shall best represent the educational value and power of the stage in raising the standard of good morals, good taste and good manners.<sup>1</sup>

In 1929 an advisory board decided to suspend the latter clause relating to the uplift of morals, taste, and manners, but by that time Eugene Gladstone O'Neill had already won three of the coveted annual awards. Although O'Neill's plays were judged to measure up to Pulitzer's original conditions, it has always been hotly contested whether O'Neill's plays, even his prizewinners, have contributed to raising either morals, taste or manners. But whether or not they have contributed to moral uplift, critics and discriminating readers agree that O'Neill's stage plays have had a definite educational value, either for good or for bad, and that O'Neill has exerted untold influence on the theatre-going public.

Whether we agree or do not agree with the thesis behind a play which thus persuades our imagination, we are caught at attention. We

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1 Burns Mantle, The Best Plays of 1933-34, Dodd, Mead and Company, New York, 1942, 537.

cannot immediately deny our experience. And so there is a chance--a chance at least--that the playwright may be able to persuade us to both thought and action. Eugene O'Neill furnishes a fair illustration of this sort of persuasion.<sup>2</sup>

O'Neill's plays are perplexing. Critics have held widely divergent views as to his purpose, his success in achieving it, and the effect produced on his audiences. This adds up to the simple fact that O'Neill is not well understood. He has a message, of course, but that message is most elusive and hard to grasp. The purpose of this thesis is not so ambitious as to state boldly and simply what O'Neill himself has tried to say, for O'Neill's plays are paradoxes. Rather it is to consider one fundamental phase of the complex problem, namely, O'Neill's attitude toward life. This centers about O'Neill's understanding of ultimates, the basic one of which is his idea of God. The burden of this thesis, therefore, will be to trace theism in the plays of Eugene O'Neill, elaborating as completely as possible O'Neill's concept of Deity, its nature and attributes. Having traced the progress or regression of thought in O'Neill's plays under this aspect, effort will be made to unify the diverse findings and to crystallize them into a few main principles which represent in the main O'Neill's attitude towards life.

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2 Frank H. O'Hara, Today in American Drama, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1939, 242.

Such an investigation will of necessity suggest many implications which, though important and extremely interesting, are beyond the scope of this thesis. No attempt will be made, for example, to treat the much disputed question of morality in O'Neill's plays. Yet morality is closely related to the problem at hand, since it is concerned with the harmony between individuals, the order and harmony within the individual, and the general purpose of human life as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Good and Evil is a vital problem in O'Neill's plays.

Through all these plays. . .there is a larger unity. . .It follows, in many extraordinary details, a universal theme found in all deeply rooted folk-lore and in the innermost experiences of the great mystics. In its simplest sense, it is the conflict of Good and Evil.<sup>4</sup>

The extraordinary character of his work is not the brutality nor the ultra-realism of its expression, but the inner content of the expression. It is almost paradoxical that he firmly chose as his themes problems of good and evil at the very time when contemporaries were trying to abolish all distinction between good and evil.<sup>5</sup>

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- 3 C.S.Lewis, Christian Behaviour, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1944, 2.  
 4 R.Dana Skinner, Eugene O'Neill, A Poet's Quest, Longmans, Green & Co., New York, 1935, 3.  
 5 Ibid., 218.

Interesting as these patterns may be, they must be relegated to a secondary role in this present investigation.

It may be questioned whether such an investigation of O'Neill's plays is justified. A dramatist, it may be objected, cannot be judged on the same basis as a philosopher; purely literary standards and not a yardstick of philosophy should be applied to the work of a playwright. O'Neill himself solves this problem by expressly pointing out his aim and purpose as a playwright. From the outset he has desired to get to the root of things, to reach ultimates.

The playwright of today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it--the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfactory new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life and to comfort its fears of death with. It seems to me that anyone trying to do big work nowadays must have this big subject behind all the little subjects of his plays or novels, or he is scribbling around the surface of things.<sup>6</sup>

O'Neill wishes to go beyond superficialities. He knows what life appears to be, and he searches deeper than mere appearances in order to reject or confirm them. He wants to "find a meaning for life." Certainly this is the domain of philosophy. No dramatist need set himself up as a moral philosopher, but if he does--and Eugene O'Neill has professedly done so--he must

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6 Eugene O'Neill, Nine Plays, Intro. by Jos. W. Krutch, Liveright, Inc., New York, 1932, xvii.



be judged on the merits of his philosophy.<sup>7</sup> For philosophy is simply an effort to face all the problems of life and to think them out as completely as possible.<sup>8</sup> If a man does not wish to philosophize, his very refusal constitutes a philosophy. And although O'Neill cannot be called a philosopher in the strict sense, he does philosophize. He seeks an answer to the many perplexities of human existence.

I'm always, always trying to interpret life in terms of lives, never just in terms of characters. I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind--Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it--Mystery certainly--and the one eternal tragedy of man in his glorious self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. And my profound conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about. . .<sup>9</sup>

O'Neill is concerned with the relation of man to God, or with the relation of man to Something, whether that Something is the universe itself or merely the enduring laws of his own being.<sup>10</sup> Thus, there seems ample justification for considering O'Neill's work under this aspect.

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7 Louis F. Doyle, "Mr. O'Neill's Iceman," America, November 30, 1946, 241.

8 James O'Mahony, O.M., A Preface to Life, Bruce Publishing Co., Milwaukee, 1936, 18.

9 Arthur H. Quinn, A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day, II, Harper Bros., New York, 1927, 199.

10 Joseph W. Krutch, The American Drama Since 1918, Random House, New York, 1939.

If O'Neill were a genuinely original thinker who offered a coherent, unified philosophy in his plays, the problem of delving to the core of his thought would be greatly simplified. But his contributions to contemporary thought are negligible. They are merely varied forms or echoes of what readers have been receiving for the past twenty-five years.<sup>11</sup> Yet O'Neill is sincere in his effort to grasp the unity and wholeness of things. He is always intellectually honest with himself, but his feelings often impede his thought. Nevertheless, the combination of what he feels and what he thinks comprises his philosophy.

What is that which gives the key to all that a man thinks or is? What but his way of thinking or feeling, whatever it may be, respecting the relation or non-relation of the whole visible world to that which is boundless, invisible, unfeatured, metaphysical? What he thinks or feels on this subject is essentially his philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

Because O'Neill's plays are so diverse and extremely complex it is impossible to specify more than the broad outlines of his attitude toward life. Like any explorer, O'Neill searches many avenues for truth, turning from one to another when his explorations lead him into blind alleys. He has never taken one approach and stuck to it. He is always experimenting, always searching. Yet there is a definite pattern in his work which tends in a

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11 Francis Fergusson, "Eugene O'Neill," Literary Opinion in America, Harper & Bros., New York, 1937, 134.

12 David Masson, The Life of John Milton, II, The Macmillan Co., London, 1881, 97.

very definite direction.

O'Neill is a mystic in the modern sense of the word.<sup>13</sup> He is strongly enamoured of this search for the 'meaning for life,' the search for truth, and he is at the same time both enthusiastic and obscure. He often confuses dream with reality. He seems to believe in a Fate or Power or Mystery, whatever be that Force about which he feels compelled to write. His characters expand and contract within the narrow gamut of belief in a Creator who has left man to contrive a salvation of his own, and a God akin to those of the Greeks, whose providence is hard and whose decrees are always accompanied by a hard, metallic laugh. Deism implies naturalism, and O'Neill is imbued with both. Deism affirms the existence of God, but denies revelations, miracles, and other details of traditional Christianity.<sup>14</sup> It is a reasoned view of religion which distrusts personal relationship between God and man. It is significant because it is a symptom of the extension of scientific and philosophical ideas and indicates a general trend of modern thought.<sup>15</sup> It is a

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13 A. Poulain, S.J., Des Graces d'Oraison, B. Herder Book Co., St. Louis, 1910, 5.

14 William K. Wright, A History of Modern Philosophy, The Macmillan Co., New York, 1941, 619.

15 Harald Hoffding, A History of Modern Philosophy, I, The Macmillan Co., London, 1924, 403.

symptom found in the work of Eugene O'Neill. O'Neill seems to have been convinced from the outset that science has knelled the "death of the old God of religion." Science for him has made God a skeleton of the past, but has put nothing in His place. Accepting this negative approach, he searches for something in which to believe; he searches for a meaning for life.

Like the philosophy it espouses, deism is a title which covers a multitude of different views. Basically it holds that there is a supreme God, but His attributes are for the most part mysterious, limited, or simply unknown. O'Neill's deism seems to imply a God who created the world and immediately removed Himself far from it, leaving man to fight his way single-handed against a cruel and inexorable Fate. O'Neill has not the mind of Voltaire; he must consider whether there is a God rather than whether he is limited. He has found no satisfactory reason for the existence of evil; he cannot echo Voltaire's "I had rather worship a limited than a wicked God."<sup>16</sup> But O'Neill has, however unconsciously, developed a definite attitude toward this strange Force which urges on human existence. What his findings are the present investigation will attempt to show.

Plays not to be considered in this thesis are five one-act dramas included in the first published edition, Thirst, which

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16 Lucien Levy-Bruhl, History of Modern Philosophy in France, The Open Court Publishing Co., Chicago, 1924, 185.

which O'Neill has since withdrawn from print. Of the five plays contained in the edition none is regarded as more than an experiment by a somewhat talented beginner.

They show some knowledge of the technical side of play-building, and they are potentially dramatic. . . In characterization and dialogue he is noticeably deficient. Here he follows fiction and melodrama; he is not yet able to utilize to any great extent what he knows of life, and he is, naturally enough for a beginner, too eager to introduce violence in the form of murder and suicide.<sup>17</sup>

Before Breakfast, written in 1916, is the monologue of a henpecking wife who drives her husband to suicide as she talks to him in the next room. It is an obvious experiment and too brief to throw light on the present question. Welded, Gold, and Diff'rent are among O'Neill's less successful plays and will not be treated. All of O'Neill's important plays, however, and those which will help toward reaching a definite conclusion as to their author's concept of deity will be treated adequately. In order to consider the plays conveniently they will be taken chronologically and divided into three general groupings: O'Neill's early one-act plays; those of his middle period between 1920 and 1925; and those plays which were written since 1925. Finally, O'Neill's most recent play, The Iceman Cometh, will be discussed in detail in order to learn whether he has found a new or clearer

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17 Barrett H. Clark, Eugene O'Neill, the Man and His Plays, McBride & Co., New York, 1929, 73.

"meaning for life" during the twelve-year silence which preceded it.

## CHAPTER II

### O'NEILL'S EARLY ONE-ACT PLAYS

Six of the seven plays included in O'Neill's Moon of the Caribbees edition<sup>1</sup> have the sea as their backdrop. Four of them employ the same characters, the crew of the steamer Glencairn. In order to appreciate better O'Neill's understanding of sea life and his use of it in his plays, it is helpful to know part of his background. O'Neill's knowledge of the sea and sailors is not merely academical. Actual experience has given him first-hand knowledge of salt brine and the type of men who sail it. O'Neill himself sketches his early years as a sailor:

My first voyage to sea . . . sixty-five days on a Norwegian barque, Boston to Buenos Aires. In Argentine I worked at various occupations . . . there followed another voyage at sea . . . After that a lengthy period of complete destitution in Buenos Aires . . . 'on the beach' . . . (This) terminated by my signing on as ordinary seaman on a British tramp steamer bound home for New York.<sup>2</sup>

Returning to New York, O'Neill lived for a time at Jimmy the Priest's, a saloon in the waterfront district,<sup>3</sup> where he became acquainted with characters whom he mirrors in his plays. His characters for the most part are not fictitious, and the

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1 Moon of the Caribbees and Six other One-act Plays, Boni & Liveright, New York, 1926.

2 Barrett H. Clark, Eugene O'Neill, Robert McBride & Company, New York, 1926, 4.

3 Ibid., 62.

fact that they come right out of his own personal experiences accounts greatly for the vividness of his dramatizations. They come directly from O'Neill's experience with life, and for that reason they have a truer sense of human character, of real tragedy, than many of his later plays where he explores man's soul for an ultimate meaning for life.<sup>4</sup>

Bound East for Cardiff is a segment of sea life in the fore-castle of the steamer, Glencairn. A sailor lies dying in his bunk as comrades hover round, lending legitimate sea atmosphere with their rough talk and coarse sentiments. There is little action, but the play is dramatically effective, for the shadow of death casts its pall upon the prostrate seaman, bringing into focus his fear of the after-life as well as a sense of relief that the present life is over. The dying Yank says to his buddy,

I was just thinkin' it ain't as bad as people think, dyin'. I ain't never took much stock in the truck them sky-pilots preach. I ain't never had religion, but I know whatever it is what comes after it can't be worser'n this.<sup>5</sup>

There is a touch of symbolism at the close of the play which lends greater force to this attitude toward life. The very moment Yank dies a voice calls from above, "The Fog's lifted." The inference is that life is lived in shadows where man finds his way

4 Eleanor Flexner, American Playwrights: 1918-1938, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1938, 140.

5 Moon of the Caribbees, 48-49.



only with greatest difficulty. Man's life is enshrouded in a fog, and only with death does the veil lift and man find relief from his confusion. Life itself is a hand-to-mouth, helter-skelter, unfortunate affair. A spiritual presence seems to be acknowledged in the play, but only in a vague, unsatisfactory manner. There is fear of what is beyond death, and yet a relief that life's struggle is over. The implications of a future life are ignored; it is the here and now which is important. Although there may be intimation of ultimate triumph over a defeatist approach to life,<sup>6</sup> that intimation is very faint, indeed. Certainly there is a very definite naturalistic approach to life to be found in the play, but it is hardly fair to attribute this to O'Neill as his own conclusion. On this score the play cannot be judged by itself, but must be taken together with O'Neill's other literary efforts.

Moon of the Caribbees is O'Neill's favorite among this collection of plays, and it is the title, in fact, which he gave to the entire volume. It is one which he calls "distinctively my own."<sup>7</sup> It presents a broad slab of life on its lowest plane, depicting the lewdness of a group of sailors with native women who visit their ship as it rides at anchor in a Caribbean harbor. The only discordant note in the theme is that of Smitty, one of

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6 Skinner, A Poet's Quest, 48.

7 Clark, Eugene O'Neill, 43.

the crew, who recoils at the debauchery of his comrades, and keeps his distance. But for O'Neill there is no virtue in his conduct. Smitty's character is one of weakness, and his reaction under the circumstances is regarded as a self-pitying whine over past memories. There is no express reference to God or fate or chance in the play. Its tone suggests naturalism in its simplest form. The highest and most beautiful perfection in the world is the harmony of nature, in which man partakes no less than the green hills and placid lakes and white-capped ocean. Anything which disturbs the normal function of nature is false and wrong. Nature should be allowed to follow its inborn, native tendencies, and man, as a part of nature, must be allowed to develop according to his natural inner drives. To frustrate this is to destroy the harmony and beauty of nature. Accordingly, when Smitty is repelled by the amusements of his comrades, he is frustrating nature, which according to the naturalistic theory, would be evil. Hence, in Moon of the Caribbees Nature itself is the supreme good, and conformity with it is man's true goal. It is nature in the guise of mortal man, or nature in the spirit of the sea. It was this impelling, mood-inducing spirit of the sea which affected and enthralled O'Neill. The sea was his principal character. For him it was truth.

The Moon of the Caribbees . . . is distinctively my own. The spirit of the sea--a big thing--is in this play the hero . . . Posed against a background of that beauty, sad because it is eternal, which is one of the revealing moods of the sea's truth, (Smitty's)

silhouetted gestures of self-pity are reduced to their proper insignificance, his thin whine of weakness is lost in the silence which it was mean enough to disturb; we get the perspective with which to judge him--and the others--and we find his sentimental posing much more out of harmony with truth, much less in tune with beauty, than the honest vulgarity of his mates.<sup>8</sup>

This is the author's interpretation of his play and its characters. As such it is a sufficiently reliable statement of O'Neill's purpose in writing the drama. Fortunately, it brings us to close grips with his attitude toward life. O'Neill tells us that there is more truth in the vulgarity of the sailors than in Smitty's disgust at their antics. Such being the assertion, we are led to inquire, what is O'Neill's conception of truth? Is immorality or amorality truth? Or is morality unessential in order that life be in harmony with truth? Truth for O'Neill seems to be an intuition, and it would seem to be different for each individual.

I intend to use whatever I can make my own, to write about anything under the sun in any manner that fits the subject. And I shall never be influenced by any consideration but one: is it truth as I know it--or, better still, feel it? If so, shoot, and let the splinters fly wherever they may . . . It simply means that I want to do what gives me pleasure and worth in my own eyes. . . .<sup>9</sup>

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8 Ibid.

9 Burns Mantle, American Playwrights of Today, 78.

This is strikingly similar to another later statement of O'Neill's: "Every man has within himself his own kind of truth, and that truth has little if any application outside its possessor."<sup>10</sup> Hence, we might conclude that O'Neill's attitude toward life in this play bespeaks a healthy naturalism, or better, it suggests a negation of any form of supernaturalism. We must remember, however, that at this period of development O'Neill was interested more in characters than in probing for ultimates. He was aware of the conflicting forces behind life, although they were not yet uppermost in his mind. At this period he wrote, "Perhaps I can explain the nature of my feeling for the impelling inscrutable forces behind life which it is my ambition to at least faintly shadow in my plays."<sup>11</sup> Those forces behind life are as yet unfathomed. O'Neill does not consider them at any great length. He considers man's conduct, not his destiny. If in Moon of the Caribbees he understands truth as a realistic presentation of life as he has found it, then his characters are true in this regard. He presents a bruised and beaten cross-cut of life. As stark realism it is a faithful reproduction of life. But if, on the other hand, lack of moral order and failure in obligations imposed by society and by God is a deviation from the right, then O'Neill's characters do not possess truth. In making

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10 David Karsner, Sixteen Authors to One, Lewis Copeland Co., New York, 1928, 101.

11 Clark, Eugene O'Neill, 43.

his assertion O'Neill does not consider his characters from any ethical point of view. Such an attitude simply emphasizes O'Neill's interest at this time in experiences he has drawn from life without preoccupation as yet regarding the reasons for man's conduct.

In the Zone, employing the same characters as O'Neill's other Glencairn plays, is a theatrically effective piece concerning the ship's crew as it enters the 1915 war zone in the Atlantic. The play is sentimental and possesses scarcely any spiritual import. O'Neill felt this, too.

To me it seems the least significant of all the (one-act) plays. It is too facile in its conventional technique, too full of clever theatrical tricks . . . At any rate, this play in no way represents the true me or what I desire to express. It is a situation drama lacking in all spiritual import--there is no big feeling for life inspiring it.<sup>12</sup>

Neither do O'Neill's other one-act plays<sup>13</sup> present any new turn of thought. They reveal O'Neill's penchant for powerful incidents and an interest in primitive, not wholly articulate characters. There is suggestion, too, that pure rationality cannot exhaust the meaning of a really important situation.<sup>14</sup> In Bound East for Cardiff, for example, Yank is much concerned with what

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12 Clark, Eugene O'Neill, the Man and His Plays, 78.

13 Where the Cross is Made, The Rope, Ile, The Long Voyage Home.

14 Krutch, 82.

God will think, and it is significant that in *Ile* the hero is a fanatical whaling captain whose wife goes mad when a sudden opening in the ice makes him break his promise to head home.

Many of O'Neill's characters were to be obsessed by something stronger than themselves, and it is that obsession, that relation to something good or evil bigger than their conscious minds, which makes them interesting to their creator.<sup>15</sup>

Through these as well as his longer plays there is a unity. It follows a universal theme, which in its simplest sense is a conflict between good and evil, a picture in objective form of the racking of a soul between a will toward the good and an appetite for the revolt of sin.<sup>16</sup> In these early plays O'Neill presents the fact without elaborating its significance. In The Rope it is obsession for gold; Olson in The Long Voyage Home has an intense desire to leave the sea and return home, but it is counterbalanced by an evil force which destroys his hopes. There is a hint of deity here similar to the gods of the Greeks, a god who is unyielding and relentless, and not to be swayed by man's prayerful aspirations for success.

Although this is the implication of these early plays, it cannot be concluded that O'Neill intended any serious message in them. They are merely cameos of life as O'Neill has conceived it.

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15 Ibid.

16 Skinner, A Poet's Quest, 4.

But if we are to consider O'Neill's concept of deity and to follow the progress of his thought, it is necessary to consider them, for they show the trend of his early considerations of what life seemed to be. They are essentially realistic and earthy. There is but one direct reference to God in the entire collection, and that is vague and unsatisfying. However, the import of the plays taken individually, as well as their accumulative force, leads to the conclusion that some force is at work behind life. This force directs man's activity, but its nature cannot be distinguished. It is a superhuman power which deals out retribution for faults committed, whether through malice or by chance, and chastisement is inflicted in this life. No concession is made toward the possibility of an after-life. Indeed, it is not even considered.

Thus, we see in these early plays that O'Neill is interested in life itself, not in its why and wherefore.<sup>17</sup> Man's nature, to judge from these plays, is a merely physical one. There is little hint of the supernatural, and no indication that man is essentially different from the lower animals. There is a force or power in the beyond which dispenses eternal, irrevocable decrees, and shapes man's destiny. Further elaboration of this force wherein is hid the "ultimate meaning of life" must await O'Neill's longer plays. O'Neill here presents the fact; he does

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17 Burns Mantle, American Playwrights of Today, 6.

not yet attempt to supply a reason, much less an answer. .



## CHAPTER III

### O'NEILL'S MIDDLE PERIOD

It was the problem of God which unconsciously troubled O'Neill. Although he did not directly consider the problem, his very search for ultimates exacted such a consideration. For to explain satisfactorily the goal and the source of life is nothing else than to discover its final and efficient causes. Logical reasoning leads inevitably to a First Efficient Cause, an Uncaused Cause, which can be only a supreme God. This is true even in His very negation. Modern science, for example, denies the existence of a Creator and attempts to answer these demands by enthroning Chance as the cause of being and of life. The fortuitous occurrences of nature, it claims, have as their object a cyclic perpetuity of the race. Although it thus refuses to accept a Christian God, it nevertheless cannot ignore the law of causality. The attributes of God are bestowed upon Chance, and mere coincidence becomes a sort of deity. In a similar manner Eugene O'Neill considers God in obliquo. Drawn from the supernatural plane, interest is centered in man, not God. It considers psychological, not ethical laws, and religion becomes nothing more than naturalism.

The findings of science, now so generally popularized, have brought a new evaluation of man and human affairs. Human character, the human will, morality, destiny, the forces behind life present themselves in a new light and assume a new significance. All this has been especially operative upon

the treatment of character.<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill treats his characters as very interesting beings who struggle and fail, but who are seldom endowed with the spiritual qualities which a truly heroic figure would possess.

Man as the center of the universe could on occasion pose as a hero; Man as the product of mere accident, and as a thing of no special importance, either absolute or relative in the scheme of things, is still a being eternally provocative and interesting, but no longer heroic. Hence it is that heroes and heroines, moral white and moral black, belong largely to the drama of the past generation.<sup>2</sup>

Objectively, the majority of O'Neill's characters are "moral black." But O'Neill does not consider them under a moral aspect. For him they are no more important than a sunset or an ocean tide, and are far less enduring. They are parts of a cyclic pattern of nature rather than personalities with individual souls.

O'Neill's search for ultimates is greatly in evidence in his first big Broadway success and the first of three Pulitzer prize winners, Beyond the Horizon. The play is "a poetic treatment of repression, mismating and fraternal love,"<sup>3</sup> with naturalism coming off the victor. It is the first of a long

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1 S. Marion Tucker, Modern American and British Plays, Harper and Bros., New York, 1931, vii.

2 Ibid., 117.

3 Oscar Cargill, Intellectual America, Ideas on the March, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1941, 688.

series of O'Neill plays which aims principally not to tell a story, however powerful it may be, but to expose the springs of action of its characters, to explain and interpret life itself.<sup>4</sup> Its chief emphasis is upon character--upon human beings in the grip of the forces of heredity and environment, which they cannot control, and which drag them to destruction. Robert and Andrew Mayo represent two fundamental conflicting tendencies in human nature, the dreamer who seeks to escape from the drudgery and responsibilities of life, and the practical man who extracts a meaning and dignity from routine drudgery.<sup>5</sup>

Here the protagonist is unmistakably man in the general, man in conflict with himself, the human spirit asking questions of life, breaking itself in helpless aspiration and frustration. The characters and the problems are universal, not particular. . .<sup>6</sup>

O'Neill's thesis seems to be that the most precious gifts to humanity are these illusions which keep us alive.<sup>7</sup> If we saw things as they really are, we would find life intolerable and would not continue to struggle. But the false appearances of things, the illusion of happiness and peace, leads us to hope and to dream. Life is seen through deceiving rose-colored glasses, and it is actually the disintegration of our hopes and the frustration of happiness which we envision under the specious

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4 S. Marion Tucker, Modern Plays, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1932, 387.

5 Flexner, 148.

6 Ibid.

7 Quinn, History of the American Drama, 174.

guise of what is good and desirable.

If I read O'Neill correctly he means that we all dream beyond our power, and that often the bad men, the failures, are those who have dreamed most bravely, most richly, and most passionately. How often the good and the great are merely those who have refused to dream, who have played safe with their souls. With hero worship such as these O'Neill will have no part. Nor will he have any part in throwing roses on the pathways of the dreamers. For it is these who fall confused among choices, blinded by vision. In reading this play (Beyond the Horizon) let us get out of our minds that it makes any difference whether the dreamer comes or goes, whether he pursues the rainbow across the world or hugs his vision to his breast in his own village. In neither case will he find what he seeks.<sup>8</sup>

It would seem that those who do evil are the most brave and most daring. They are more bold and audacious, and therefore worthy of greater praise for their effort, since in their failure they lose no more than others who are too weak to dare. Frustration is man's inevitable lot, and so the greater his dreams the more man is Man. In Beyond the Horizon O'Neill has a true sense of tragedy in so far as it is the inevitable outcome of evil deeds.<sup>9</sup> Whether his characters are of heroic calibre is debatable. There is no comedy or humor to interrupt or lighten the mood, for humor has little in common with an outlook which views life as under the domination of some grim deity.

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8 Thomas H. Dickinson, Playwrights of the New American Theatre, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1925, 81.

9 Skinner, A Poet's Quest, 217.

It is true he is not witty and his plays contain few broad smiles. But if one sees all his life as a compulsory pastime, and the finespun gossamer that ultimately becomes the shroud of the weaver, and the manifold activities of men as little gestures that rarely throw off a ripple into the next cycle--if he sees life as something like this (as a man may see it who has curved the ocean in the fore-castle of an ocean tramp) he may discern the sad humor that lies deep in the burning eyes of O'Neill.<sup>10</sup>

Hence, once again we find a conception of deity as chastiser. It is not punishment by whip or fire nor the threat of penalty if man does not repent and right his ways. It is rather the inevitable frustration which is consequent to the action which man has placed. Man aspires to what is beyond his horizon, to what he cannot attain, and therefore he must fail. The edict of the god or force which has fixed his destiny also concomitantly decrees the frustration and heartache which is the price man must pay for seeking happiness.

In Anna Christie we also find an intense search for happiness which circumstances refuse to gratify. Again there is pre-occupation with man's struggle for existence. Each of the characters seeks his own happiness amid the maelstrom of conflicting forces. And just when it appears that happiness is within reach of each of them, fate in the form of "dat old devil, sea" washes away their hopes. Although Anna and Mat plan to be

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10 Karsner, 121.

married, and Anna's father is no longer at enmity with Mat, the sea takes its toll of happiness by dashing to pieces present hopes and casting doubt upon the future.

The play is actually the story of many conflicting forces-- of the destruction wrought by the land to those who belong to the sea, of the sea as a she-devil to those who fear it or love it inordinately, of the conflict between Anna and Mat, and of Anna's father who is jealous of the claim the sea has laid upon his own.<sup>11</sup> It is really the sea which is the hero of the play and which comes off victorious. From the very first there is a premonition that the sea will in the end claim its full toll of lives,<sup>12</sup> and although Anna has wrenched some small happiness from life, this is not the end. Tragedy occurs when her father tries to save his daughter from the sea which he has known only as an implacable enemy. Anna Christie is thus a fatalistic tragedy in which men and women are blind puppets directed by the strings of fate.<sup>13</sup> There is not a happy ending, despite prospects for the future. In fact, it is fear of the future which casts its shadow over the characters. The play ends in a question mark rather than with finality, an objective which O'Neill had when he planned the play.

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11 Skinner, A Poet's Quest, 81.

12 Flexner, 146.

13 Ibid.

My ending seems to have a false definiteness about it that is misleading--a happy-ever-after which I did not intend. I relied on the father's last speech of superstitious uncertainty to let my theme flow through and on . . . In short, that all of them at the end have a vague foreboding that although they have had their moment, the decision still rests with the sea which has achieved the conquest of Anna.<sup>14</sup>

For O'Neill, the so-called happy ending is merely the comma at the end of a gaudy introductory clause, with the body of the sentence still unwritten.<sup>15</sup>

Not even the most adversely prejudiced could call this a "happy ending." Meaning that I wish it understood as unhappy? Meaning nothing of the kind. Meaning what I have said before, that the play has no ending. Three characters have been revealed in all their intrinsic verity, under the acid test of a fateful crisis in their lives. They have solved this crisis for the moment as best they may, in accordance with the will of each of them. The curtain falls. Behind it their lives go on . . . It would have been so easy to have made my last act a tragic one. It could have been done in ten different ways, any one of them superficially right. But looking deep into the hearts of my people, I saw it couldn't be done. It would not have been true. They were not that kind. They would act in just the silly, immature compromising way that I have made them act; and I thought that they would appear to others as they do to me, a bit tragically humorous in their vacillating weakness.<sup>16</sup>

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- 14 Clark, Eugene O'Neill, O'Neill's letter to George Jean Nathan, 55.
- 15 Isaac Goldberg, The Theatre of George Jean Nathan, O'Neill to G. J. Nathan, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1926, 154.
- 16 Quinn, History of the American Drama, Letter to New York Times, 177.

Decidedly, O'Neill drops his curtain on an apparently indeterminate note. "Only dat old davil sea--she knows!" Fate lurks in the guise of the sea, working defeat as inexorable as any decreed by the gods. Fate lurks in the economic order which will continue to set the pattern of their lives, and in the psychological patterns of each of their lives, implying a direction for each of them along their already set habits of life.<sup>17</sup> The question arising out of the play is, "What happened afterward?" And the response which O'Neill strove for is not a particularly encouraging one. One feels that not one of his characters is strong enough to withstand the throttling hold of circumstance. It seems that the sea has again conquered Anna, her father, and Mat.

All the time of the play we are aware of a presence in the background, a vast, malignant, mocking, demoniac presence, against which all the actions of the people in the play make instinctive, unconscious war. In the end this Beyond-power will be victorious. All these people will have to give in and go the way it wills. Fate will win.<sup>18</sup>

Once again it is fate which O'Neill stresses. He emphasizes the unhappy lot of man and elaborates none of his joys, if indeed he has them at all. Hence, there would seem to be little possibility for a providence which directs man's affairs. Providence

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17 O'Hara, 18.

18 Alan D. Mickle, Six Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Horace Liveright, New York, 1929, 21.



would imply a benevolent God who takes care of his creatures and helps them to avoid pain and sorrow. But since man seems to be for the most part a hapless incident in the world, buffeted about by every ill wind, it is Fate which weaves his destiny and leads him ultimately to desolation and frustration, if not to despair. This Beyond-power which O'Neill considers in the play is an inexorable, but not completely cruel deity. Anna has found some happiness, slight though it is, and quickly fleeting. Her first faint taste of joy passed, she hopes bravely for the future. Perhaps her hopes will be fulfilled, but probably they shall never be wedded with happiness. If Anna is ever to find the happiness she seeks, it is unyielding destiny in the guise of the sea which will specify the day and the hour.

O'Neill's sincerity is worthy of note. There is something admirable in his honest attempt to extract a meaning from life. He frankly accepts the essential facts of life and tries to present them without distortion and exaggeration in all their stark reality.<sup>19</sup> At times he carries such literalness too far, so that beauty vanishes, and in its place is found a sordidness and sometimes a disgust. Some of these attempts to draw beauty from the coarse and the vulgar have been outright failures, while others have met with no little success. Of these latter,

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19 Charles H. Whitman, Seven Contemporary Plays, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1931, 555.

The Hairy Ape is one. Not only does O'Neill succeed in etching his character with stark realism, but the play also affords a further insight into O'Neill's deism.

In The Hairy Ape the mystical overtones become so pronounced as hardly to remain mere overtones any longer . . . The moral of the play does not involve merely an attack upon capitalism. The world which it presents is a world disordered because its inhabitants have lost touch with things larger than themselves at the very moment when they thought they had not, so much lost touch with as conquered them.<sup>20</sup>

Yank, the illiterate, muscular stoker on an ocean liner, believes he has conquered the world and "belongs", until a disgusted look from a neurotic girl blasts his illusions and makes him realize that there is another world beyond the stokehole, a world which he does not know and which will have no part of him. Yank is a symbol, and the play is propaganda in the sense that it is a symbol of man who has lost his harmony with nature.<sup>21</sup> Implied is the thought that man once possessed this harmony in an animal way, but has not yet acquired it spiritually.

The subject here is the same ancient one that always has and always will be the one subject for drama, and that is man and his struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with the gods, but is now with himself, his own past, his attempt "to belong."<sup>22</sup>

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20 Krutch, 89.

21 Clark, Eugene O'Neill, 73.

22 Ibid.

O'Neill is showing what he conceives to be the struggle of primitive man upward, and he endeavors to depict in terms of modern institutions the struggle through which the race went in beginning its process of mental growth.<sup>23</sup> O'Neill seems to say that man in his most undeveloped state was much akin to the beast, surpassing his closely similar simian brethren only by the half-generated seeds of an intellect. Man possesses a sluggish intellect, but no soul, no spirit which lives on and which may aspire to intellectual truths above and beyond the physical realm. Aside from this intellect which can reason only faintly, the clod in the stokehole is not essentially different from the coal dirt on his face and the filth with which he is begrimed.

In the crude language of *Yank*, we have the most profound problem of the disjointed and divided soul, rebelling . . . at the very possession of intellect itself, at the very distinction between man and beast, at the burden of thought itself and the tragedy of being born a man. Man searching for peace in mere animal instinct and finding that even then he cannot throw off his manhood. The answer? Escape even from thought.<sup>24</sup>

It is true that O'Neill does not directly consider God. But in positing definite attributes or liabilities to man, he is by that very fact imputing complementary attributes to some power which is above and beyond man. In denying the existence of such

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23 Quinn, 185.

24 Skinner, A Poet's Quest, 111.

a being he is considering deity nonetheless. The important part which fate plays in so much of O'Neill's work might be traced also in The Hairy Ape, but there is a marked difference between this and previous plays. Antecedent to The Hairy Ape O'Neill considered a power of some kind which directed man's destiny, grim and cruel though it might be. Here he seems even to ignore this factor. Here naturalism is at its strongest, and it is never more authentic than in the fireman's forecastle and the stokehole of Yank's ocean liner.<sup>25</sup> "To belong" for Yank means to be indispensable, to make things go; for O'Neill it would seem to mean to be a necessary cog in the wheels of Nature. This is naturalism at its best, a naturalism which does not argue against an omnipotent, omniscient God because it believes such a consideration foolish. Since there is no God, man cannot be made to His likeness. He is animal, nothing more.

Yank is the O'Neill blazing with pride in belonging to a low past, and seeking to glorify the lowest state into the highest . . . passionately seeking the first man of an age that no longer saw man in God's image and as a creator under God's law.<sup>26</sup>

Yank is not singular in his desire "to belong." In other plays O'Neill's characters all "belong" to something, either to an ideal, to their soil, or to the traditions of their culture.<sup>27</sup>

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25 Ludwig Lewisohn, "The Development of Eugene O'Neill," The Nation, March 22, 1922, 349.

26 Skinner, A Poet's Quest, 108.

27 Krutch, 99.

But Yank is unique not only because he is a symbol of force and of a class of society, but because he epitomizes a definite attitude toward life. The Hairy Ape is a play of sheer terror, an indictment against life itself.<sup>28</sup> Man would seem to be no more significant in the order of nature than a gust of wind on a frosty morning. He fits into the order of nature, but were he dispensed with, nature would be none the worse off. And since man is so entirely insignificant, there is little purpose in considering a God Who governs him.

Perhaps O'Neill makes the mistake of treating as a philosophical problem what is essentially a social one. Even so, if his search for a meaning to life ended here, we could catalogue his conclusion as utter defeat.

If the pessimism of a play like Beyond the Horizon suggests Hardy and his merely capricious Destiny, much in The Hairy Ape and certain of O'Neill's other plays suggest the less clearly defined despair of D. H. Lawrence and his search for the "dark gods" who may be terrible, but with whom, nevertheless, man cannot dispense.<sup>29</sup>

The morbid realism of The Hairy Ape shortly gave way to a more optimistic, more visionary outlook, presented confusedly in The Fountain. This is one of O'Neill's unsuccessful plays, but it is worthy of note in the intellectual and spiritual sequence

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28 Skinner, A Poet's Quest, 112.

29 Krutch, 89.

of O'Neill's work. It is concerned with the story of Juan Ponce de Leon's quest for the Fountain of Youth and his ultimate realization that all such ventures are doomed to failure when materialistically conceived, but that they become glorious events when identified with love, life, and beauty.<sup>30</sup> On the Greenwich Village Theater program announcing the play, O'Neill vehemently attests that it is not morbid realism as was his previous play.<sup>31</sup> But the content is more philosophical than dramatic, and, as usual, unsatisfyingly vague.

Being an immature and derivative thinker, he may leave one profoundly dissatisfied with his philosophy, and every formal statement of it in his plays or in his explanations may be either banal or chaotic. But the necessity of expressing his thoughts in the theatre through actual characters and situations led him to create intense drama. Even if we accept one critic's charge that, with respect to his philosophy, he has been "forever arriving at the same conclusion and embarking anew on the same quest," we must observe that many of his trips have been extended, intense, and remarkably exciting.<sup>32</sup>

The Fountain is a disappointment dramatically, but although it strikes a philosophic chord both banal and conventional,<sup>33</sup> it is a step forward in O'Neill's intellectual ramblings, and stands forth in bold relief to The Hairy Ape. There remains a broad

30 Clark, Eugene O'Neill, 92.

31 Ibid., 95.

32 John Gassner, Masters of the Drama, Random House, New York, 1940, 642.

33 George J. Nathan, "O'Neill's Latest," The American Mercury, VII, February, 1926, 247.

swath of earthiness which is evident in previous plays; there is more display of passion. But spiritual values are blended even with crude passion, and the author makes effort to find some flavor of beauty in the longing for youth and love and beauty.<sup>34</sup> Beauty is deified and made to share its divine essence with man. In scene ten Juan calls out in rapture, "O God, Fountain of Eternity, Thou are all One, the One in all--the Eternal becoming which is Beauty!"<sup>35</sup> And in the closing scene he identifies himself with Beauty:

One must accept, absorb, give back, become oneself a symbol . . . Juan Ponce de Leon is past! He is resolved into the thousand moods of beauty which make up happiness--the color of the sunset, of tomorrow's dawn, breath of the great Trade Wind, sunlight on the grass, an insect's song, the rustle of leaves, an ant's ambitions. I shall know eternal becoming--eternal youth.<sup>36</sup>

And yet, the discovery of an underlying hunger for beauty, though indicative of a spiritual force, does not mean that O'Neill suddenly abandoned his pessimistic and fatalistic approach to life.

Nothing in the author's work so emphasizes the essential tragedy of his outlook as the discovery under passions and appetites and tangled growths of falsehood, of a soul-plant of purity and aspiration.<sup>37</sup>

The Fountain is confusingly, albeit poetically executed, and

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34 Dickinson, 114.

35 Eugene O'Neill, The Fountain (and Other Plays), Boni & Liveright, New York, 1926, 108.

36 Ibid., 117.

37 Dickinson, 114.

leaves no clear indication of O'Neill's thesis. There is anarchy in his thought as in much of his work.<sup>38</sup> But there is, at least, recognition of a spiritual drive within man which aspires to better things. He must learn what man is before he can know what God is and what the attributes of God are. In The Fountain O'Neill seems to have found a spiritual substrate heretofore not considered. True, it is not a conclusion nor even a reasonably clear statement of what he thinks. Perhaps this is because he does not think clearly. At any rate it is at least one of O'Neill's heady intuitions which gives hope of something more profound in the near future.

Clearly, O'Neill's philosophy is not beyond cavil. On the contrary, it is open to obvious criticism. And yet, it must be said that O'Neill follows the path set by twentieth century attitudes of mind, and he even takes a further stride forward.

We have seen how during the Twentieth Century when political and economic rights have been secured, the dramatists under the leadership of William Vaughn Moody, became concerned with the problem of the individual's rights to self-expression, and the sanctity of rebellion was taught . . . to the overthrow of God Himself. Eugene O'Neill certainly marks the next step forward. The individual no longer rebels against God or Fate for the right to express himself. He demands something more. The Creative Force must express him . . . Whatever his characters may attempt, success or failure means little, but the

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38 Gassner, 640.



struggle is worth while.<sup>39</sup>

O'Neill, admittedly an experimenter in stage techniques, has made many intellectual excursions, too, into unknown regions. However, he is not a man who thinks incisively in abstract terms. He cannot clearly communicate the results of his own self-analysis, despite his introversion.<sup>40</sup> It would seem also that the more he attempts to become a philosopher, the less sure he becomes and the more easily confused. Well-spoken is the observation of Barrett H. Clark:

I love the theater too much to want to see our best dramatist turn into a prophet, a philosopher, or a thinker, for I fear that no one can be these and be a great artist. There is naturally no reason why O'Neill should not attempt to portray characters in the throes of mental and spiritual torture, but the moment he himself tries to solve the riddle of the universe he is lost.<sup>41</sup>

From our study of these four plays written during the first decade of O'Neill's twenty-five years of great productivity, we may draw a few definite conclusions. It is true that O'Neill primarily considers man and his behavior. There is little mention of God or deity unless it is treated per accidens in the interest of man and his activity. But as has already been pointed out, such consideration exacts a consideration also of

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39 Quinn, 200.

40 Krutch, 79.

41 Clark, O'Neill, the Man and His Plays, 186.

deity. For man knows that he is not self-causing; he did not cause himself to be. More obvious is the fact that events do not occur the way man would wish them, and that events are often fashioned contrary to his wishes and desires, not infrequently to his own disadvantage. Furthermore, man acts for a purpose. Since he is a rational animal he has a reason for doing what he does, and this reason is a guide to his actions and the norm by which all other things are valued. There thus arises a relation between man and things, between the human intellect and will and their object. If the behavior of man shows that he acts solely out of natural motives and for ends that are bound to earth and matter, then implicitly there is denial of supernature, a negation of any goal or motive for action beyond that which relates to the present. By investigating man's behavior, therefore, we can arrive at a more or less definite summation of his idea of God. Hence, although O'Neill stresses man's struggle for life, we are still enabled to get some indication of his attitude toward the governing force which forges man's destiny.

From his plays we observe that O'Neill is greatly impressed by the fact that man is often frustrated by some kind of fate. If man is a victim of fate, then fate must be superior to man, and the severe attributes of a stern god belong to the deity which directs him. Because O'Neill considers the problem from the point of view of man, he does not form any clear idea of this directing Force. It is something which is known only through its

effects, hence we are aware only of a single attribute; fate forges man's destiny with inexorable determination. The result of such a conception is a feeling of frustration and an ultimate pessimism as regards life. Such pessimism leads inevitably to despair, and O'Neill's search would terminate there were it not for the fact that in probing his own soul and in observing human nature, he has found deep in man a desire for beauty and truth. O'Neill thus encounters the difficulty of reconciling grim destiny which frustrates man with man's natural urge for peace and happiness.

His tentative answer, as found in these four plays, is that if there is a God, it is Nature, of which man is an inseparable part. Just as nature is a manifestation of deity, so also is man. The more man is glorified, the higher and more noble he becomes, the more like he becomes to the Force which he must learn to express in himself.<sup>42</sup> O'Neill seems to make man part of a cyclic evolution of nature which constantly supports and replenishes itself. He takes man in his lowest form and attempts to raise him to the highest,<sup>43</sup> but in so doing he takes instead a supreme deity and lowers it to man's stature. He thus dispenses wholly with an omnipotent God, and his theism emerges in a very fundamental form. It is a materialistic naturalism which tries

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42 Quinn, 200.

43 Skinner, A Poet's Quest, 108.

to ennoble man by limiting God. Man as a part of Nature must allow himself to develop naturally, and any variation from this course leads inevitably to punishment which is meted out by Nature itself. Man cannot become greater than Nature intends him to be. And yet strangely enough, man somehow shares in the all-embracing oneness of nature and forms an integral part of the oneness of Being.

For one who alleges to be seeking the "meaning of life," it seems impossible to linger long with so inadequate an explanation of life. Logically it seems that O'Neill should advance along one of two paths. Either he should recoil into his fundamental and relatively simple, though inadequate outlook on life, or professing to seek the true ultimates, press on even at the expense of parting with his preconceived notions of a purely materialistic world, finding a meaning for life in a philosophy which will establish for man an intrinsic nobility higher than the admittedly inferior creatures of the universe. Up to this point O'Neill has well considered and powerfully expressed in drama the seeming paradox of life, but the ultimate explanation still lies beyond him.

## CHAPTER IV

### O'NEILL'S LATER PLAYS

O'Neill could not content himself with so unsatisfying a solution to life as that which he had thus far formulated. He was beginning now to focus more on the "why" and the "wherefore", and could not believe that surface appearance constituted both the powerful and the petty forces behind life. He therefore began to probe deeper into the subconscious and to occupy himself with man's inner struggle and with psychological problems. He would find an ultimate meaning for life in the depths of man's own soul.

But delving into the psychical, O'Neill is in a region unknown and mysterious, a land which he himself is traveling for the first time. It is not surprising that he should make mistakes, for nearly every search takes at least one wrong direction before reaching its goal. And O'Neill is searching for precious treasure, an answer which will give purpose to all of man's activity. He is striving for an explanation of life, not especially for men, but for man, one man, Eugene O'Neill.

Desire Under the Elms, written in 1924, is the bleakest of all the O'Neill tragedies. Frustration is its dominant note. Its characters go down to complete and absolute defeat, both physical and moral.

O'Neill denies any mitigation. Not only does

he show man as victim, victim of life, of nature, of circumstance, of other men, of self, but also shows man as undergoing an inner defeat. For the defeat his protagonists suffer is spiritual; they end in spiritual frustration, a spiritual failure.<sup>1</sup>

It is true that the tragedy of spiritual frustration is not characteristic of O'Neill alone. The Spoon River Anthology and the work of E. A. Robinson share a like quality. But the sense of frustration is O'Neill's strongest mood when it comes to dealing with life. Even if we concede that in Desire Under the Elms O'Neill wanted to write a play of extraordinary intensity,<sup>2</sup> and that, consciously or unconsciously, he was using the incest formula of Greek tragedy, he nevertheless fails to find any other meaning for life than a pessimism which regrets the fact that man was made. Desire Under the Elms is a sordid story of life on a New England farm. Its characters are presented crude and raw, completely lacking in human appeal. Their baseness serves as a springboard for a depressing theme of selfishness and self-satisfaction. It would seem, indeed, that O'Neill appeals to his audience by means of sensationalism rather than art. Prescinding, however, from any aesthetic judgment, and viewing the play simply from the point of view of content as regards man's life and destiny, the play is a negation of any spiritual content

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1 Thomas K. Whipple, "The Tragedy of Eugene O'Neill," The New Republic, XLI, January 21, 1925.  
2 Cargill, 694.

whatever in man. It reduces intellectual being to the animal plane. Though presented more brutally, it is entirely consonant with the plays which preceded it and which have already been discussed at some length. For its basis we find the starkest materialism. It is true that O'Neill himself publicly regretted his inability to clothe his theme in more exalted speech.<sup>3</sup> But even were the medium improved, the play would lack the satisfaction to be found in great tragedy. There is lacking the inexplicable beauty one expects in real tragedy; that beauty, for instance, which is found in Aeschylus or Sophocles. Desire Under the Elms presents man as a reasoning animal, but with no destiny nor any desire higher or more sublime than the basic drives of animal nature. Man is an end in himself, and man's end is annihilation. The play is a denial of the nobility of man, and a subsequent denial of God and Providence as well. The play affirms that man is, but in a purely animal likeness. His soul is inextricably bound to clay, and his desires and aspirations do not surmount the physical level.

O'Neill is writing here about life in terms of human psychology, and he is probing the mind and the instincts rather than the decrees of the gods.<sup>4</sup> He has stated that it was his intent "to make practically expressive the inexpressiveness of New

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3 Walter B. Eaton, "O'Neill--New Risen Attic Stream?" American Scholar, Summer, VI, 1937, 304.

4 Ibid.

England's inhibited life,"<sup>5</sup> and to show the poetical vision illuminating even the most sordid and mean blind alleys of life. This, says O'Neill, is his concern and his justification as a dramatist. Obviously it is his concern. He could scarcely have painted his characters in a more raw or crude manner. From them we would judge that not only are there many blind alleys, but life itself is a path with a closed circuit. There is no goal, no destiny. Thus we find in the play more of a complete denial of God than the affirmation of a Force or a deity of power as in his earlier works. Indeed, it seems futile to consider the question in view of the apparent absence of a spiritual soul in man. The representation of man as driven and directed by sheer instinct is not without implication. It is significant in O'Neill's search to find a meaning for life.

The play will always be subject to the criticism of being too brutal and realistic a treatment . . . It is a torrential outpouring of crude feeling, almost terrifying in its raw projection upon a realistic stage. But aside from this aspect--admittedly a very important one in a purely dramatic discussion of O'Neill's work--the meaning of the play as an integral part of the long struggle of a poet's soul toward inner harmony should be accepted at its own worth.<sup>6</sup>

Nowhere else in O'Neill's works is life so brutally presented as in Desire Under the Elms. But be it noted that he

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<sup>5</sup> Krutch, 94.

<sup>6</sup> Skinner, A Poet's Quest, 156.



presents life from this one side only, the completely material and physical. And even here he presents chiefly those segments which have been badly bruised.<sup>7</sup>

Although Desire Under the Elms is singular in its extreme, Marco Millions gives evidence of a similar attitude. This play was the next to come from O'Neill's pen, and though less severe in tone, its deistic implications do not differ greatly from its predecessor. It presents the same picture of O'Neill's frame of mind, but the glare is more subdued. Man is presented from the purely material side. Emphasis is changed from the individual to his social activity, but the materialistic tone is not elevated. Marco Polo represents Man, who will always slumber in the slough of his own natural satisfaction.<sup>8</sup> Marco indicates that any consideration of a God is a pure waste of time. Such reflection is futile, for whatever man's future, a god will have nothing to do with it. It is true in large part that the play is one of satire and a certain type of comedy.<sup>9</sup> But beneath its irony the sad eyes of the poet peer forth, and they are searching ones. The play presents no answer to the problem of life, but rather confirms what to this point is O'Neill's indictment of life as having no meaning at all.

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7 Skinner, Our Changing Theatre, New York Dial Press, Inc., New York, 1931, 62.

8 Cargill, 702.

9 Clark, Eugene O'Neill, 97.

It is not until The Great God Brown that we find hope of O'Neill emerging from the complete materialism which hovers over his preceding plays. Although there is still a heavy emphasis on the sensual, other attitudes of mind can be detected which have not been expressed heretofore. There are moments of seeing spiritual insight as well as greater hope for an abiding Faith.<sup>10</sup> But although O'Neill seems to have a new and brighter vision, confusion still lurks in his work.

There is still confusion apparent in his thought, for O'Neill feels more acutely than he thinks. But for once, at least, he came definitely forth from the shadow which fell forbiddingly over his earlier work. He approached that ecstatic moment when tragedy transmutes itself, through song, into spiritual comedy.<sup>11</sup>

Confusing as it is, it represents O'Neill's most complete exposition of deity up to this time. The problem is not thought out completely; but what he feels, he says. As usual, there is a divergence between what he intends and what he actually presents. But if there is mystery and a sense of confusion in what he says, it is because that is what he wanted to express.

It was far from my idea in writing Brown that this background pattern of conflicting tides in the soul of man should ever overshadow and thus throw out of proportion the living drama of the recognizable human beings . . . I meant it always to be mystically within and behind them, for-

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10 Skinner, Our Changing Theatre, 45.

11 Ibid., 47.

cing itself through them to expression in mysterious words, symbols, actions, they do not themselves comprehend. And that is as clearly as I wish an audience to comprehend it. It is Mystery -- the mystery of one man or woman can feel but not understand as the meaning of any event--or accident--in any life on earth. And it is this mystery I want to realize in the theater.<sup>12</sup>

Despite his intention, O'Neill has emphasized the conflict within the soul of his protagonist to the point of distortion of character. It is not life in the living we observe, but a mind searching for intellectual security. And more than an intellect groping for support, we observe a soul writhing in an effort to find permanent values. This conflict of soul O'Neill intensifies by his devices of symbols and masks. By them each character is able to present a new side of his personality which is completely at odds with the extrovert in him, or with the phase which is most obvious to others. Thus, one phase of Dion's personality longs for belief in a God while the other, overpowered by the physical reality of life, reasons to His nonexistence. Substantiating this is O'Neill's own explanation of what he desired to clothe in the character of Dion:

Dion Anthony--Dionysius and Saint Anthony--the creative pagan acceptance of life, fighting eternal war with the masochistic life--denying spirit of Christianity as represented by Saint Anthony--the whole struggle resulting in this modern day in mutual exhaustion--creative joy in life for life's sake frustra-

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12 Clark, Eugene O'Neill, 97.

ted--rendered abortive, distorted by morality from Pan into Satan, into a Mephistopheles mocking himself in order to feel alive; Christianity, once heroic in martyrs for its intense faith now pleading weakly for intense belief in anything, even Godhead itself.<sup>13</sup>

Here in O'Neill's own words we have his clearest interpretation of life up to this time. He sketches the two creeds he considers to be in conflict, and he chooses as best he can between them. On the one side there is the pagan philosophy which offers a stoic interpretation of life. Life must be accepted and endured because it is its own end. Nothing follows human existence, and life is creative only because it shares somehow in nature's cycle. But sheer enjoyment of life is impossible, due to a Christian spirit of abnegation and denial, a spirit of sacrifice which man also experiences as part of his nature. There is constant opposition between these two urges, and the conflict makes life a refined sort of torture.

In its simplest form this struggle is that of acknowledgment or denial of a God. O'Neill more than hints at his attitude toward Christianity. Once it was heroic. That was at the time when men shed their blood and gave their lives for their Faith. But today, he says, it is weak, "pleading weakly for intense belief in anything." Because O'Neill finds these two conflicting forces in all life, he can affirm or deny neither com-

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13 Ibid., 95.

pletely. Instead, he compromises, giving preference to his previous trend of thought. His affirmation of a hedonistic naturalism is found in Dion's words,

I've loved, lusted, lost and won, sang and wept! I've been life's lover! I've fulfilled her will and if she's through with me it's only because I was too weak to dominate her in turn. It isn't enough to be her creature; you've got to create her or she requests you to destroy yourself.<sup>14</sup>

This is reminiscent of what O'Neill calls the "eternal tragedy of Man." Unsatisfied with being mere creature, he tries to make the Force express him.<sup>15</sup> This Force in The Great God Brown seems to be life itself, and man's peace is to be found in dominating life, not in being its victim. This phase of man's being is spiritually barren. Man is all clay, and his desires do not surmount the natural. Brown echoes these sentiments cynically:

To be merely a successful freak, the result of some snide neutralizing of life's forces-- a spineless cactus--a wild boar of the mountains altered into a packer's hog eating to become food--a Don Juan inspired to romance by a monkey's glands--and to have Life not even think you funny enough to see.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, Cybel tells us that "You may be important, but your life's not," for life can cost too much "even for a sucker to

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14 O'Neill, Nine Plays, 347.

15 Quinn, from a letter of O'Neill, 199.

16 Ibid.

afford."<sup>17</sup> O'Neill hints again at man's share in the oneness of nature. As an individual life a person is valueless. But he is important when he is considered as being a partaker and having a share in the Life which is Nature.

But on the other hand, O'Neill cannot disregard entirely the possibility of a deity beyond nature itself. In fact, he not only affirms God in the play, but for the first time he bestows on Him a personality. Brown, although he despairs of God's assistance, nevertheless affirms His existence when he scorns man's yearning for self-expression:

Bah! I am sorry, little children, but your kingdom is empty. God has become disgusted and moved away to some far ecstatic star where life is a dancing flame. We must die without him!<sup>18</sup>

We may thus conclude a number of things quite pertinent to O'Neill's deism from The Great God Brown. First of all, O'Neill states in clear terms that there is a God. This is no little progress over his complete denial of any supernatural power in The Hairy Ape and in Desire Under the Elms. God's nature is not clearly developed, but His existence is affirmed. We gather, too, that this deity is omnipotent. It is within his power to do or not to do, to aid or frustrate man's desires. O'Neill seems to say that this deity is able to help man, but as a matter

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17 Ibid., 337.

18 Ibid., 371.

of fact, does not. He is Creator and nothing more. Once man has been made, he is left to eke out existence as best he may. The result, of course, is failure. Man's life is "blown out like the flame of a cheap match."<sup>19</sup>

There is noticeable a new interest in the subconscious. Man is a complex mechanism of emotions and moods, thoughts and desires. In order to understand man better O'Neill must penetrate him more deeply. Burrowing into man's soul, O'Neill discovers a new vein which is at variation with his ever-present naturalism. Men will never find complete fulfilment, but nevertheless there is elaborated in The Great God Brown a certain spiritual exultation which was suggested first in The Fountain. Man shares somehow in the unity of nature. O'Neill poetically exults in this striking concept:

Spring again! -- Life again! -- summer and  
fall and death and peace again! -- but al-  
ways, always love and conception and birth  
and pain again -- spring bearing the intoler-  
able chalice of life again! -- bearing the  
glorious, blazing crown of life again!<sup>20</sup>

Life is intolerable, but man is elevated and ennobled by the struggle, futile though it be. Insofar as man's cycle of birth and life and death is identified with the cycle of the seasons and the ordered recurring pattern of the universe, he

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19 Ibid., 337.

20 Ibid., 375.

shares in deity. And yet a power of some kind remains above and beyond man, still setting forth imperial decrees, much to man's sorrow.

The play shows obvious advance over O'Neill's previous thought, although his presentation of the place of a God in man's life is on a relatively fundamental plane. The Great God Brown suggests a God-creator Who made the world and exercises His prerogatives as creator over it. But His whim is to ignore man and leave him to his own devices for "making a go of life." Since there is no future beyond death, and since life itself is unhappy at best, the greatest boon to man is death which will end the cruel joke of existence.

O'Neill further emphasizes his interest in man from a spiritual point of view in Lazarus Laughed. The play does not clarify the confusion so apparent in O'Neill's work, but as much as may be it is a statement of O'Neill's faith at this time, his philosophy of life, death and immortality.<sup>21</sup>

He (O'Neill) has already progressed in this drama even beyond the conception of the relations of God and man . . . There is less emphasis upon the struggle of man for the expression of his personality by the Divine Force; there is more emphasis laid upon the peace which comes to man as a merciful and bountiful gift from Death.<sup>22</sup>

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21 Anita Block, The Changing World in Plays and Theatre, Little, Brown & Company, Boston, 1939, 152.

22 Quinn, 201.



O'Neill allegorically declares that death is nonexistent, and that it is merely the fear of different manifestations of life in the universe. In explanation he tells us that the fear of death is the root of all evil and the cause of all man's blundering unhappiness. His character of Lazarus knows that there is no death, but only change. When Lazarus is reborn after three days in the grave, he is without that fear. Therefore he is the only man who is able to laugh affirmatively. His laughter affirms God. Yet, it is too noble to desire personal immortality. Lazarus gives his life for the sake of Eternal Life.<sup>23</sup> To suggest that confusion lurks in O'Neill's explanation is mere tautology. It is O'Neill the poet and playwright attempting to become the philosopher.

O'Neill had read much from Nietzsche's works,<sup>24</sup> and in Lazarus Laughed he restores Nietzsche's Dionysius to the stage and endows him with many of the faculties which Nietzsche prophesied of him.

Such a god teaches that all the sorrow in the world comes from the splitting up of Nature into individual men; such a god promises a return to universal "oneness" and assures us of the joy behind phenomena-- "that in spite of the flux of phenomena, life at bottom is indestructibly powerful and pleasurable."<sup>25</sup>

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- 23 Erich A. Walter, editor, Essay Annual, Appleton-Century Company, New York, 1937, 227.  
 24 Clark, O'Neill, the Man and His Plays, 18.  
 25 Cargill, 702.

Lazarus' laughter is an expression of joy in the Dionysian sense.

(It is) the joy of a celebrant who is at the same time a sacrifice in the eternal process of change and growth and transmutation which is life, of which his life is an insignificant manifestation, soon to be absorbed. And life itself is the self-affirmative laughter of God.<sup>26</sup>

Although O'Neill has mixed numerous Christian ingredients into his Dionysius, naturalism remains clearly dominant. But this is not difficult to understand, for O'Neill in his search to find a meaning for life was simply being honest with himself. He was employing everything at his disposal in attempting to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion to his problem. In Lazarus Laughed there is attempt at greater fusion of conflicting trains of thought. O'Neill is not successful in his attempt, but these trends are more readily detected than in previous plays. There is still a primary interest in man's struggle. O'Neill regards life as an arena in which man strives to liberate himself from fear, and man himself remains an inseparable part of the universe.<sup>27</sup>

Underlying O'Neill's representation of Lazarus is a deadly resignation and nihilism . . . In the resigned love of Lazarus for life, in his refusal to designate evil, in his glossing of his attitude with the appearance of love for

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26 Essay Annual, 227.

27 Block, 158.

man, there is not so much confusion as hedonism--hedonism turning ascetic.<sup>28</sup>

Still present is the echo of what O'Neill calls "the eternal tragedy of Man," his unavailing effort to rise above his surroundings and become something truly admirable. Just as in the vague, quasi-mystical form of The Fountain, all life becomes one. God is the universal oneness of nature, and man is one of its inseparable parts.

Lazarus Laughed was followed by Strange Interlude, but in this prize-winning play O'Neill is no nearer a solution to his problem of life. However, the play manifests a deeper interest in the spiritual side of man, insofar as it presents its characters thinking aloud and displaying their motives for action. The only reason O'Neill could have had for employing such a technique is that he does not want his audience to miss the point he is obviously trying to make. He is delving deeper into the psychical of the psycho-physical being, man, and he is presenting him in the nakedness of his soul, so far as O'Neill understands him. Materialism is of the warp and woof of his thought, and the morbid effect of the god of materialism on man is strikingly expressed. O'Neill uses asides in the dialogue in order that no hidden thought may escape his audience. By this means he is able to show more clearly his idea of God, man's relation to Him, and

man's conduct in view of this relation. As usual, he approaches these problems in reverse order, advancing from man's struggle to the reasons for his conflict, and from the nature of this conflict with some obstacle or force, to the nature of that force.

The play is not authentic tragedy, although it is clear that O'Neill intended it to be. Real tragedy is the destruction of something beautiful. But beauty is hard to discover in any of the characters of Strange Interlude. Nina is a symbol; she is a universal Woman in her struggle to attain fulfilment in life. From her losing struggle O'Neill concludes that an over-power is at work to frustrate her designs, and from the resulting frustration he estimates what must be the nature of this Power or Force. Nina is not a mere individual. She seems to outgrow and cast off her sex, and be identified, rather, with the life-instinct itself. In this way she stands not even for Woman, but rather as a symbol of every agonized soul, of human nature itself.

Presenting Nina as he does, O'Neill again paints a picture of abnormality. Nina's activity is confined to one phase of life only. And in so far as O'Neill ignores every other phase of life but sex, he loses the perspective of life as a whole. Implicitly he denies any form of supernaturalism and negates the Christian concept of God. As in The Great God Brown, so in Strange Interlude we find life as the unhappy nightmare of an eternity of nothingness. Man was nothing, now he is, but in a wretched and

unhappy state. His greatest happiness will come when death relieves him of the burden of life. Why he does not end it all immediately and release himself from the pain and burden of existence is not clear. It seems that such is not the rule of the game, but that man must, instead, continue to take part in the losing struggle for happiness.

Existence is evil for Nina as well as for Darrell, her paramour. Life is a strange, dark interlude within a spiritual vacuum, a time of trial during which souls "are scraped clean of impure flesh and made worthy to bleach in peace."<sup>29</sup> If O'Neill has any idea of after-life, this seems to be it. All that will be left to man is a place where his parched and whited bones may rot to dust beneath nature's sun. Man is but a few ounces of chemicals which return to nature that they may take part again in its rebirth. The peace man reaps at the close of life is not that of a limbo where he will be satisfied and at ease. This peace is nothing positive; it is not even a nirvana. It is rather the peace that comes with absolute extinction.

But we may not conclude from this that Strange Interlude indicates a complete and thorough-going atheism. Indeed, God is clearly affirmed, and some of His attributes may be deduced. It is hard to say what O'Neill means when he says through Nina, "the

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29 O'Neill, Nine Plays, 681.

mistake (which causes suffering in life) began when God was created in a male image, . . . The God of gods, the Boss, has always been a man."<sup>30</sup> The implication of a Greek line of deities is too large a problem to discuss at this point. But at the very least we may say that, as presented here, O'Neill conceives of a supreme deity, "The Boss," whatever he may intend for subordinate hierarchy. God is also acknowledged in the affirmation of life as "a strange dark interlude in the electrical display of God the Father."<sup>31</sup> Thus, either God is the Force about which O'Neill speaks in prior plays, or shows of force are the manifestation of His presence. But O'Neill cannot escape the compelling realization that the world is under the rule of some supreme being, for man's activity points unerringly to such a being. Yet the life of man is lived between flashes of His might and without His help. Man, though he need not be if "The Boss" willed otherwise, is independent of the operation of God. Deity takes no interest in him, for if it did, man's aspirations would more often meet with success. God is too selfish to be interested in man's affairs; He is content in His own satisfaction, and save for creation, man is a non-entity in God's regard. "God is a male whose chest thunders with egotism and is too hard for tired heads and thoroughly comfortless."<sup>32</sup> He is either blissfully ignorant

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30 Ibid., 524.

31 Ibid., 681.

32 Ibid., 524.

or cruelly disdainful of man's plight. He is so "deaf and dumb and Blind" to man's aspirations that man must resign himself to being a mere atom in the plan of nature.<sup>33</sup>

The frequent reference to God the Father is meaningless in view of the rest of the play. Moreover, we learn of God by what He is not, rather than by what He is. He is not a comforter, but instead leaves man to roll and pitch in his own slough of despond. God the Father is not paternal, He is not a loving and generous benefactor to his creature. In fact, as far as man is concerned, He is no better than a name, a nonsense syllable. Is there any wonder, then, that a strong chord of pessimism should be sounded in the play? Is it surprising that the fruit of such writing should be a morbid outlook and a despairing view of life? For since life is utterly meaningless and the most man can hope for is extinction, man is utterly and permanently frustrated.

It is highly possible that annihilation is the last conceivable delight for those who wholly pander the senses, as O'Neill's characters do in Strange Interlude. Perhaps this is the joy of life--to leave it as soon as possible. In any event, the only answer to the query, "Why? To what end is life?" is that offered by Nina at the end of the play. It is an empty answer; it offers nothing to man either for hope or for desire.

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33 Ibid., 680.

God the Father is just a word, and man is simply a part of the cosmic process.<sup>34</sup> Hence we see that O'Neill's naturalism is more pronounced than ever before. The God of science is still astride the universe, and O'Neill retains the materialistic background it provides as the setting for the thoughts as well as the actions of his characters. Although the play may be primarily not life in the living, but a tract on O'Neill's new psychology,<sup>35</sup> it is more replete with morbidity and pessimism than the very early plays in which he undertook to present life itself without invading the substrata of consciousness.

O'Neill chose bit by bit to assume the role of philosophic poet, seeking through drama to interpret problems of the day. We have seen that his choice was not a fortunate one, for in this process the groping thinker has made more and more demands upon the poet-artist, and as a result his work has suffered. Dynamo marks an important milestone in O'Neill's career, not because it is an especially good play, for it is not, but because it illustrates what may happen to a poet who tries to become a philosopher. Again it voices the naturalism which underlies O'Neill's work.

Dynamo is the death chant of the extrovert.<sup>36</sup> It is the

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34 Flexner, 173.

35 Ibid.

36 Skinner, Our Changing Theatre, 84.



tragedy of a young man who loses faith in the "old God of religion and dogma," and who imagines that he recovers it in the sleek image of an electric dynamo. Soon he finds himself worshipping it with the vehemence, superstition, and madness of a religious maniac.<sup>37</sup> The play was designed to probe into the failure of science to find a meaning for life. It was to substitute for faith and belief in a personal God and a personal immortality.<sup>38</sup> No longer are there symbols or artificial devices. All pretense is abandoned. O'Neill states clearly the failure of science to find the meaning for life, and shows that he himself is dissatisfied with its findings. The spirit of Dynamo is frenzied, exhibiting a feverish and personal mood. It is far from being O'Neill's best piece of work, but it indicates the extent to which he would go to present his own attitude toward life. O'Neill once wrote that he would put on the stage whatever he felt was right. In Dynamo O'Neill is thinking rather than feeling, and when he gives himself over to science and philosophy he seems to lose his fine intuition as an artist.<sup>39</sup> The play is one of material possessiveness like The Hairy Ape, which seeks to deny the interior man. Having lost belief in a God of religion, man tries to fashion one from science, but

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37 J. Brooks Atkinson, Review, The New York Times, January 22, 1922.

38 Block, 188.

39 George J. Nathan, "A Non-Conductor," The American Mercury, March, 1929, 373.

science cannot fill the void.

Although the play denies God as a spiritual being, it indicates at the same time the failure of science to supply a materialistic God in which man might believe. A God of physical force as found in a steam turbine or a dynamo is patently unsatisfactory. O'Neill is astute enough to see that science has failed; it has destroyed a God in which man once believed, but it cannot produce one to supplant Him. In negating the interior man there seems to be a denial of creation as far as man is concerned.

The interior and the exterior must be united to create, to feel the eternal pulsing rhythm of the universe in which matter is animated by spirit, in which the center bestows life upon the periphery, in which God enters the lives of created men.<sup>40</sup>

This is simply another way of saying that Dynamo denies man more than an accidental superiority over the brute. For all practical purposes God is a word and does not really exist.

Mourning Becomes Electra is, perhaps, O'Neill's greatest play. In title and theme he has set about to rewrite the Oresteia in terms of his own age. His success is startling. It is only in "The Homecoming" that he fails to show the great talent of Aeschylus, although his ending is adequate. His theme of revenge is the same; so are his characters. A point by point

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40 Skinner, A Poet's Quest, 210.

comparison with his Greek model gives due praise to O'Neill. But the very fact that O'Neill was imitating a masterpiece makes it difficult to interpret the play as entirely his own. Because of the possibility, at least, of O'Neill being all artist and striving for a perfect imitation, we hesitate to attribute to him the whole of its doctrinal content.

However, supporting the belief that O'Neill expresses his own ideas in the play are the additions he lends to the material supplied by Aeschylus. O'Neill strengthens motivation by employing use of Freudian psychology.<sup>41</sup> This is another indication of his materialistic tendencies, for no one who ever became acquainted with the principles of Freudian psychology can doubt that its foundations are utterly materialistic.<sup>42</sup> There is also an accentuation on sex. Though this is Aeschylus' theme, it has also been O'Neill's. Moreover, Mourning Becomes Electra is strikingly similar to Strange Interlude, which it immediately followed save for the writing of Dynamo. It seems, then, a valid inference that much of what O'Neill presents in the play is what

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41 O'Neill has been called the Freudian dramatist. Although he denies any conscious use of psycho-analytical material in this or any of his plays, there are so many similarities to modern psychological and behavioristic theories as to cast doubt on his statement. Humanity in his plays acquires a psychopathic quality present in life, but O'Neill considers it as a norm, which it is not. Cf. Cargill, 716, also "O'Neill on Freudianism," Saturday Review of Literature, VIII, May 28, 1932, 759.

42 Rudolf Allers, The Successful Error, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1940, 92.

he himself also feels and believes. In both plays, Electra and Strange Interlude, there is an intellectual framework aligned with Freudian psychology, implying a scientific and materialistic theism. God is a deity no more spiritual than the matter science treats, and no more personal than science itself.

Without reference to its model there would be justification for the severe criticism of Ellen Drew:

All that O'Neill does in Mourning Becomes Electra is to diagnose a group of people all suffering in one form or another from some kind of sexual abnormality or repression, and to illustrate how it brings them all to disaster. But there is no more "tremendous tragedy" about them than about the stories of the thousands of similar cases which belong to medical history . . . When O'Neill rewrites the Oresteia in terms of his own age, the characters become just a group of sex-starved neurotics.<sup>43</sup>

But in fairness to O'Neill we must be cautious in attributing this to his own frame of mind, similar as it may be to his previous trend of thought. Although it offers nothing new as regards O'Neill's interpretation of life and his attitude towards God, Mourning Becomes Electra is worthy of mention because it shows O'Neill persisting in that frame of mind suggested in Strange Interlude.

Thus far we have seen O'Neill's interpretation of the tra-

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43 Elizabeth Drew, Discovering Drama, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1937, 192.

gedy of modern man. The constantly recurring theme in his dramas is that man envisions the perfect, he struggles vainly to achieve it, but in the end must accept inevitable defeat.<sup>44</sup> The God who observes man's behavior is a silent tyrant who is able to save man all his woe, but who wills otherwise. Logically, this is the end. If perfection is impossible and if reality is an ugly truth that must be grimly endured, then the rest is silence.

Probably the most surprising part of O'Neill's career is the twelve-year silence which followed the presentation of Days Without End. It would be less startling were his last play in accord with the theme of his previous work. But in Days Without End O'Neill again shows himself a revolutionary. By some it has been hailed as his best work and the solution to his quest for life's meaning.<sup>45</sup> Philosophically it is a complete turnabout from all his previous theorizing. Not only does his atheistic hero accept a Christian God, but at the close of the play he casts himself at the foot of the Cross of Christ with the prayer, "Thou has conquered, Lord. Thou art--the End."<sup>46</sup> Never before had O'Neill approached life from this angle. Never before had he so much as suggested that Christianity might hold a possible

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44 Frederic I. Carpenter, "The Romantic Tragedy of Eugene O'Neill," College English, VI, February, 1945, 250.

45 Especially R. Dana Skinner who hails the play as O'Neill's greatest and the solution to a twenty-year quest. Cf. A Poet's Quest.

46 Eugene O'Neill, Days Without End, Random House, New York, 1934, 156.

solution to his problem of life.

All of O'Neill's plays have been closely autobiographical. They have traced the course of this thought through twenty years of intellectual wandering. It is wholly credible, then, that Days Without End should be the sincere outpouring of what O'Neill had found within his own soul. Had he never written another play there would be great possibility that he had found the meaning of life in "the old God of religion," in the Christian God who died on the Cross to redeem man. Let us suppose for the moment that this is true, or that O'Neill found, at least, in the Christian religion the peace and comfort his searching soul had sought. In either case it vouches for O'Neill's sincerity. Even if O'Neill had written a drama about a theme which he did not believe or could not share, he would still necessarily have had to meditate seriously over the doctrine itself. No one could write Days Without End without having seriously studied and considered the Christian God, whether or not he envisioned all its implications.

Autobiographical or not, Days Without End marks the most complete reversal of O'Neill's career.<sup>47</sup> With naturalism and materialism as the backdrop for his other plays, and the focus of life set on Death as a generous benefactor which would provide physical and spiritual obliteration, the victory of Christianity over

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47 Cargill, 719.

the atheistic attitude of John Loving is startling, indeed. O'Neill shows that he has a healthy grasp on the concept of a Christian God, even though he does not project its theology very far. If we are to accept the play as a sincere expression of himself as his other plays have been, then we are correct in considering it a symbol of his rejection of the palpably false philosophy of life which he had hitherto entertained.

Days Without End is testimonial to a new found optimism, but as a play it suffers from the same old malady which arises whenever the author attempts to philosophize. It would seem that the better his philosophizing, the more distorted are his powers as dramatist.

It comes to the old tale: when O'Neill goes in for pure emotion, he is a sound and enormously effective dramatist; but when he ventures into theorizing and philosophizing, he is--to be very gallant about it--far from palatable.<sup>48</sup>

Days Without End indicates a remarkably new approach to the nature of God. The God of Christianity vanquishes the grim bogey of a materialistic god, whose only attitude toward man is one of scorn. It is the theology of Christianity; its God is one of mercy, forgiveness and love. Voiced strongly for the first time is the heretofore unexpressed substrate of O'Neill's personality which cries for belief in something which will give meaning to

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48 George J. Nathan, Passing Judgments, Longmans Green, New York 1937, 124.

man's life.

It would be very fortunate to consider this the culmination of O'Neill's work. It might mean that he had found a satisfactory explanation for the meaning of life. But the play itself does not constitute a place of rest for his intellectual roamings. Much of the way remains to be traveled; it is hardly a capstone to his work.<sup>49</sup>

It is not the final peace-filled consummation of a Parsifal raising the Grail. It is more the young Parsifal seizing the spear cast by Klingsor, standing exaltedly before the withering of the magic gardens, but still with the long road of knighthood and of test to travel.<sup>50</sup>

Let us consider at this point the distance O'Neill has traveled in his search for the meaning of life. Up to the time of Days Without End his search had been a more or less harmonious one. He had written tragedies of frustration or of incompleteness which in some way corresponded to the great spiritual upheavals in his own curiously unadjusted mind.<sup>51</sup> He shows himself rebellious against God for making man what he is. He is a rebel against the Fate that frustrates man and keeps him from becoming a God; he would seem to lead man against God in man's behalf. In almost every one of these plays O'Neill takes pains to explore his great problem, but more often than not he gets

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49 Cargill, 719.

50 Skinner, A Poet's Quest, 241.

51 Skinner, Our Changing Theatre, 41.



beyond his depth in philosophizings and abstractions.<sup>52</sup> The sum total of the import of these plays is that man is adrift in the world to make his way as best he can, and that the creator who placed him there is not much interested in the outcome of his struggle. Until Days Without End no answer was forthcoming to the question of why man was placed in such a position in the first place. But in this last play before his temporary retirement, O'Neill seems to find a solution. He discovers in the God he left a possible answer to the queries that so long bothered him.<sup>53</sup> But to accept such a doctrine entirely is a tremendous step; it is, moreover, a complete reversal of his earlier attitudes. To accept it would mean a difficult and gradual adjustment. It suggests a great conflict, one which may have been beginning in the soul of O'Neill, a conflict in which the concept of a Christian God struggles with a doctrine of utter materialism. There is little wonder, then, that O'Neill should give himself time to think out his problem, not so much for the betterment of his plays as for his own peace of mind. What the fruit of these musings would be, his future work would tell.

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52 Whitman, 555.

53 O'Neill was baptised and reared a Catholic. Cf. Clark, Eugene O'Neill, 5.

## CHAPTER V

### THE ICEMAN COMETH

Twelve years of voluntary retirement preceded the return of Eugene O'Neill to the American theater with The Iceman Cometh. After so long a silence it was but proper that there should be expectation of something momentous, for O'Neill had not been inactive during his hidden years. Although screened from public view in California and a continent away from the scenes of his former Broadway triumphs, he was writing plays and planning carefully the work of his next few years.<sup>1</sup> Days Without End had left O'Neill's critics puzzled. It had shown a new turn in O'Neill's thought, a different approach to the problem of life. Whether this last play was an experiment or a new phase in O'Neill's philosophy of life had yet to be decided. The answer would very probably be found in whatever followed next from O'Neill's pen. It was not without reason, then, that the dramatic world watched with interest when O'Neill left his retirement in 1946 and presented The Iceman Cometh. After twelve years of mysterious silence it was felt that his new play would be highly significant. O'Neill would speak because he had something to say, and that something would be a clearer vision of his problem of finding an ultimate meaning for life. A clearer idea of man's nature and of the relation between man and God was a reasonable expectation.

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1 George J. Nathan, "Eugene O'Neill after Twelve Years," American Mercury, LXIII, October 6, 1946, 462.

But The Iceman Cometh turned out to be a disappointment. As philosophy it is confusing; as drama it was considered "scarcely deeper than a puddle."<sup>2</sup> O'Neill offered no clear solution to his aging problem. Once more man's struggle for life was belabored, examined, displayed from new angles, and left once more in its former state of confusion. Life is a losing struggle and a flight from reality at best; it is the dream that keeps man fighting and living, the pipe dream of a world of make-believe.

O'Neill supplies no answer to the question he had been seeking to solve. But then, O'Neill is no more an abstract philosopher than is Kant or Nietzsche a dramatist. Whatever answer he evolves, he must dramatize, not merely rationalize it; he must present his ideas in flesh-and-blood characters and let them speak by their actions. He must live his answer through his figures on the stage, and in The Iceman Cometh O'Neill does so at great length.

The main character of the play is Hickey, a breezy, aggressive traveling salesman. His annual visit to Harry Hope's saloon is always looked forward to with great expectation by the hangers-on and has-beens and never-were's who dribble their lives away at the well-worn tables and bar of Hope's "bedrock bar." But when Hickey arrives he is greatly changed from the drummer they

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2 Time Magazine, XLVIII, no. 17, October 21, 1946, 71.

used to know. His gaiety is the same, but he has lost his old companionable habit; he doesn't drink anymore. The rest of the play is taken up with Hickey's attempt to convert the no-goods whom he now pities to his own new turn of mind. He attempts to make each one recognize himself for what he is, to admit that he has been a failure, and so to free himself from his self-enslavement and enervating pipe dreams of success. One by one the characters go out to slay their dragon, but each one returns in utter dejection and defeat instead of in possession of the peace which Hickey had promised them. In a long monologue Hickey explains how he overcame his own pipe dreams by admitting to himself how rotten he was. He freed himself from his phantasy and from fear by killing his wife, whose constant forgiveness of his infidelities only aggravated his wretchedness. Hickey's would-be converts begin to realize that Hickey must be mad. They convince themselves of this so that they may be persuaded also that his indoctrination is that of a madman, and therefore to be disregarded. One by one they reclaim their pipe dreams, and life begins to be interesting once more. They find a modicum of peace in assuming once more their old attitudes of mind. They elevate themselves to decency and respect in their own eyes by stepping again into their former little make-believe worlds.

In his play O'Neill does not mean to capture an isolated atmosphere remote from his audience. Instead The Iceman Cometh is of universal import and his characters are universal.

His characters are not specific, individual and isolated types, but active symbols of mankind in general, with mankind's virtues and faults, gropings and findings, momentary triumphs and doomed defeats.<sup>3</sup>

Since O'Neill is dealing with the fate of all mankind, and not merely with the individuals who frequent such places as Harry Hope's, the personnel is extensive. There is McGloin, the former policeman, now a parasite; the tavernkeeper himself, who once fawned upon political bosses for special favors; Jimmy Tomorrow, a well-bred drunkard, formerly of money and position; and the pimps and tarts who do a thriving business, but resent being considered what they are. Finally, there is Larry Slade, the tired, tolerant, cynical critic of life, who shares the fate of his comrades, yet looks on with "the face of a pitying but weary old priest's" and the meditative pale blue eyes of a mystic.<sup>4</sup>

Hickey is the personality-plus salesman. He, too, is a universal, a general idea placed in the specific term of Hickey. Like each of the other characters, Hickey has had his pipe dream. But he has shattered it and experienced the relief of being freed from a slavery of fear. He has "finally had the guts to face myself and throw overboard the damned lying pipe dream that'd been making my life miserable."<sup>5</sup> His feeling of personal success in

3 George J. Nathan, "O'Neill--A Critical Summation," American Mercury, LXIII, December, 1946, 718.

4 O'Neill, The Iceman Cometh, 5.

5 Ibid., 79.

the endeavor is what drives him to urge his friends to make a similar effort. He wants to help them, and his platform is simple. It is for each one to be honest with himself and "just stop lying about yourself and kidding yourself about tomorrows."<sup>6</sup>

The message Hickey brings is an interesting one. He promises peace; peace gained from a self-knowledge drawn from reality and not from the glowing aura of impossible make-believe. Hickey is certain that his experience has been the very same as the regulars at Harry Hope's, who are too weak to help themselves. For years he had sought peace and had dreamt of what he thought would bring it. More than that, he daily resolved that he would begin to use the necessary means to reach that goal, but like Johnny Tomorrow, he would use those means another day. But at last he realized that this was just a pipe dream and not reality; it was yearning for something he did not possess and would never have unless he did something about it today. So the doctrine which Hickey preaches is that you must make the effort; you must prove to yourself that you are equal to the dreams you have of yourself and your abilities, for only thus will you learn whether or not you are lying about your tomorrows.

This is Hickey's thesis. The pipe dream he wants to destroy is the mirror of complacent self-esteem which never proves itself.

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6 Ibid., 81.

the pipe dream of hypothetical certainty which says that if you start, you will, of course, succeed. It is only the starting which is difficult, and yet, for the dreamer it is impossible. So, motivated by his own feeling of self-success, Hickey's sales talk to each of his friends is designed to inspire them to make the initial effort. As a matter of fact, the characters are such that they will not succeed. They are weak-willed and cowardly from head to toe. They are afraid of themselves. From their own standpoint they are better off in not attempting to realize their pipe dreams, for in their dreams they will always be heroes and there is no chance of failure. They are better off in attempting nothing, and rather assuring themselves of success in whatever they undertake, if they should ever undertake it.

Again and again O'Neill stresses the same point. Each character repeats in his own way the theme O'Neill does not want his reader to miss. Living with one's pipe dream is a type of torture, for there can never be complete fulfilment of desires so long as peace and fruition are unattained. Although such a dream-like existence is not happy, it is not as sad as a life which must be lived in the despair of having failed utterly to make one's dreams reality. Against this Hickey preaches that only by each one facing his pipe dream can there be any hope for a modicum of peace under the heavy burden of life. He has destroyed his own pipe dream, and in the first surge of exultant feeling after slaying his dragon, he tries to make conversions.

To his friends he explains,

I meant to save you from your pipe dreams. I know from my experience, they're the things that really poison a guy's life and keep him from finding any peace. If you knew how free and contented I feel now. I'm like a new man. And the cure for them is so damned simple, once you have the nerve. Just the old dope of honesty is the best policy -- honesty with yourself, I mean. Just stop lying about yourself and kidding yourself about tomorrows.<sup>7</sup>

Terror and an inherent fear of facing reality is the first reaction to Hickey's offer. Harry Hope and his hangers-on are contented. They are satisfied to linger in their half-hearted existence, for it requires no exertion. They live in a vacuum, mistaking their dreams of tomorrow for reality. Only Larry Slade, an ex-anarchist who views the problem with weary tolerance, is able to penetrate its true meaning. In the opening of the play he sounds its theme as well as the personalities of its characters in his description of Hope's saloon.

What is it? It's the No Chance Saloon. It's Bedrock Bar, the End of the Line Cafe. The Bottom of the Sea Rathskeller. Don't you notice the beautiful calm in the atmosphere? That's because it's the last harbor. No one here has to worry about where they're going next, because there is no farther they can go. It's a great comfort to them. Although even here they keep up appearances of life with a few harmless pipe dreams about their yesterdays and tomorrows.<sup>8</sup>

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7 Ibid., 81.

8 Ibid., 25.



Prior to Hickey's eloquent plea that "honesty is the best policy," Larry had categorized the attitude of the entire group with his expostulation,

To hell with truth! As the history of the world proves, the truth has no bearing on anything . . . The lie of a pipe dream is what gives life to the whole misbegotten lot of us, drunk or sober.<sup>9</sup>

Larry seems to be the author himself looking on the scene. He appears to be O'Neill's spokesman, echoing the author's own attitude toward life and the pipe dreams which keep it living. He is a symbol of tragic omniscience.<sup>10</sup> Life, he seems to say, is a fiction of pipe dreams, but if you are going to live at all, you must have them. For even when one understands that life is composed largely of unattainable desires and hopes, and that man lives on because he is spurred to do so by foolish hopes which he knows he can never realize, even then there is no escape. Enlightenment is a source of despair. Far better to believe in pipe dreams, for this is to hope. And as long as the actuality is not encountered, hope is still possible. Only when we have faced our problem and failed is hope really beyond us.

The import of O'Neill's play seems to be simply this: life is impossible without illusions. Hickey is a clever paradox. He comes to give life to Harry Hope and his friends by exploding

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>10</sup> "The Iceman Cometh," The New Yorker, XXVII, Oct. 19, 1946, 55.

their tortuous pipe dreams. But instead he becomes a symbol of death by robbing them of the dreams which for them were life-sustaining. Having lost their dreams, life holds nothing for them. Hope complains to Hickey, "We can't pass out! And you promised us peace!"<sup>11</sup> The peace Hickey promises is really a final and absolute acceptance of defeat.

The Iceman Cometh is a return to a familiar O'Neill theme where focus is centered upon man's struggle for existence. The theme is materialistic, reminiscent of the plays written prior to Days Without End. But here O'Neill is concerned with the inner operations of man rather than his external conduct. To this extent The Iceman is a fusion of the basic naturalism of such plays as The Hairy Ape, and the psychological interests shown in Strange Interlude. Heretofore O'Neill has attempted to relate his characters not merely to men, but to outside forces of a cruel nature which ultimately controls them. He has employed such names as "the great angry eye of God," "that old devil sea," "the ironic life force," and "Mother Dynamo." But in The Iceman Cometh instead of relating men to the unseen agents of their destiny, he occupies himself with what they must live by within themselves.<sup>12</sup> In order to sustain the burden of life, man must

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11 O'Neill, The Iceman Cometh, 224.

12 John M. Brown, "All O'Neilling," The Saturday Review of Literature, XXIX, October 19, 1946, 26.

entertain illusions of what he might be. Reality, the actual state of man in the order of nature, is without peace, without hope. Only in make-believe is there possibility for even a minimum of happiness.

The conclusion O'Neill seems to make is that man exists, but that he does not live in the true sense of the word. Life is little more than a wearisome task that should be terminated as quickly as possible. His "ultimate meaning for life" remains confined to the here and now of man's terrestrial existence. The iron-handed Fate of Strange Interlude and The Great God Brown is again displayed. There is little resemblance to the God to whom John Loving prayed in Days Without End. Hence, The Iceman presents the same answer to O'Neill's question concerning a meaning for life as do all the plays before it with the exception of Days Without End. Man is a frustrated victim in the power of a cold-hearted, mighty-handed force which governs according to an iron-clad law. Man can never attain his aspirations, and any attempt to reach a higher goal will meet with inevitable failure. Man will be far happier by not getting too close to reality. Rather let him dream dreams and consider his lassitude a vigorous activity.

It is obvious that this is no more an arrival at ultimates than any other O'Neill play. A search for the ultimate meaning of life cannot be allowed to terminate at man himself. Yet

O'Neill considers man's endeavors in what is patently a world of woe, without considering the nature of the ultimate to which man, as a dependent being, should be ordered, and by which he should be governed. The Iceman Cometh is agnostic. If there is a God, He has no interest in man. If a God created the world, He ignores it now. This first principle presupposed, O'Neill treats man and his struggle as independent and apart from any deity. Larry, O'Neill's most balanced character in the play, quotes the poet Heine,

Lo, sleep is good; better is death; in sooth  
The best of all were never to be born.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, in The Iceman Cometh we find no answer to the why or the whither of life, for such answers are impossible if no goal of life is considered. And in this as in his other plays, O'Neill considers not so much life as its living. He attempts to find a meaning for the living of life without considering its direction or purpose. The fact of man's continual frustration is so striking for O'Neill that he has great difficulty in viewing anything else, and hence it tends to distort his work. The result is that, lacking a satisfactory answer, O'Neill seems to give up in despair.

The alarming thing about The Iceman is that it sounds a note he has never sounded before, the note of tired futility, defeat,

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13 O'Neill, The Iceman Cometh, 32.

surrender. Where is the "intensified feeling of man's being and becoming?" It seems more like seeking escape from life into cocoons of petty self-illusion.<sup>14</sup>

Because of O'Neill's sincerity in writing what he feels and thinks, it is not too hazardous a step to attribute at least some of the failures of content in The Iceman Cometh to its author. There is a certain confusion as to the goal for which his characters should be striving, and this confusion may be due to the failure of the author to understand the destiny of man.

There are, I think, two interpretations possible for Mr. O'Neill's conception. The psychoanalytical and the theological. The first is perfectly simple, but the author himself has chosen the second, and I feel it is important to try to understand why. I feel there is a giant American ignorance behind all of the opera of this American giant. In his compassion, in his constant cry after God, O'Neill has steadily invented rather than learned. In respect of his present play, there is of course no intelligence in attempting to attach symbolism to the plain words of St. Mark; there is no intelligence in opposing "death" to the "Soul"; and there is only an all-American intelligence in attempting to prove a religion of drink. At the same time I find neither vulgarity nor fakery in the extent of his confusions. They are native confusions. Nevertheless, I think it is time he applied himself to the primary science and chose his God or gods, devil or devils, or their several lack. . . I feel it is quite possible that he has accomplished a great American play, but I think the tribute is a

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14 Louis F. Doyle, "Mr. O'Neill's Iceman," America, Nov. 30, 1946, 242.

sad one.<sup>15</sup>

With The Iceman Cometh we conclude our consideration of O'Neill's works and end on a note strikingly similar to that on which we began. At the beginning of his career O'Neill's intent was "to find a meaning for life." In The Iceman there is still lacking a satisfactory solution to his problem. O'Neill seems to have begged the question through the years, or else have given up his search as an impossible task.

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15 Kappo Phelan, Review of The Iceman Cometh, Commonweal, XLV, 2, October 25, 1946, 45.

## CHAPTER VI

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Having observed the quality of O'Neill's output as a dramatist over a quarter of a century, we may now draw together our various observations in order to find what attitudes have been peculiar to O'Neill which may have bearing on his quest for the meaning of life. We have seen that an unalloyed naturalism is set forth in his early one-act plays. He presents man as moulded by circumstance, struggling in a world of set, unchangeable laws, variation from which is always followed by unhappy consequences. He prescind from any God or deity; only man and his struggle are considered.

This naturalistic tone continues through O'Neill's middle period, during which time his star grew bright in the dramatic world with such plays as Beyond the Horizon, Anna Christie and The Hairy Ape. In these plays man is still considered simply as a physical being struggling to find his place in a world of nameless, shapeless forces. There is an intensification of the struggle for existence. Man is struggling harder, failing more wretchedly, his misfortune being in proportion to his effort to succeed. There is acknowledgement of some kind of force which rules the conduct of men with an iron hand, but its precise nature is not clear. There is slight advance from the purely physical consideration of man to a suggestion of some spiritual factor. But the relation of man to the Force which directs him

is one of complete subjection. It is the relation of man to nature, and nature rules man as absolutely as it rules every other creature of the universe.

Still more intensified is the struggle for existence in O'Neill's later plays, the dramas which were produced during the Nineteen-Twenties when O'Neill's play output was at its peak. More desperately than ever before man seeks peace. He seeks fulfillment in a world of frustration. He is still a physical machine, but the previously intimated spiritual element is studied more in detail. This is the psychological factor which manifests itself in inner reactions to external circumstances. But in this interior life just as in the physical, man feels the heavy hand of some superior force and is subjected to its inflexible laws. The force is nothing personal. It is a vague, terrifying fact; it is heartless, exacting, uninterested in man or his endeavors. Therefore man's natural urge to improve his conditions and ennoble himself is futile, for according to the inflexible law of nature he can attain nothing higher. Thus there appears a contradiction in man's very nature. He naturally strives for the better, but is inevitably forced to concede failure. The depression which results from such an attitude can be sensed in these plays. There hovers about them a pessimism at being crushed beneath the burden of life, and pessimism is the first prelude of despair.



Finally, in The Iceman Cometh we are brought very close to just such a realization. Till now O'Neill had presented man in the midst of his struggle for existence, hopelessly searching for happiness and peace. In The Iceman the struggle becomes weaker. Effort is almost beyond him, and man seems to be giving up in despair. Though life must go on, improvement is impossible. Frustration is the inevitable outcome of effort; to try is to fail. Therefore it is better to attempt nothing; it is foolish to attempt the impossible. Rather let man indulge in idle fancies and day dreams of what might be, instead of reality. O'Neill's presentation of the universal, Man, is not changed much from his earlier plays. Man is a pawn to be shuttled back and forth at the whim of the super-force which governs him. Man's relation to that force is one of unavoidable and strict servility. Since there can be no such thing as merit or self-betterment, of what profit is cultivation of a God? It is much better to discount Him completely and to live life as best one can.

What conclusion can be drawn from these plays? What unity can be found in them? As we have seen, there is a definite, persistent emphasis upon naturalism, whose roots are sunk deep in the soil of materialism. Man as a part of the universe must accept his role in nature with docility. His spirituality consists only in an intellect by which he is able to hope and to dream. But his goal is no different nor any higher than that of

any other creature, and man's superiority over his surroundings is merely accidental. The mystifying power which dominates nature may be a God, but it cannot be a Person, for no person could find pleasure or profit in subjecting man to the frustrations of life.

O'Neill would find much in common with Henry Adams.

. . .the idea that any personal deity could find pleasure in torturing. . .with a fiendish cruelty known to man only in perverted and insane temperaments, could not be held for a moment. . .God might be, as the Church said, a Substance, but He could not be a Person.<sup>1</sup>

Under such tyranny man has no alternative but to submit to domination. He must make the best of a bad proposition, and be relieved when life is at last terminated.

Why, it may be asked, should man be obliged to continue such a hopeless existence? Why should he not end it all by some painless means and conclude the farce of life? O'Neill seems to have evolved a vague and nebulous philosophy that the misfortunes of life are not as important as the desire to struggle against those misfortunes. It seems the duty of man to struggle against his fate, which is to be found in various guises.

Fate is the Social Order, the Inequality of Classes, the Economic Cause of a Submerged Fraction. Or he may wear the guise of "Ole

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1 Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1918, 289.

Devil Sea" or the Dust Bowl Drought. But whatever we call him, he still operates to defeat man.<sup>2</sup>

O'Neill's apparent delight in the struggle is due to his interest in what he terms "the significant worth of man's being and becoming." His approach is reminiscent of von Hartmann's progressive disillusionment.<sup>3</sup>

It is the duty of the individual not to withdraw from this enterprise (of life) and contrive a private salvation of his own, but to identify himself with it.

True morality and religion consist in the recognition of the evil of existence together with sympathy with God, and the willingness to share the suffering by which God and the world shall be redeemed.<sup>4</sup>

An appeal to one so inconsistent as von Hartmann is of little help in clarifying the confusion latent in the work of Eugene O'Neill. However, it does help us to appreciate more fully the trend of O'Neill's thought. Von Hartmann voiced the pessimism of the nineteenth century. In drama a few generations later O'Neill follows suit.

The naturalism in O'Neill's plays is not a dogmatic atheism,

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2 O'Hara, 13.

3 Cf. Friedrich Ueberweg, History of Philosophy, II, Scribner, Armstrong & Company, New York, 1877, 359.

4 Ralph B. Perry, Philosophies of the Recent Past, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1926, 197.

for we find admission of some supreme power which imposes its rule on the universe. However, it does emerge in a practical atheism, for if God is a Power Who will have nothing to do with the world, there is little profit in giving Him service. There is latent, then, in O'Neill's plays a denial of religion, since it avails nothing to pay homage to or be bound by duties to a heartless, unyielding Force. Nothing will change Fate.

It may be objected that to classify O'Neill's work in this manner is unfair to the author on the grounds that O'Neill is portraying life as he finds it and not moulding it to suit himself. Such criticism might be valid were it not for O'Neill's own attestations to the contrary. O'Neill avowedly is seeking to interpret life; he is seeking its ultimate meaning. He wants to know what man is and why he is, and in order to find the answers to these problems he must know man's destination.

If O'Neill the dramatist is continually embroiled with O'Neill the psychologist, he is also in perpetual conflict with O'Neill the philosopher. To the latter, life is not explicable in scientific terms alone. He must go beyond them and search for an ultimate meaning which will justify human sufferings as well as explain it. This quest is his principal preoccupation as a playwright; he himself has said so.<sup>5</sup>

O'Neill has dug deeply into human life and has often laid bare more than was necessary. He has not known quite what he

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5 Flexner, 133.

was after, and this uncertainty has led to most of his errors. The majority of his plays become involved, or at least leave the direct road of simplicity, because of his overpowering desire to explore the inner life.<sup>6</sup>

The trouble with O'Neill . . . has been his quite evident ambition to intellectualize his primitive poetic power. Instead of fusing the two faculties, he has unconsciously let the one choke the other.<sup>7</sup>

Since, then, O'Neill has himself chosen to approach the ultimates and to present a philosophy of life, it is necessary to judge his work on this basis. And the judgment which must be made, as has been seen, is that O'Neill's plays are heavily weighted with a naturalistic materialism. It is highly significant that the constant theme of his plays is the restless turmoil of man's struggle. There is no consideration of his goal and hence no reflection as to the obligations involved if man were to attain such a goal. The only finis of life is a deadly nihilism, an extinction which is the absolute end of everything.

O'Neill's characters base their lives upon illusion. Sometimes the illusion takes the form of a dream of beauty, as in The Fountain; sometimes it is love, sometimes crude passion. But always it is the quest that counts, the never-ending quest

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6 R. Dana Skinner, "O'Neill and the Poet's Quest," North American Review, 240: 54, June, 1935.

7 Skinner, Our Changing Theatre, 85.

for happiness, the hope for an ultimate meaning and justification of life.<sup>8</sup> It is the same illusion, the same dream, whether it be the dream of O'Neill's one-act plays like The Long Voyage Home, or the whiskey-soaked visions of The Iceman Cometh.

Why, then, should O'Neill find man worth writing about? Why is he a worthy subject for literature if he is always frustrated, down-trodden, desolate? O'Neill himself gives the answer.

I'll write about happiness if I can happen to meet up with that luxury, and find it sufficiently dramatic and in harmony with any deep rhythm of life. But happiness is a word. What does it mean? Exaltation; an intensified feeling of the significant worth of man's being and becoming. Well, if it means that--and not a mere smirking contentment with one's lot--I know there is more of it in one real tragedy than in all the happy-ending plays ever written. . . . I don't love life because it is pretty. Prettiness is clothes-deep. I am a truer lover than that. I love it naked. There is beauty to me even in its ugliness.<sup>9</sup>

However enthusiastic O'Neill may become over such an approach to life, this path has led to its inevitable destination. Man is a victim of his environment, which he in turn cannot affect. To judge from his plays, the discovery of man as sharing an animal nature is nothing short of a revelation for O'Neill. And like more profound naturalistic thinkers, he expresses it in his own way.

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8 Clark, Eugene O'Neill, 55.

9 Ibid., 87.

In their unreflective thinking they go along with their fellows "conquering" nature and managing their affairs, but in the privacy of philosophical reflection they awake from their pragmatic nightmares to observe calmly how even they are caught in the grip of natural forces. This knowledge of their bondage then appears to them as a precious liberty, not granted to other animals, of living in disillusionment; they "bear their fetters with an air." They now play the role of seers and join the great company of heavenly reporters, alternately urging their fellows to emancipation and then fleeing alone for refreshment to the private world of the imagination.<sup>10</sup>

Such a description of "desperate naturalism" may aptly describe Eugene O'Neill. Thirty years have shown little progress in his basic attitude. There have been only variations of the same depressing theme. Intellectually he seems to have progressed no farther than he was when twenty-five years ago he began his search to find a meaning for life. True, he has achieved something no other playwright has done. He has placed the disintegrated person on the American stage.<sup>11</sup> But his presentation is neither intellectual nor spiritual. O'Neill himself has said that he was attempting to find an ultimate solution to life and to portray it in his work. If he considers that his search is ended, then his conclusion is that life has no value whatever,

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10 Herbert W. Schneider, A History of American Philosophy, Columbia University Press, New York, 1947, 397.

11 Mary M. Colum, "The Drama of the Disintegrated," The Forum, XCIV, July-December, 1935, 358.

but "it is the dream that keeps us fighting, willing -- living."<sup>12</sup>

Life is a struggle, often if not usually an unsuccessful struggle; for most of us have something within us which prevents us from accomplishing what we dream and desire. And then, as we progress, we are always seeing further than we can reach.<sup>13</sup>

It is being honest, not unkind, to say that the confusion O'Neill believes to be inherent in human life shows very much in his works. He has something to say, but what that something is it is hard to discover.<sup>14</sup> His message is not clear because his thought is confused. And O'Neill's personal view of life today shows the same lack of direction, the same weary, yet tolerant attitude that his plays exhibit. At a conference prior to the presentation of The Iceman Cometh, he told pressmen,

The war helped me realize that I was putting my faith in old values, and they're gone. . . . It's very sad, but there are no values to live by today . . . Anything is permissible if you know the angles . . . I feel in a sense that America is the greatest failure in history . . . we've squandered our souls trying to possess something outside it, and we'll end as that game usually does, by losing our soul and the thing outside, too. . . . There is a feeling around, or I'm mistaken, of fate. Kismet, the negative fate, not in the Greek sense . . . I'm happier now than I've ever been--I couldn't ever be negative

12 "The Extraordinary Story of Eugene O'Neill," American Magazine, November 8, 1922.

13 Oliver M. Saylor, "The Real Eugene O'Neill," The Century Magazine, CVIII, 1921-22, 35.

14 Bonamy Dobree, "The Plays of Eugene O'Neill," The Southern Review, Winter, 1937, II, 435.



about life. On that score you've got to decide YES or NO. And I'll always say YES. Yes, I'm happy.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time he significantly remarked that

It's struck me as time goes on, how something funny, even farcical, can suddenly without any apparent reason, break into something gloomy and tragic . . . as though life were being manipulated just to confuse us.<sup>16</sup>

It is true that O'Neill was speaking while in the center of the spotlight, but there is intimation that he is satisfied with himself and with the solution to life with which he has compromised. But is it any different from the answer he has presented in his plays? He believes that it is foolish to seek anything outside of life, for if we do, we shall lose both our soul and the thing outside. He tells us that he is strongly aware of a negative fate, Kismet. Is not this the message he has presented in his plays for almost thirty years? "You've got to say "yes" or "no" to life," he tells us, and he will always say "yes." This is not the clear reasoning of a thinker. It is pseudo-courageous whistling in the dark of a confused mind. It is persuading oneself of something by constantly dinning it into one's own ears.

Whatever O'Neill's personal estimate of life and its destiny and of his present belief as to the existence and nature of God,

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<sup>15</sup> Time, 77.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

it is evident that his plays present man in a world of strife in which God plays no part. Hence, life's purpose and goal must be limited accordingly. Such circumscription suggests a fatalistic pessimism which borders on despair, for a negation of God is a negation of purpose, and a denial of any sufficient reason for life itself.

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## APPENDIX

## Chronology of O'Neill's Plays

- 1913-14 Five one-act plays: The Web, Recklessness, Warnings,  
Fog, Thirst.
- 1914 Bound East for Cardiff.
- 1916 Before Breakfast.
- 1917 In the Zone, Ile, The Long Voyage Home, Moon of the  
Caribbees.
- 1918 The Rope, Beyond the Horizon, The Dreamy Kid, Where  
the Cross is Made.
- 1919 The Straw.
- 1920 Gold, Anna Christie, Emperor Jones, Diff'rent.
- 1921 The First Man, The Hairy Ape.
- 1922 The Fountain.
- 1923 Welded, All God's Chillun Got Wings.
- 1924 Desire Under the Elms.
- 1925 Marco Millions, The Great God Brown.
- 1926 Lazarus Laughed.
- 1927 Strange Interlude.
- 1928 Dynamo.
- 1929-31 Mourning Becomes Electra.
- 1932 Ah, Wilderness.
- 1933 Days Without End.
- 1945 The Iceman Cometh.

APPROVAL SHEET

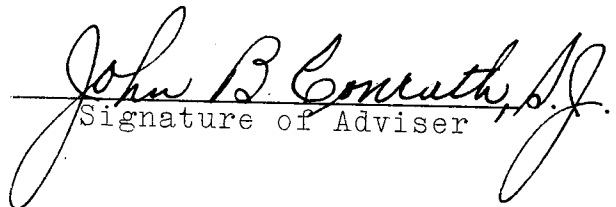
The thesis submitted by **Robert C. Dressman, S.J.** has been read and approved by three members of the Department of **English**.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

December 17, 1949

Date

  
Signature of Adviser