

Themes and Technique in the Plays of Eugene

O'Neill during the period 1921-1931

by

Dennis Whitaker

A thesis submitted to the  
University of London for  
the degree of Master of  
Philosophy.



ProQuest Number: 10096415

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest 10096415

Published by ProQuest LLC(2016). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All rights reserved.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.  
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346



ABSTRACT

No one who reads O'Neill can fail to see how his mental conflicts shaped his art. Most of his strengths and weaknesses as a dramatist can be traced to the divisions in his mind, and this strong autobiographical element is perhaps most prominent in his work from 1921 to 1931.

The First Section of this study is introductory. Chapter 1 sketches some significant early influences on O'Neill, mainly those of his father and mother and men he knew as a sailor. Chapter 2 surveys the dominant characters and themes of the plays written before 1921. The Second Section examines the development of O'Neill's social, religious and psychological ideas up to 1931 and shews how they led to pessimism. The chapters of the Third Section discuss the more important aspects of his technique. They shew how he uses the Chorus to interpret his themes to the audience, structure to give force to the expression of his ideas, irony to attack materialistic society and human nature, and masks to illustrate the duality of personality that life forces

on us. The last chapter of this Section tries to evaluate the contribution that O'Neill's dialogue makes to the effectiveness of his plays.

In 1931 O'Neill had not yet come to terms with himself. His statement on life as expressed by his themes was still erratic and his technique still sometimes clumsy and unsuitable. After 1931 O'Neill came to a kind of serenity, and the Conclusion shews how this new outlook helped him to make a balanced and more compassionate comment on life through his themes and at the same time to achieve a more effective dramatic technique.

# Key to Abbreviations

## Plays by O'Neill

<u>A.W.</u>	Ah, Wilderness
<u>A.G.C.G.W.</u>	All God's Chillun Got Wings
<u>A.C.</u>	Anna Christie
<u>B. the H.</u>	Beyond the Horizon
<u>B.E. for C.</u>	Bound East for Cardiff
<u>D.W.E.</u>	Days Without End
<u>D.U.E.</u>	Desire Under the Elms
<u>Dif.</u>	Diff'rent
<u>Dyn.</u>	Dynamo
<u>E.J.</u>	The Emperor Jones
<u>F.M.</u>	The First Man
<u>F.</u>	Fog
<u>The F.</u>	The Fountain
<u>G.</u>	Gold
<u>G.G.B.</u>	The Great God Brown
<u>H.A.</u>	The Hairy Ape
<u>I.C.</u>	The Iceman Cometh
<u>I.</u>	Ile
<u>I. the Z.</u>	In the Zone
<u>L.L.</u>	Lazarus Laughed
<u>L.D.J.I.N.</u>	Long Day's Journey Into Night
<u>L.V.H.</u>	The Long Voyage Home

<u>M.M.</u>	Marco Millions
<u>M.B.E.</u>	Mourning Becomes Electra
<u>M. of the C.</u>	The Moon of the Caribbees
<u>The R.</u>	The Rope
<u>S.</u>	Servitude
<u>The Sn.</u>	The Sniper
<u>S.I.</u>	Strange Interlude
<u>The St.</u>	The Straw
<u>T.</u>	Thirst
<u>The W.</u>	The Web
<u>Weld.</u>	Welded

### Secondary Sources

Where I have referred frequently to a secondary source, I have given the author's name, the title of the work, the place (unless it is London) and date of publication and the page number in my first reference (e.g., Richard D. Skinner, Eugene O'Neill: A Poet's Quest, New York, 1964, p. 12.) In subsequent references I have given the author's initials and surname, and the page number (e.g., R.D. Skinner, p. 12.)



# CONTENTS

Section One	Introduction	7
Chapter 1,	Some Early Influences	8
Chapter 2,	Characters and Themes of the Early Period	32
Section Two	Themes: 1921-1931	66
Chapter 3,	Social Themes	67
Chapter 4,	Religious Themes	96
Chapter 5,	Psychological Themes	133
Chapter 6,	Pessimism	178
Section Three	Technique: 1921-1931	208
Chapter 7,	The Chorus	209
Chapter 8,	Structure	240
Chapter 9,	Irony	262
Chapter 10,	Masks	281
Chapter 11,	A Poet of the Theatre	310
Section Four	Conclusion	343
Chapter 12,	The Period 1932-1953	344
A List of O'Neill's Plays in Production		371
Bibliography		374

## CHAPTER 1

### SOME EARLY INFLUENCES

Eugene O'Neill is one of the most controversial figures in modern drama and ever since the nineteen twenties scholars and critics have disagreed about his speculative powers, his craftsmanship and his stature as a dramatist.

#### Section One

...O'Neill is no thinker. He is a little a thinker, it is dangerous for him to think. To prove this you have only to look at the fruits of his thinking. ...For a very long time he has been too much of a...

#### Introduction

Lionel Trilling claims that O'Neill himself has always been ready to declare his own ideological presuppositions and that the appearance of Love Without End has made perfectly clear the existence of an organic and progressive unity of thought in all O'Neill's work.<sup>1</sup> Allardyce Nicoll complains of the "parenthetic quality

1. Eric Bentley, "Try to Like O'Neill," Eugene O'Neill and His Plays, ed. O. Jargill et al., 1961, p. 124.

2. Lionel Trilling, "The Science of O'Neill," Eugene O'Neill and His Plays, ed. O. Jargill et al., 1961, p. 223.

## CHAPTER 1

### SOME EARLY INFLUENCES

Eugene O'Neill is one of the most controversial figures in modern drama and ever since the nineteen twenties scholars and critics have disagreed about his speculative powers, his craftsmanship and his stature as a dramatist. Eric Bentley says:

...O'Neill is no thinker. He is so little a thinker, it is dangerous for him to think. To prove this you have only to look at the fruits of his thinking; ....For a non-thinker he thinks too much.<sup>1</sup>

Lionel Trilling claims that "O'Neill himself has always been ready to declare his own ideological preoccupation" and that "the appearance of Days Without End has made perfectly clear the existence of an organic and progressive unity of thought in all O'Neill's work".<sup>2</sup>

Allardyce Nicoll complains of the "phrenetic seizing

1. Eric Bentley, "Trying to Like O'Neill," Eugene O'Neill and His Plays, ed. O. Cargill et. al., 1961, p. 344.

2. Lionel Trilling, "The Genius of O'Neill," O. Cargill, p. 292.



upon new devices" which prevent O'Neill's becoming a "finished literary artist"<sup>1</sup> but Alan S. Downer says;

Other men have conceived tragic situations, and other men have made full use of the resources of the modern stage. Few, however, have achieved a balanced combination of the two with the consistency of Eugene O'Neill. O'Neill has a unique combination of skill and vision.<sup>2</sup>

Bernard de Voto, at a loss to understand the award of a Nobel Prize to O'Neill, comments;

At best he is only the author of some extremely effective pieces for the theatre. At worst he has written some of the most pretentiously bad plays of our time. He has never been what the Guild and the Nobel jury unite in calling him, a great dramatist.<sup>3</sup>

Sinclair Lewis, in his own Nobel Prize Address, pays tribute to O'Neill as someone who "has done nothing much in the American drama save to transform it...from a false world of neat and competent trickery into a world of splendor, fear, and greatness".<sup>4</sup> All these remarks have some truth. O'Neill will often startle us within the same play by dramatic vitality and

- 
1. Allardyce Nicoll, World Drama, 1951, p. 881.
  2. Alan S. Downer, "Eugene O'Neill as Poet of the Theatre," O. Cargill, p. 469.
  3. Bernard de Voto, "Minority Report," O. Cargill, p. 302.
  4. George Jean Nathan, "Our Premier Dramatist," O. Cargill, p. 283.

theatrical ineptitude. His inconsistency sometimes comes from careless workmanship, but more often from a gravely divided mind. His inner conflict is not only a source of weakness but is also something explored and explicitly discussed in the plays. In this first chapter, I shall say something about the early influences that caused and contributed to this conflict. I shall discuss the apparent advantages of his background, his insecure childhood, the strong influences of his father and mother, the effects of separation from his parents, his conflict, self-debasement and physical collapse.

At first sight, it would seem that O'Neill had the great advantage of being born into the theatre. His father was an actor of acknowledged ability. Adelaide Nielson, the famous Shakesperian actress of the late nineteenth century, called him the greatest of those who had played Romeo to her Juliet and said:

When I played with other Romeos, I thought they would climb up the trellis to the balcony; but when I played with Jimmy O'Neill, I wanted to climb down the trellis, into his arms.

---

1. Arthur & Barbara Gelb, O'Neill, 1962, p. 31.

Edwin Booth, with whom James O'Neill had alternated parts in Othello, admitted that "that young man is playing Othello better than I ever did!",<sup>1</sup> and Barrett Clark described him as being "one of the most impressive personalities in the theater of his generation".<sup>2</sup>

Eugene was in close contact with the theatre during the most impressionable part of his life. He said of his early days, "I knew only actors and the stage. My mother nursed me in the wings and in dressing rooms".<sup>3</sup> As a young man he took part in his father's productions and so acquired "a strong aptitude for dramatic writing and theatrical effect".<sup>4</sup> But these are superficial factors. It is the intimate personal influences of his early life that are more significant and rather less happy.

He was unfortunate from the beginning. We hear, for example, that "the birth of Eugene O'Neill proved to

- 
1. Long Day's Journey Into Night, IV, New Haven, 1956, p. 150. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to the text of Long Day's Journey Into Night, except for the quotation on p. 328.
  2. Barrett H. Clark, Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays, New York, 1929, p.15.
  3. Croswell Bowen, The Curse of the Misbegotten, 1960, p. 17.
  4. Introduction to O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. John Gassner, New Jersey, 1964, p. 2.

be a difficult one, and his mother was ill for some time".<sup>1</sup> She had had an unhappy pregnancy and in Long Day's Journey Into Night (1941) O'Neill reflects her old despair in the words "You were born afraid. Because I was so afraid to bring you into the world"<sup>2</sup> and "I was afraid all the time I carried Edmund. I knew something terrible would happen....I never should have borne Edmund".<sup>3</sup> He sometimes used to think that his mother bore him "a hard, accusing antagonism--almost a revengeful emnity".<sup>4</sup> He may well have been mistaken in this reaction for the portrait of his mother in Long Day's Journey Into Night suggests that, where she did display antagonism and emnity to her husband and sons, its causes lay in the frustrations of her drug addiction rather than in personal animosity. She seems to have been devoted to him when he was a baby. Because she had lost an earlier child, she cherished him "with a fiercely protective love" and "never for an

- 
1. C. Bowen, p. 16.
  2. L.D.J.I.N., III, p. 111.
  3. Ibid., II. ii, p. 88.
  4. Ibid., III, p. 116.



instant would she let this last baby out of her sight".<sup>1</sup>

For this reason Eugene went on tour with his parents.

(He) grew up in a bewildering world that was always sliding past the windows of trains, a world where even the four walls of the room in which he went to sleep and awakened were always changing color and pattern.<sup>2</sup>

He tells us:

My first seven years were spent mainly in the larger towns all over the United States--my mother accompanying my father on his road tours in Monte Cristo and repertoire.<sup>3</sup>

This is a long time for a child to have put down no roots and "the disruptive and grueling routine of travel" about the country did nothing to "bolster Eugene's sense of security".<sup>4</sup>

O'Neill believed his mother was "the most beautiful woman in the world"<sup>5</sup> and described her as "a wonderful woman, a perfect type of our old beautiful ideal of wife

1. Doris Alexander, The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill, New York, 1962, p. 15.
2. Ibid., p. 16.
3. C. Bowen, p. 16.
4. A & B Gelb, p. 60.
5. D. Alexander, p. 19.

and mother".<sup>1</sup> She was not in fact an "ideal of wife and mother". The "pampered daughter of a middle-class family",<sup>2</sup> she was an incorrigible sentimentalist. At convent school "she received the calling--or what she thought was the calling--to become a nun. She had a vision; she felt, as she knelt before the statue of the Blessed Virgin...."<sup>3</sup> But the idea of marrying the Church left her when she met James O'Neill and became "hypnotized by the glamour and magic that surrounded him".<sup>4</sup> She was "carried away by the idea of being the wife of James O'Neill and, summoning an uncharacteristic tenacity and resolution, she determined to marry him".<sup>5</sup> She found after her marriage that travelling about the country with her husband was often unpleasant and she made a difficult life worse by constant complaint to him. Her most serious defect was a refusal to accept responsibility for her own actions and when the doctor gave her morphine to relieve extended post-natal pain, she blamed her subsequent addiction on Eugene. As a result, he grew up

- 
1. Days Without End, I, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. III, Random House edn., New York, 1955, p. 509. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to the text of Days Without End.
  2. A & B. Gelb, p. 9.
  3. C. Bowen, p. 10.
  4. A & B. Gelb, p. 19.
  5. Ibid., p. 19.

believing that she had never wanted him. Doctor Bisch, who psychoanalysed O'Neill, suggested that subconsciously he had a "deep antagonism toward his mother",<sup>1</sup> that "because his mother had failed him, all women would fail him" and that "he had to take revenge on them".<sup>2</sup> His unhappy marriages and his cruelty to the women who loved him seem to support this view. It was only as he entered middle-age that he became more sensitive and thoughtful in his relationships with women. He was certainly more appreciative of his third wife, Carlotta, than of the others, but even she went to law and charged him with "cruel and abusive treatment".<sup>3</sup>

The despair that Ella O'Neill caused her husband and sons because of her remoteness and drug addiction is violently expressed in Long Day's Journey Into Night. Edmund Tyrone says of his mother:

The hardest thing to take is the blank wall she builds around her. Or it's more like a bank of fog in which she hides and loses herself. Deliberately, that's the hell of it! You know something in her does

- 
1. A & B. Gelb, p. 595.
  2. Ibid., p. 595.
  3. C. Bowen, p. 349.



it deliberately--to get beyond our reach, to be rid of us, to forget we're alive! It's as if, in spite of loving us, she hated us!<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill once spoke of his mother's remoteness to a journalist, Elizabeth Shepley, and described his yearning as he looked "towards a lovely distant mother to whom he stretched his arms in vain".<sup>2</sup> The calculated irresponsibility of his elder brother, Jamie, was closely connected with their mother's drug addiction. James Tyrone, Jr., says, "Never forget the first time I got wise. Caught her in the act with a hypo. Christ, I'd never dreamed before that any women but whores took dope!"<sup>3</sup> and "I suppose I can't forgive her--yet. It meant so much. I'd begun to hope, if she'd beaten the game, I could, too".<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, O'Neill was sympathetic and sensitive to his mother and in Long Day's Journey Into Night Mary Tyrone says, as her menfolk leave the house,

It's so lonely here. (Then her face hardens into bitter self-contempt.) You're lying to yourself again. You wanted to get rid of them. Their contempt and disgust aren't pleasant company. You're glad

- 
1. L.D.J.I.N., IV, p. 139.
  2. A & B. Gelb, p. 64.
  3. L.D.J.I.N., IV, p. 163.
  4. Ibid., IV, p. 162.

they're gone. (She gives a little despairing laugh.) Then Mother of God, why do I feel so lonely?<sup>1</sup>

But apart from the realistic picture of his mother in Long Day's Journey Into Night, O'Neill could not bear to write about her as she really was. He certainly could not bring himself to criticize her. There is only one instance in his plays where a son makes an outright attack on his mother and that is in Dynamo (1928) where Reuben Light says of his mother, "she cheated me!... when I trusted her!...when I loved her better than anyone in the world!..."<sup>2</sup> These words may be significant and reflect a remembered bitterness, but O'Neill usually compensates for his mother's shortcomings by creating an idealized image of her in his mind. Whenever a mother figure appears in his plays, she is presented as a source of happiness and fulfilment in life like Christine Mannon in Mourning Becomes Electra (1931) or of security and peace in death like Amelia Light in Dynamo. In The Great God Brown (1925), we find the Mother of Life who "stands like an idol of Earth, her eyes staring out over the world".<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. L.D.J.I.N., II. ii, p. 95.
  2. Dynamo, I. iv, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. III, Random House edn., p. 448. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to the text of Dynamo.
  3. The Great God Brown, IV.ii, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. III, Random House edn., p. 323. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to the text of The Great God Brown.

O'Neill may even be identifying his mother with the Virgin Mary when Dion Antony says of his dead mother, "the last time I looked...she was stainless and imperishable, and I knew my sobs were ugly and meaningless to her virginity".<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt at all that he deified his mother's image when in Strange Interlude (1927), Nina Leeds declares, "God is a Mother".<sup>2</sup>

The decisive influence on Eugene O'Neill was his father's. James O'Neill had had to overcome extraordinary difficulties to reach the top of his profession. He did so by developing a "steel-hard determination to drive on in the face of failure and ridicule. Again and again in his life he wrested final victory out of defeat through sheer refusal to give up".<sup>3</sup> Far from being soured by his experiences, he "enjoyed every moment of the struggle that changed him from a stage-struck file cutter with a heavy brogue at twenty into one of the foremost actors in America at thirty".<sup>4</sup> He was a vital and likable man. "He loved

---

1. G.G.B., I. iii, p. 282.

2. Strange Interlude, V, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. I, Random House edn., p. 92. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to the text of Strange Interlude.

3. D. Alexander, p. 31.

4. Ibid., p. 36.



good conversation, stimulated by a social glass. His friends were legion: actors, producers, managers--all knew him and loved him."<sup>1</sup> He developed an "ironclad code of behaviour" which incorporated a strong sense of vocation and a desire to act justly and honourably. These aspects of James's personality made a favourable impression on Eugene who sentimentally recalls them in some of his plays. In Ah, Wilderness! (1932) Nat Miller (James O'Neill) is portrayed as a "regular guy" who would be incapable of using his newspaper for a "dirty, spiteful trick", who believed that "there's got to be some discipline in a family"<sup>2</sup> and whose son would never lie to him. In Days Without End (1933), Father Baird's piety is expressed in the pretentious phraseology reminiscent of James O'Neill when he says, "There comes a time in every man's life when he must have his God for friend"<sup>3</sup> and "One may not give one's soul to a devil of hate--and remain forever scatheless".<sup>4</sup> But an interesting summary of James O'Neill's ethics is contained in a poem written by Eugene in 1912

---

1. D. Alexander, p. 49.

2. Ah, Wilderness! IV.iii, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. II, Random House edn., p. 289. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to the text of Ah, Wilderness!

3. D.W.E., I, p. 508.

4. Ibid., III. i, p. 538.

called "A Regular Sort of Guy".<sup>1</sup> This is a sentimental portrait of the man's man who "fights where the fight is thickest" and "keeps his high honor clean", who stands by his friends in trouble, who has a "pat on the back" for "the lowliest bum on the street", who "smiles when the going is hardest" and "plays out the game" like "a regular sort of guy". Whatever we may think of the naivety of these sentiments and the triteness of the expression, they were firmly held by James O'Neill and respected by Eugene. O'Neill received his early religious indoctrination from both his father and his mother, not so much in formal training as in his childhood experience of their belief that the Church was the natural extension of Christ's teaching. They were devout Catholics and it is plain that his boyhood attachment to his religion was an expression of his love for both of them, but it was his father rather than his mother that he identified with religion. This is not surprising. James O'Neill was often mistaken for a priest in everyday life and, as his performance in the part of Jesus Christ in Morse's Passion Play demonstrated, was capable of

---

1. Ralph Sanborn & Barrett H. Clark, A Bibliography of the Works of Eugene O'Neill, New York, 1931, p. 148.

projecting a powerful religious influence.

In September 1895, "a date that was to fall across Eugene O'Neill's life like an ax, shattering its organization, altering it drastically and irrevocably",<sup>1</sup> he was sent away from home to Mount Saint Vincent School:

A shy, bewildered boy who felt lost and frightened among the strange children and the alien, black-robed women....And he was left, not for a few hours, but for days and weeks and months, which were filled with...yearning for Mama, for Papa, for the familiar presences that made up his universe.<sup>2</sup>

His unhappiness was intensified when he had to stay at school for the vacations. When he did go home on holiday, he suffered more on his return. Elizabeth Sargeant has recorded the "acute memories of the outbursts of hysterical loneliness that overtook him on every return to his rigid Christian exile".<sup>3</sup> This separation from his parents was a turning point in his life in which he felt lost and betrayed.

Whatever he suffered from the other frustrations of childhood, this was the experience of which he always talked with

- 
1. D. Alexander, p. 20.
  2. Ibid., p. 23.
  3. A & B. Gelb, p. 64.



the greatest bitterness--never forgetting the shock to his love for his parents and his trust in them when they banished him to school.<sup>1</sup>

He could not bring himself to admit a hatred for his mother, but he felt that "he had been sent away to school at his father's wish, and his father...was the cause of his suffering".<sup>2</sup> When he was a boy, "he revenged himself upon James...by writing his own name in the front of his father's books"<sup>3</sup> and by pouring a tinful of paint "over a box of shiny, metal statuettes depicting James as Edmond Dantes".<sup>4</sup> As a young man, playing small parts in his father's play, he would deliberately go on to the stage without "the 'prop' message he was required to deliver... he would search his costume for the paper and finally hand his father empty air".<sup>5</sup> Sometimes he would come on stage drunk. In these ways he struck at his father's "professional pride and even threatened his career".<sup>6</sup>

---

1. D. Alexander, p. 24.

2. Ibid., p. 25.

3. A & B. Gelb, p. 84.

4. Ibid., p. 84.

5. Ibid., p. 182.

6. Ibid., p. 182.



O'Neill's antagonism towards his father went beyond adolescent rebelliousness. In almost all his plays, we find outcroppings of his bitterness. Sometimes he takes one of his father's small faults and gives it a malevolent prominence<sup>as</sup> in Hutchin Light's hypocrisy, or Ephraim Cabot's miserliness, or Professor Leed's possessiveness. He sometimes uses Oedipal revolt as a major ingredient of a play and savagely criticizes the father figure in Desire Under the Elms (1924), Dynamo (1928) and Mourning Becomes Electra (1931). He publically declared his antagonism to his father when he said:

My early experience with the theatre through my father really made me revolt against it. As a boy I saw so much of the old, ranting, artificial, romantic stage stuff that I always had a sort of contempt for the theatre.<sup>1</sup>

He was artistically at odds with his father, too. On one occasion, when James O'Neill, displeased with Eugene's performance in The Count of Monte Cristo, said, "Sir, I am not satisfied with your performance", his son replied, "Sir, I am not satisfied with your play".<sup>2</sup>

---

1. D. Alexander, p. 66.

2. C. Bowen, p. 34.

Some years after, when James O'Neill attended a rehearsal of his son's play, Before Breakfast (1917), there was another difference of opinion.

Father and son, in a perfect Freudian pattern, disagreed on every point. O'Neill senior tried to instill in Mary Pyne...some of the histrionic technique of an era which the Players had no wish to revive, while O'Neill junior stalked up and down, muttering his displeasure.<sup>1</sup>

His rejection of his father is inseparable from his rejection of Catholicism. When he was sent away to school, he felt betrayed by his father and by his God. Dion Antony was probably echoing O'Neill's own thoughts when he said, "I had loved and trusted him and suddenly the good God was disproved in his person and the evil and injustice of Man was born!"<sup>2</sup> His estrangement from his father and religion was confirmed by his experiences at school where "he learned of the God of Punishment, and he wondered":<sup>3</sup>

His God of Love was beginning to show Himself as a God of Vengeance, you see!...He saw his God as deaf and

- 
1. C. Bowen, p. 83.
  2. G.G.B., II.iii, p. 295.
  3. D.W.E., I, p. 510.

blind and merciless--a Deity Who  
 returned hate for love and revenged  
 Himself upon those who trusted Him!<sup>1</sup>

In the end "he cursed his God and denied Him, and, in  
 revenge, promised his soul to the Devil--on his knees,  
 when everyone thought he was praying!"<sup>2</sup>

But much of James O'Neill stayed with Eugene. He  
 kept his father's code of ethics, he "caught all his  
 father's enthusiasm for Irish culture",<sup>3</sup> and he was like  
 his father in the way that he could not get on with his  
 children. He shewed his father's shrewdness when he  
 "drove a hard bargain on rights to his plays and manuscripts".<sup>4</sup>  
 John Henry Raleigh suggests that "O'Neill's life-long  
 preoccupation with the mystery of the family and the  
 ambiguities of paternity, maternity and son-ship...may  
 have had its roots in Monte Cristo"<sup>5</sup> and Doris Alexander  
 notes that, from watching rehearsals of his father's  
 productions, he obtained ideas he would incorporate in his  
 own work.

---

1. D.W.E., I, p. 511.

2. Ibid., I, p. 511.

3. D. Alexander, p. 62.

4. Ibid., p. 63.

5. John Henry Raleigh, "Eugene O'Neill and the Escape  
 from the Chateau d'If", J. Gassner, p. 15.



(He) learned the value of "strong situations," as his father called them: father and son about to fight, not knowing their relationship (Monte Cristo); brother against brother (The Two Orphans, When Greek meets Greek); the husband whose child has been begotten by a trusted friend (The Manxman). He would use such situations in his own plays--more meaningfully, perhaps, but just as surely for their dramatic value.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of his contemptuous dismissal of his father's theatre, he fell back on the rhetoric of The Count of Monte Cristo for the dialogue of The Fountain (1922), Marco Millions (1925) and Lazarus Laughed (1926).

His father's weak sentimentality appears in the last scene of The Fountain and throughout Ah Wilderness. He shews his father's love of melodrama in All God's Chillun Got Wings (1932) where Ella stalks her husband with a carving knife and in Mourning Becomes Electra where Lavinia places a box of poison pills on her dead father's chest to force a confession of guilt from her mother.

Nor did O'Neill easily escape his religious indoctrination. His plays often shew evil and grace as powerful forces fighting for the human soul. He

---

1. D. Alexander, p. 65.

rejected Catholic absolutes but went on looking for absolutes elsewhere: though he rejected God, he tried to find Him in rational philosophies:

First it was Atheism unadorned.  
Then it was Atheism wedded to Socialism.  
But Socialism proved too weak-kneed a  
mate, and the next...Atheism was living  
in free love with Anarchism, with a  
curse by Nietzsche to bless the union.<sup>1</sup>

None of these alternatives satisfied him, because the destruction of his childhood universe "had left an indelible scar on his spirit".

There always remained something in him that felt itself damned by life, damned with distrust, cursed with the inability ever to reach a lasting belief in any faith, damned by a fear of the lie hiding behind the mask of truth.<sup>2</sup>

The intense bitterness of most of O'Neill's plays reflects his real suffering. For a large part of his life he found it almost impossible to love with trust and confidence because he recalled his youthful "betrayal" and disillusion with the world when he had been "at the mercy of his affections...."<sup>3</sup> O'Neill's dilemma is that of Dion Antony:

1. D.W.E., I, p. 502.

2. Ibid., III,i, pp. 534-535.

3. A & B. Gelb, p. 64.

Why am I afraid of love, I who  
 love love?...Why must I pretend to  
 scorn in order to pity? Why must I  
 hide myself in self-contempt in order  
 to understand?...Why was I born without  
 a skin, O God, that I must wear armor in  
 order to touch or to be touched? Or  
 rather, Old Graybeard, why the devil was  
 I ever born at all?<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill had to wear armour, too, and his mask, like  
 Dion's, was "mocking, reckless, defiant...and sensual".

O'Neill put on this mask when he left his family,  
 friends and a newly-married wife to go to sea in 1909.  
 He joined a gold-prospecting trip to Honduras and in  
 1910 he went on a voyage to Buenos Aires where, once  
 ashore, "he worked when he had to--when he could find  
 work--in order to pay for board, room and liquor, and on  
 occasion for such crude forms of entertainment as he could  
 find near the wharves or in the vicinity of Buenos Aires".<sup>2</sup>  
 In 1911 he returned to New York where he lived at Jimmy  
 the Priest's, a "waterfront dive, with a back room where  
 you could sleep with your head on the table if you bought  
 a schooner of beer".<sup>3</sup> Frank Best assures us that O'Neill  
 "frequented the haunts of bums and seamen seeking true  
 facts"<sup>4</sup> to get copy for his plays, but this is excessive

---

1. G.G.B., Prologue, pp. 264-265.

2. B.H.Clark, p. 19.

3. Ibid., p. 21.

4. C. Bowen, p. 30.



generosity. O'Neill had managed to get himself married to a girl he did not love and he was running away. He seems also to have had an urge to debauch himself and it seemed to comfort him, like many of his characters, to feel that he could sink no lower. Nina Leeds, in Strange Interlude piles up "too many destructive experiences" and seeks "the gutter just to get the security that comes from knowing she's touched bottom and there's no farther to go!";<sup>1</sup> Orin Mannon is driven by his sense of guilt "so deep at the bottom of hell there is no lower you can sink and you rest there in peace!";<sup>2</sup> and in The Iceman Cometh (1939), there is a whole batch of human wrecks gathered in the saloon which Larry Slade sardonically calls, "Bedrock Bar, The End of the Line Café, The Bottom of the Sea Rathskeller!" where no one "has to worry about where they're going next, because there is no farther they can go".<sup>3</sup> These experiences made their contribution to his work certainly, and he tells us, "My real start as a dramatist was when I got out of an academy and among men

---

1. S.I., II, p. 35.

2. The Haunted, III, Mourning Becomes Electra, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. II, Random House edn., p. 160. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to the text of Mourning Becomes Electra.

3. The Iceman Cometh, I, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. III, Random House edn., p. 587. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to the text of The Iceman Cometh.



on the sea".<sup>1</sup> He came into contact with people he could respect and "he came to know something of men, not their hypocritical manners and the masks they wear, but their minds and hearts".<sup>2</sup> (Some of the men he met at this time became models for his characters as I shew in my next chapter.) Most important, O'Neill believed that the sea would help him to prove his manhood. He wanted "to be a he-man; to knock 'em cold and eat 'em alive"<sup>3</sup> and, by signing on the "Charles Racine", he had every opportunity to do so. He "scrubbed decks, climbed the rigging, spliced ropes, and stood watch. He subsisted, like the others, on hard tack and dried codfish. At Buenos Aires he was paid off and loafed on the docks and in waterfront dives until his money ran out".<sup>4</sup>

Whatever the value of this period to O'Neill in his work and attitudes, it was physically unfortunate. Whether his tuberculosis was inherited (two of his grandparents died of it) or contacted in Argentina or picked up by sleeping in a bed at Jimmy the Priest's "previously occupied by a man who

---

1. A & B. Gelb, p. 156.

2. B.H. Clark, p. 30.

3. A & B Gelb, p. 144.

4. C. Bowen, p. 30.

who had died of the disease",<sup>1</sup> we do not know. The likeliest explanation is that his health broke down mainly because "his nervous system, never too strong, had been seriously taxed by a good deal of hard and indiscriminate drinking".<sup>2</sup> On Christmas Eve, 1912, he entered the Gaylord Sanatorium for consumptives at Wallingford, Connecticut. Medically, he was an uninteresting case, because "there was so little wrong with him",<sup>3</sup> and after five months, he was discharged. The importance of Gaylord to O'Neill is that he found time there to take stock of himself. His mind "got the chance to establish itself, to digest and evaluate the impressions of many past years in which one experience had crowded on another with never a second's reflection".<sup>4</sup> It was here too that "the urge to write first came to him, the desire to express what he knew and felt about life in the form of drama".<sup>5</sup> This was the second turning point in his life, for though he went into Gaylord without knowing what he wanted to do in life, he came out intending to write plays "rather... than do anything else".<sup>6</sup>

---

1. A. & B. Gelb, p. 226.

2. B.H. Clark, p. 27.

3. Ibid., p. 29.

4. Ibid., p. 28.

5. Ibid., p. 28.

6. D. Alexander, p. 177.

## CHAPTER 2

### CHARACTERS AND THEMES OF THE EARLY PERIOD

In this chapter I want to make a brief sketch of the dominant characters and themes to be found in the plays of the early period. O'Neill once said:

Most modern plays are concerned with the relation between man and man, but that does not interest me at all. I am interested only in the relation between man and God.<sup>1</sup>

It would have been truer for O'Neill to say that he was interested only in the relationship between God and himself. He rejected God and his father whom he identified with God, but he found it impossible to cope with the consequences. He discovered that he needed substitutes for both father-figures and that he was divided between scepticism and a yearning for religious certitude. His plays express this conflict of mind and are largely a search for personal redemption. As a result, O'Neill's characters are either projections of his own personality, portraits of people he knew or

---

1. Introduction to J.W. Krutch's Nine Plays, New York, 1932, p. xvii.



a combination of both. His themes express his own mental divisions, illustrate obsessions and indirectly reflect the conflicts of his parents. No one can read his plays without realizing how powerfully his personal experience shaped his art, but towards the end of this period, there are signs of a broadening and externalizing of his thought and art.

A recurrent character in the early plays is the self-portrait. O'Neill draws a romantic picture, depicting himself as he liked to think he was; lonely, pensive, life-weary and poetic. The character is close to life in his despair, his guilt and in his inability to find harmony and ease. Like his creator, he is haunted by a sense of rootlessness. The character is modelled on people O'Neill knew as a young man. Smitty of the *Glencairn* plays, for instance, was a man he calls "A" whom he met in Buenos Aires. O'Neill described him to Louis Kalonyme:

He was very young, about 25 at the most, and extraordinarily handsome. Blond, almost too beautiful, he was, in appearance, very like Oscar Wilde's description of Dorian Gray. Even his name was as flowery. He was the younger son of a traditionally noble British family. He had been through the English public schools, had acquired a university accent, and, finally down in London for good, became one of its lordly young men....



Then suddenly he messed up his life-- pretty conspicuously. Though he didn't have to leave England, he couldn't face life there, couldn't bear the thought of daily reminders of what he'd lost--a lady--<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill's models were usually very like him in mind, attitude and experience and "A" provided a clear mirror in which he might see himself reflected. Physically, "A" would remind him of the romantic heroes of nineteenth century poetry and prose whom he so admired. Like O'Neill, "A" had "messed up his life--pretty conspicuously" and had run away from the mess. He would recall to O'Neill his own aristocratic connections and "the associations of the name O'Neill, which had been borne by the kings of Ireland".<sup>2</sup> Perhaps most significant of all, "A" resembled Dorian Gray in whose story O'Neill "saw his whole youthful torment rendered meaningful".<sup>3</sup>

Smitty is portrayed as the conventional aristocratic outcast. Although he is in the gutter, he has an obvious breeding which earns him the nickname, "Duke", he shews a patrician dislike of the goings on in the forecastle, and he maintains a "drunken dignity" in dealing with his

---

1. D. Alexander, pp. 143-144.

2. Ibid., p. 62.

3. Ibid., p. 103.

inferiors as we see in his "I'll trouble you not to pry into my affairs, Donkeyman".<sup>1</sup> In The Moon of the Caribbees (1917), O'Neill draws Smitty too sentimentally. He is a self-hating personality who is running away from some problem too delicate to be revealed to us. He accompanies his drinking and forced gaiety with disgusted shudders and remarks such as "We're poor little lambs who have lost our way, eh, Donk? Damned from here to eternity, what?"<sup>2</sup> He is too slightly drawn, having hardly more than forty sentences to say in the whole play, and it would be easy to overlook him in the vigour of his shipmates' carousing. He reappears in In the Zone (1917), where he still does not have a lot to say, but is certainly the central character. He has lost his private battle with alcohol and his girl and because they are suspicious of his behaviour, his shipmates force him to reveal his problem in humiliating circumstances. Smitty is interesting because his behaviour is the first example of O'Neill's favourite device of presenting a character who faces life by putting a barrier between himself and other people. In other plays, O'Neill shews

- 
1. The Moon of the Caribbees, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. I, Random House edn. p. 467. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to the text of The Moon of the Caribbees.
  2. M. of the C., p. 467.

this defensiveness by causing his characters to wear masks which they put on or take off in The Great God Brown (1927), by setting soliloquy against conversation, in Strange Interlude (1927), and by causing characters to create wordy "pipe-dreams" about themselves in The Iceman Cometh (1941) and Long Day's Journey Into Night (1941). I shall discuss the use of these devices in more detail later.

Another interesting character in the Glencairn plays is Driscoll. O'Neill based this character on a real life Driscoll:

He was a giant of a man, and absurdly strong....He was very proud of his strength, his capacity for gruelling work. It seemed to give him mental poise to be able to dominate the stokehold....<sup>1</sup>

Driscoll was not as strong as O'Neill had thought and eventually he committed suicide. O'Neill remarked, "Driscoll's curious death puzzled me....I concluded something must have shaken his hard-boiled poise, for he wasn't the type who just give up, and he loved life".<sup>2</sup> Driscoll appears in all the Glencairn plays and he is described in them as "a powerfully built Irishman",<sup>3</sup>

---

1. D. Alexander, p. 152.

2. Ibid., p. 246.

3. M. of the C., p. 456.



"a tall, powerful Irishman"<sup>1</sup> and "a brawny Irishman with the battered features of a prize-fighter".<sup>2</sup> In three of the Glencairn plays his function is not significant, but in Bound East for Cardiff (1914) he is more important. He is the foil to the dying Yank and throughout the play they talk about their peculiar relationship to each other, revealing their mutual affection, their hidden hopes for the future and God's justice. Yank tends to claim most of our attention because of his predicament, but Driscoll's rough kindness makes him attractive. He reassures Yank:

Didn't I tell you you wasn't half as sick as you thought you was? The Captain'll have you out on deck cursin' and swearin' loike a trooper before the week is out.<sup>3</sup>

He comforts Yank's fear of God's vengeance for killing a man:

Ye stabbed him, and be damned to him, for the skulkin' swine he was, afther him tryin' to stick you in the back, and you not suspectin'. Let your conscience be aisy. I wisht I had nothin' blacker than that on my sowl.<sup>4</sup>

- 
1. The Long Voyage Home, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. I, Random House edn., p. 496. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to the text of The Long Voyage Home.
  2. Bound East for Cardiff, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. I, Random House edn., p. 478. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to the text of Bound East for Cardiff.
  3. B.E. for C., p. 485.
  4. Ibid., p. 488.



He meets Yank's embarrassed confession of his hopes for their future together with a brusque reassurance:

Laugh at you, is ut? When I'm havin'  
the same thoughts myself, toime afther toime.  
It's a grand idea and we'll be doin' ut sure....<sup>1</sup>

The dovetailed nature of the conversation between these men with its closely interwoven thought patterns suggests that the characters are not so much individuals as aspects of the same mind. This impression is intensified because O'Neill does not sharply differentiate them as persons and because we are more conscious of what they say than what they do. In The Hairy Ape (1921), of course, O'Neill combines Yank's name and Driscoll's temperament into one character.

One of O'Neill's dominant subjects is mental conflict and he experiments with many dramatic forms to convey it. Sometimes he divides what is essentially one personality between two players, an ego and an alter ego. He does this in Beyond the Horizon (1918) where the personality being divided is plainly that of O'Neill himself. Robert Mayo represents that side of O'Neill which has "a touch of the poet about him expressed in his high forehead and wide, dark eyes",<sup>2</sup> he is the intellectual who ought to "have

---

1. B.E. for C., p. 487.

2. Beyond the Horizon, I. i, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill Vol. III, Random House edn. p. 81.

gone back to college...".<sup>1</sup> He has an Irish mystical streak and dreams childhood dreams of fairies who sang songs "that told of all the wonderful things they had in their home on the other side of the hills".<sup>2</sup>

Andrew Mayo presents the other side of O'Neill, the "husky, sun-bronzed handsome" type he hoped to be when he saw himself as a "he-man; to knock 'em cold and eat 'em alive". The brothers represent opposed attitudes and values and the play shews what can happen when natural instincts are thwarted. The idea came to O'Neill when he remembered a Norwegian seaman who had been his friend.

The great sorrow and mistake of his life, he used to grumble, was that as a boy he had left the small paternal farm to run away to sea. He had been at sea twenty years, and had never gone home once in that time....He loved to hold forth on what a fool he had been to leave the farm.... I thought, "What if he had stayed on the farm, with his instincts? What would have happened?"<sup>3</sup>

The play tries to give a detached answer: each character who chooses wrongly becomes the victim of his "desire for what he can never have--for what lies beyond the horizon".<sup>4</sup>

---

1. B. the H., I.i, p. 83.

2. Ibid., I.i, p. 90.

3. B.H. Clark, p. 94.

4. Ibid., p. 96.

Once again O'Neill is writing about himself. His mind at this time was divided between his desire to lead a life of free adventure and his need for security through marriage. He had undertaken to settle down to married life with his second wife, Agnes Boulton, and he was finding it hard to resist an "inborn craving for the sea's unrest".<sup>1</sup>

...he imagined himself in the position of the character he visualized when he first thought of the play: a man who "would throw away his instinctive dream and accept the thralldom of the farm for--why, for almost any nice little poetical craving--the romance of sex, say."<sup>2</sup>

He conveys this personal struggle in Beyond the Horizon not only through the antagonists, Robert and Andrew, but also by structural symbolism. He alternates indoor and outdoor scenes which are intended to represent the influences of static acceptance of life and adventurous aspiration respectively. In the indoor scenes, all the characters express their disillusionment, jealousies and hatreds and in the farmhouse sitting room Robert Mayo hears of the fatal nature of his illness. In the outdoor scenes, the Mayo brothers talk of the promise and adventure of

---

1. B.H. Clark, p. 95.

2. C. Bowen, pp. 100-101.



the outside world and, at the end of the play, Robert leaves the house to die on the hillside where he can see "the edge of the sun's disc rising from the rim of the hills".<sup>1</sup> O'Neill intends us to see Robert's death as a release to happiness, but as Frederic Carpenter has pointed out, Beyond the Horizon "achieves its finest tragic effect, not with Robert Mayo's proclamation of freedom in death, but with Ruth Mayo's acceptance of defeat".<sup>2</sup> He recalls that, as Andrew tries to comfort her, Ruth "remains silent...her mind already sinking back into that spent calm beyond the further troubling of any hope".<sup>3</sup> I would add to this that Ruth's "acceptance of defeat" foreshadows O'Neill's own hopeless pessimism which is the outcome of his personal struggle and which is illustrated in Strange Interlude (1927) and The Iceman Cometh (1939).

Beyond the Horizon has other important autobiographical features. The rivalry of the Mayo brothers which underlies their mutual affection is like that between O'Neill and his brother, Jamie. The enraged disappointment of James Mayo at Andrew's failure to follow him as a farmer

---

1. B. the H., III. iii, p. 168.

2. Frederic I. Carpenter, Eugene O'Neill, New York, 1964, p. 89.

3. B. the H., III. iii, p. 169.



is an echo of James O'Neill's regret that his sons did not wish to take up acting. Robert Mayo, like O'Neill, has tuberculosis. Even the Mayo farm has its original in a farm O'Neill knew in New England. There ran by it "a byway across the dunes, called the Atkins-Mayo road" which "lent its name to the two families"<sup>1</sup> in the play.

O'Neill continues to investigate mental conflict in The Emperor Jones (1920) and The Hairy Ape (1921). This time he shews the suffering that comes from the individual's collision with society. O'Neill again bases his characters on people he knew or heard about and again uses his art to express his own difficulties of adjustment. In the "New York World", O'Neill described the original of Brutus Jones and the source of the play's central device--the silver bullet.

The idea of The Emperor Jones came from an old circus man I knew. This man told me a story current in Hayti concerning the late President Sam. This was to the effect that Sam had said they'd never get him with a lead bullet; that he would get himself first with a silver one....<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. A & B. Gelb, p. 334.
  2. B.H. Clark, p. 104.

But there was another negro, Adam Scott, a bartender, who contributed to the character of Brutus. Scott fascinated and amused O'Neill because he was both an elder of the Shiloh Baptist Church and a more than competent drinker. On being challenged once about his ambiguous position, Scott replied, "I'm a very religious man, but after Sunday, I lay my Jesus on the shelf",<sup>1</sup> a remark paraphrased by Brutus Jones in his "I'se after de coin, an' I lays my Jesus on de shelf for de time bein'".<sup>2</sup>

The detail of Brutus Jones's character seems at first sight to owe a lot to certain modern psychologists and some critics suggested after seeing the play that O'Neill had been directly influenced by Freud. O'Neill denied this, saying that the critics "read too damn much Freud into stuff that could very well have been written exactly as it is before psychoanalysis was ever heard of".<sup>3</sup> But he did admit that he found some of Jung's "suggestions...extraordinarily illuminating in the light"

- 
1. A & B. Gelb, p. 203.
  2. The Emperor Jones, I, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. III, Random House edn., p. 185. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to the text of The Emperor Jones.
  3. W. David Sievers, Freud on Broadway, New York, 1955, p. 97.

of his own experiences "with hidden human motives"<sup>1</sup> and some of Jung is directly relevant. In his "Two Essays on Analytical Psychology" Jung argues that the divided personality grew out of the collective or tribal psyche, that it did so only after a grim struggle and that it never entirely escaped lingering tribal inhibitions which constantly tried to reconquer the individual ego. This could be a description of Brutus Jones's predicament and the battle for his mind which the play sets before us. Jones has revolted against his tribal affiliations and has established his individual independence mainly by standing on the shoulders of his own kind. He is now the "Emperor" of a backward native tribe, but he is still subject to primitive superstitions and his journey through the jungle is a retracement by way of voodoo, fear of the witchdoctor and hypnosis to the authority and power of the tribe. The play's theme, to use Jung's terms, is a conflict between the individual and collective psyches. The end of the play shews O'Neill's belief that although superstitions may remain a powerful influence - and he may be thinking of his own religious

---

1. W. D. Sievers, p. 97.



superstitions too - the man who is emancipated can never fully be reclaimed by savagery or, in his own case, religious doctrine. Jones dies with his face to the ground, "his arms outstretched, whimpering with fear", but his last words are "You don't git me yit!"<sup>1</sup> and we see that he has not yielded his individuality.

In The Emperor Jones the individual is "in advance" of the society he is fighting against, but in The Hairy Ape (1921) he is socially retarded. Frederic Carpenter claims that this play "describes the failure of the uneducated American to 'belong' to civilized society",<sup>2</sup> but I think he narrows O'Neill's intention too much. Certainly, the main character is called Yank and the play is set in America, but the theme is Everyman and his relation with his environment. O'Neill once wrote that Yank is a "symbol of man, who has lost his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not yet acquired in a spiritual way".<sup>3</sup> On another occasion, he said, "Yank is really yourself, and myself".<sup>4</sup> I think that the play expresses O'Neill's

- 
1. E.J., VII, p. 202.
  2. F.I. Carpenter, p. 100.
  3. B.H. Clark, p. 127.
  4. F.I. Carpenter, p. 101.



own maladjustment, this time stressing his sense of rootlessness. The source of O'Neill's rootlessness is revealed in his poem, "The Lay of the Singer's Fall" where he describes a "singer" - himself - who had enjoyed a happy, boyhood certitude, but who had lost his faith as "the Devil of Doubt crept in". Like Yank, he could not return to his "old harmony" and, as a result, "the soul of the singer died---". This rootlessness occurs in many of O'Neill's characters. In Smitty, it is a bitter yearning for something lost, the "beastly memories" that "haunted you when you were awake and when you were asleep--".<sup>1</sup> In Olsen, it is homesickness when he longs for his farm and his people, in Yank of the Glencairn plays it is a dream of a home where he could "have a wife, and kids to play with at night after supper when your work was done"<sup>2</sup> and in Jim Harris it is a search for a "white" identity. Yank of The Hairy Ape expresses his problem in characteristic allegory: "I ain't on oith and I ain't in heaven, get me? I'm in de middle tryin' to separate 'em, takin' all de woist

---

1. M. of the C., p. 467.

2. B.E. for C., p. 486.

punches from bot' of 'em."<sup>1</sup> "de woist punches" also describes O'Neill's mental conflict which comes not from trying to separate anything, but from trying to reconcile his scepticism and his need for religious faith.

At this time, O'Neill begins to explore characters with a ruling passion. O'Neill himself had a compulsive urge to write, he was often in the grip of his emotions and his drinking habits sometimes got the better of him, but he was not a victim of neurotic obsession. His mother, however, was obsessed by her need for drugs and the results of her addiction are exposed in Long Day's Journey Into Night (1941). Perhaps because of his mother's addiction, O'Neill would be more than usually interested in obsession and the destructive effect it could have on personality. In his early plays, he creates two obsessed characters, both sailors. Captain Keeney is in Ile (1917) and Captain Bartlett appears in Gold (1920) and Where the Cross is Made (1928). In Ile, the main characters are Keeney, whose pride is always to return from a whaling expedition with his ship's hold filled with oil, and his

---

1. The Hairy Ape, VIII, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol.III, Random House edn., p. 253. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to the text of The Hairy Ape.

wife, Annie, who will be sacrificed to his vanity. Mary Vorse suggested the story to O'Neill and told him of a man she had known called Captain John Cook:

(He) drove his men to the point of mutiny by insisting on staying at sea for two years, in order to harvest his quota of whale oil; his wife, Viola, who accompanied him on the voyage in 1903, went mad from a combination of monotony and witnessing her husband's cruelty to his men.<sup>1</sup>

The dramatic conflict is between Keeney's obsession and his solicitude for his wife, but because the outcome is never in doubt the play lacks tension. O'Neill tries to inject vitality by including melodramatic incidents like Keeney's violent crushing of the mutiny and the deranged Annie's discordant playing of the organ at the final curtain, but they do not compensate for the play's weakness. The play really fails because he does not make clear the true nature of Keeney's monomania. Obviously, there must be something more to Keeney's problem than a desire to return to port with a full consignment of oil. If we knew more about the real obsession, we could better understand its grip on him and sympathize with him. Keeney certainly cannot explain his dilemma. He says:

---

1. A & B. Gelb, p. 314.



I've always done it--since my first voyage as skipper. I always come back--with a full ship--and--it don't seem right not to--somehow. I been always first whalin' skipper out o' Homeport, and-- Don't you see my meanin', Annie?<sup>1</sup>

Annie doesn't, of course, and we can only surmise that, in his narrow way, Keeney is a perfectionist. He is unable to control his obsession and one of his crew explains it as "the punishment o' God on him".<sup>2</sup>

This explanation does not really help us, since we do not know why he is being punished. The story is only half-told.

O'Neill's preoccupation with obsession continues in Gold (1920). Here the monomaniac is Captain Bartlett, who is obsessed by a desire to deceive himself. At first sight, his ruling passion looks like greed and indeed the irony of his position is that in the beginning he "wanted gold in order that he might give his wife and children happiness and social security".<sup>3</sup> His obsession gradually shews itself as a determination to live in fantasy and to ignore society. The dramatic conflict is better defined here

- 
1. Ile, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. I, Random House edn., p. 547. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to Ile.
  2. I., p. 537.
  3. Sophus Keith Winther, Eugene O'Neill, New York, 1961, p. 272.

than in Ile and is a struggle between obsession and conscience. What is more, the outcome is by no means predictable. But the real interest of the play is the significance of Bartlett in O'Neill's technical development. He is a link between two of O'Neill's character types. Because he has to fight his conscience, he is one of the early "divided" characters, but his willing submission to illusion is the earliest and crudest form of the O'Neillian "pipe-dream" and links him with Larry Slade and the other "roomers" at Harry Hope's saloon in The Iceman Cometh (1939).

There is a fairly precise connection between the obsessions of these two sailors and Ella O'Neill's drug addiction. The obsessions of both Keeney and Bartlett cause a diminishing sense of responsibility, increasing callousness and a growing self-centredness, and the resemblance to the process and results of addiction is plain. It is noticeable, too, that the two captains are susceptible to the "sustaining lie" that the drug addict creates about himself to avoid an unbearable reality. O'Neill calls this illusion a "pipe-dream", a common metaphor taken from drug addicts' slang. The sustaining lie in these plays is the drug and,

when the victim is deprived of it, he loses his vitality just like the addict. When Keeney's resolve is weakening, "his shoulders sag, he becomes old".<sup>1</sup> When Nat destroys his father's illusion, Captain Bartlett "sighs, his eyes shut...", he "sags back in his chair, his head bent forward limply on his chest"<sup>2</sup> and dies.

Where The Cross is Made (1918) explores the possibility that an obsession can transfer itself from one person to another. The suggestion that mental aberration, like some physical diseases, can perpetuate itself by way of successive hosts is perhaps fantastic, but mental patients can have a deleterious effect on one another and sane people can be degraded by mob influence. O'Neill goes even farther and suggests that the madness he portrays might extend to the audience:

This play presumes that everybody is mad but the girl....Everybody but the girl means everybody in the house but the girl. I want to see whether it's possible to make an audience go mad too.<sup>3</sup>

O'Neill may have been playing a practical joke, because when George Jean Nathan advised him in the interests of his reputation to tear up the play, he replied:

- 
1. I., p. 549.
  2. Gold, IV, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. II, Random House edn., p. 692.
  3. A & B. Gelb, p. 385.



But where did you get the idea that I really valued "Where the Cross Is Made"? It was great fun to write, theatrically very thrilling, an amusing experiment in treating the audience as insane--that is all it means or ever meant to me.<sup>1</sup>

I am not sure that we can accept this remark at its face value. The thoughtful character portraits and the moments of passion in the play argue the writer's serious intention, while the quarrels between producer and playwright during rehearsal for the play's first performance about removing the hallucination scenes suggest O'Neill's emotional involvement. I think that there are links between the play and O'Neill's personal conflict and experiences of obsession. Agnes Boulton, his second wife, recalled his "sudden and rather dreadful outbursts of violence" when "he appeared more like a madman than anything else".

The "madman" first appeared when they went to New York in November, 1918, for the production of Where the Cross is Made. At a drinking party Agnes got into a conversation about modern painting with Teddy Ballantine. Both of them were intensely interested and showed it. Later, when Agnes came to Gene to urge him to leave with her, he suddenly pushed her away and then slapped her hard across the face with the back of his hand. "Then he laughed, his mouth distorted with an ironic grin".<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. From a letter written by O'Neill to George Jean Nathan, 20 June, 1920, O.Cargill, p. 102.
  2. D. Alexander, p. 256.

Later, "when he returned to their hotel room, sick and miserable, she put her hand on his head. 'He reached out and put his arm around me,' Agnes would say, 'holding me tightly and quivering.'"<sup>1</sup> It is possible that, when he wrote about a man at the mercy of his passion, he was thinking, too, of his own difficulties of self-control. Perhaps the play's link with his mother's drug addiction is more important. In the last scene of Long Day's Journey Into Night (1941), Ella Tyrone, under the influence of drugs, joins her husband and sons in their sitting room, carrying her "old-fashioned white satin wedding gown".

Her face is paler than ever. Her eyes look enormous. They glisten like polished black jewels. The uncanny thing is that her face now appears so youthful. Experience seems ironed out of it. It is a marble mask of girlish innocence, the mouth caught in a shy smile. Her white hair is braided in two pigtails which hang over her breast.<sup>2</sup>

Oblivious to the others, she talks to herself about her girlhood at the convent, the vision she saw of the Virgin Mary and the way she fell in love with her husband. As she does so, her husband and sons make frenzied attempts to break through her illusion, but they fail.

---

1. D. Alexander, pp. 256-257.

2. L.D.J.I.N., IV, p. 170.

At last, they see that they have lost her. Sadly,  
Jamie recites Swinburne's "A Leave-taking":

Let us go hence, my songs; she will not hear.  
.....  
She loves not you nor me as all we love her.  
Yea, though we sang as angels in her ear,  
She would not hear.<sup>1</sup>

The only way Ella can continue to live is within her sustaining lie. This scene illustrates the tragedy of the O'Neill family which haunted Eugene all his life. It is hard to believe that Where The Cross Is Made, whose final scene also deals with the tragic consequences of the sustaining lie, could be written as "an amusing experiment".

Anna Christie (1920) is an excellent example of the way O'Neill bases the surface details of his characters on people he knew and their deeper motivation on his own experience, and the way he draws the theme of his plays from his own dilemma. Anna Christie was the "outgrowth of an earlier play, Chris, or Chris Christopherson. It was also at one time called De Old Davil."<sup>2</sup> In this earlier version written in 1919, the main character was a Swedish seaman O'Neill met in New York. O'Neill said of him:

---

1. L.D.J.I.N., IV, p. 173.

2. B.H. Clark, p. 110.



He had sailed the sea until he was sick of the mention of it. But it was the only work he knew. At the time he was my room-mate he was out of work, wouldn't go to sea and spent the time guzzling whiskey and razzing the sea. In time he got a coal barge to captain. One Christmas Eve he got terribly drunk and tottered away about 2 o'clock in the morning for his barge. The next morning he was found frozen on a cake of ice between the piles and the dock. In trying to board the barge he stumbled on the plank and fell over.<sup>1</sup>

The theme of this earlier play is man's futile fight against a relentless evil force, symbolized as "dat ol' daval sea" and the play shews Christopherson's losing battle against the sea's influence over himself and his daughter, Anna. Anna is portrayed as a "tepid girl and the first mate" is "nothing like the tempestuous stoker, Matt Burke, whom O'Neill later developed".<sup>2</sup> The play was not successful and O'Neill eventually rewrote it as Anna Christie. He drew more on his memories for this later version than for the first. He sets the opening scene in "'Johnny-the-Priest's' saloon near South Street, New York City"<sup>3</sup> which is obviously

---

1. B. H. Clark, p. 111.

2. A & B. Gelb, p. 397.

3. Anna Christie, I, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. III, Random House edn., p. 3. This edition will be used in all subsequent references to Anna Christie.

Jimmy-the-Priest's saloon where he "did a great deal of talking, listening and drinking"<sup>1</sup> in 1911. The owner of the saloon "had earned his name because he looked much more like an ascetic than a saloonkeeper".<sup>2</sup> He appears in Anna Christie as Johnny-the-Priest and O'Neill describes him in the play's opening stage instructions:

With his pale, thin, clean-shaven face, mild blue eyes and white hair, a cassock would seem more suited to him than the apron he wears....But beneath all his mildness one senses the man behind the mask--cynical, callous, hard as nails.<sup>3</sup>

O'Neill obtained much of his "firsthand knowledge of whores...from the half dozen months he lived at Jimmy's"<sup>4</sup> and "one of them, Maude...professed to be in love with him".<sup>5</sup> Marthy Owen may be based on Maude or may be a composite portrait of the other women O'Neill met at the saloon, but Anna was certainly modelled on a woman who was known to him and "the actual details of her regeneration" which the play traces "are copied from letters of the former mistress of O'Neill's best friend, Terry Carlin".<sup>6</sup> This girl, "like Anna, had tried being a 'nurse girl' at one time, before taking to the streets",<sup>7</sup>

- 
1. C. Bowen, p. 33.
  2. A & B. Gelb, p. 161.
  3. A.C., I, p.3.
  4. A & B. Gelb, p. 170.
  5. Ibid., p. 163.
  6. F.I. Carpenter, p. 95.
  7. A & B. Gelb, p. 290.

but after living with Carlin for some time, she left him and began a new life in California. She described her "re-birth" in a letter to Carlin where she said:

I am intoxicated by all this beauty and love the very air and earth. I feel the ecstasy of the aesthetic fanatic.... I feel newborn and free....At night I sleep as I have never slept--a deep dreamless slumber. I awake to a cold plunge in the stream....Everything in the past is dead....I have become happy, healthy, and free, free without hardness. ...I will now lave myself with the pure crystal waters and make myself clean again....<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill almost paraphrases these sentiments when Anna describes how the sea has given her a new life:

And I seem to have forgot--everything that's happened--like it didn't matter no more. And I feel clean, somehow--like you feel yust after you've took a bath. And I feel happy for once--yes, honest!--<sup>2</sup> happier than I ever been anywhere before!

She expresses the feeling of being purified again when she explains what loving Mat Burke has done to her. She asks him, "Will you believe it if I tell you that loving you has made me--clean?"<sup>3</sup>

As he re-wrote Chris Christopherson, O'Neill ran into difficulty because he made the "mistake of not

---

1. A & B. Gelb, pp. 290-291.

2. A.C., II, pp. 28-29.

3. A.C., III, pp. 59-60.



deciding exactly whose play it was to be, Anna's or Chris's";<sup>1</sup> he admitted to Nathan that "Anna forced herself on me, middle of the third act".<sup>2</sup> She does this, of course, because the childhood experiences that motivate her are closer to those of O'Neill himself than are Chris's. As Carpenter points out,<sup>3</sup> her neglect by her father, her banishment to live with relatives and her resultant prostitution are very much like O'Neill's "rejection" by his father, his exile to boarding school and his youthful promiscuity. As a result, Anna's recriminations were a channel for some of O'Neill's own bitterness. She berates Chris in terms we might expect O'Neill to use against his own father.

Didn't I write you year after year how rotten it was and what a dirty slave them cousins made of me? What'd you care? Nothing! Not even enough to come out and see me!....You just didn't want to be bothered with me!<sup>4</sup>

So too, as Anna became dominant, O'Neill changed the theme of the first play to that of the consequences of paternal irresponsibility. Anna has been exploited by relatives and others at a time when she ought to have had her father's

- 
1. B.H. Clark, p. 113.
  2. Ibid., p. 112.
  3. F.I. Carpenter, p. 95.
  4. A.C., III, p. 57.

protection. She is now permanently maladjusted so that she distrusts "all men, God damn 'em! I hate 'em! Hate 'em!"<sup>1</sup> Her future, too, will be warped for even if she marries Burke, she will not forget her cousin, Paul, who first "started" her "wrong" because "he was big and strong--(Pointing to Burke)--like you!"<sup>2</sup> Her father is the cause of all the trouble. She tells him, "If you'd even acted like a man--if you'd even had been a regular father and had me with you--maybe things would be different!"<sup>3</sup>

The play also reflects another of O'Neill's boyhood dilemmas. James and Ella O'Neill both came from Irish Catholic families, but their backgrounds were irreconcilable.

Ella could never forgive James for exposing her to his rough-and-tumble world; and he could not forgive her for the pride with which she held aloof from that world. Yet each satisfied in the other a perverse need to torment and pardon. They could express their love only in cycles of punishment and reconciliation.<sup>4</sup>

- 
1. A.C., III, pp. 58-59.
  2. Ibid., p. 57.
  3. Ibid., p. 58.
  4. A & B. Gelb, p. 9.

This conflict made an indelible impression on O'Neill and he often portrays his parents "as lovers communicating in code, neither ever able to find the other's key".<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the best example of this incompatibility is in The Great God Brown (1925) where Dion Antony and his wife, Margaret, go through their married life loving each other's masks and deliberately hiding their true natures. In Welded (1923), Eleanor and Michael Cape find married happiness as they "torture and tear, and clutch for each other's souls!--fight--fail and hate again--but!--fail with pride--with joy!"<sup>2</sup> O'Neill was torn between conflicting loyalties to his father and mother and tried to work out his problems through his plays.

In Anna Christie, he presents his divided allegiances as a struggle between opposed masculine and feminine attitudes. Christopherson and Burke represent the old-fashioned masculine attitude which assumes that the man is superior to the woman and that she is his property. They try to dictate Anna's future and act as though there were one set of morals for men and another for women.

---

1. A & B. Gelb, p. 10.

2. Welded, III, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. II, Random House edn., p. 488. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to the text of Welded.



Anna, having been exploited by men, is militantly independent. When Burke says, "She'll do what I say! You've had your hold on her long enough. It's my turn now" and Chris argues, "Ay tal you she don't! Ay'm her fa'der",<sup>1</sup> Anna turns on them both and says:

First thing is, I want to tell you two guys something. You was going on 's if one of you had got to own me. But nobody owns me, see?--'cepting myself. I'll do what I please and no man, I don't give a hoot who he is, can tell me what to do! I ain't asking either of you for a living. I can make it myself--one way or other. I'm my own boss.<sup>2</sup>

The two men believe that chastity is the most desirable of virtues in a woman although this morality does not apply to them: Chris lives with Marthy Owen, a good-natured wharf-side prostitute, and Burke admits that "them cows on the waterfront is the only women I've met up with since I was growed to a man".<sup>3</sup> When Chris first hears from Anna, he idealizes her as being a "fine, good, strong gel, pooty like hell!"<sup>4</sup> who some day will "marry good, steady land faller here in East, have home

---

1. A.C., III, p. 55.

2. Ibid., III, pp. 56-57.

3. Ibid., II, p. 34.

4. Ibid., I, p. 12.

all her own, have kits--".<sup>1</sup> Burke, who falls in love with Anna and asks her to marry him, sees her as a "fine dacent girl" whose pardon for an unintended slight he will ask "a thousand times--and on my knees, if ye like".<sup>2</sup> The irony of the play is that Anna is, in fact, a hardened prostitute. Nevertheless, she is more resilient and sensible than the two men. She exposes the weakness of Mat's condemnation of her past when she points out, "You been doing the same thing all your life, picking up a new girl in every port. How're you any better than I was?"<sup>3</sup> She proves, too, that given a new set of circumstances, she can forget the past and make a fresh start. The sea has changed her "'s if all I'd been through wasn't me and didn't count and was yust like it never happened--".<sup>4</sup> But Mat's response and his subsequent behaviour shew that he will not easily lose his preconceived ideas. The play demonstrates that not only are masculine ideas inflexible and arid but also that a man is imprisoned by them. It is the woman who is

---

1. A.C., I, p. 13.

2. Ibid., II, p. 34.

3. Ibid., IV, p. 73.

4. Ibid., III, p. 59.

sufficiently adaptable and ingenious to devise a sensible alternative and it is only by accepting Anna's initiative that Mat can escape his narrow masculine absolutes. Here O'Neill, indirectly perhaps, seems to shew his sympathy with his mother. In real life, however, his mother shewed neither adaptability or ingenuity and it is plain from Long Day's Journey Into Night (1941) that in spite of his father's efforts to make life bearable, her drug addiction, her withdrawal into herself and her refusal to make the best of what she had got made the family a hopeless quartet.

Here, we move on from domestic influences to personal influences of a broader and more sociological kind. As he reached manhood, O'Neill became a socialist and Corwin Wilson, one of his friends at Harvard, recalls:

O'Neill and I discussed politics, and he was in the same boat as I was, wavering between extreme Marxian socialism on the one hand, extreme Nietzschean individualism and anarchism on the other --although he admitted to me he leaned strongest in the latter direction.<sup>1</sup>

In 1915, O'Neill went to live at the notorious "Hell Hole" saloon at the corner of Sixth Avenue and Fourth Street in New York where he met Terry Carlin, a man whose

---

1. D. Alexander, pp. 194-195.



thinking "long before he embraced anarchy as a creed... was communistic".<sup>1</sup> Carlin, however, persuaded O'Neill to prefer Nietzsche to Marx because there was no "answer to bourgeois morality in socialism". Nevertheless, some of O'Neill's plays are about "bourgeois morality" and contain social protest. In The Emperor Jones (1920), he attacks the hypocritical nature of the white man's ethic and shews its corrupting effect on the negro and, in The Hairy Ape (1921), he protests against the inhuman society that American capitalism has created and he illustrates the dilemma of the misfit.

In August, 1920, O'Neill's father died:

Eugene felt an enormous gap in his life. He knew that something tremendous was gone from him. For the rest of his life he would try to come to grips with what his father had really meant to<sup>2</sup>him... remembering the profound love.

Fortunately, the event coincided with O'Neill's arrival at some degree of maturity. By this time, "he had in him the materials for all the plays he would write".<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that he had resolved his personal problems. He was many years away from that. He still had to put his relationships with his parents in its

---

1. A & B. Gelb, p. 287.

2. D. Alexander, pp. 285-286.

3. Ibid., p. 290.

proper perspective. He was still afraid of life and even more of death. On these fears, were to be based the major topics of the middle period when he wrote so much of his best work.

Section Two

Phases: 1921-1931

Section Two

Themes: 1921-1931



### CHAPTER 3

#### SOCIAL THEMES

O'Neill's social thinking had its source in personal rebellion against parental, religious and school authority, grew into opposition to the establishment through Marxism, pacifism and anarchism and finally hardened into the conviction that society, seeing individual aspiration as a disruptive danger, conspires to crush it. After I have described the nature of O'Neill's adolescent revolt, I shall refer to the socialism and pacifism found in some of his satirical poems, his criticism of social inequity in his earlier plays and his major attack on the materialism of modern society in The Hairy Ape (1921), The Great God Brown (1925) and Marco Millions (1925)

O'Neill seems to have first shewn his rebelliousness in outbursts of defiance against authority when

he was at boarding school. He began by rejecting his parents' religious beliefs and at fifteen he refused any more religious training. He jeered at his parents' arguments, saying that "religion had proved of little use to them; why insist on it for him?"<sup>1</sup> and in one of his school vacations, he refused to attend church any more. In spite of a violent quarrel with his father, Eugene stood his ground and his father "finally went off to church alone". James O'Neill, seeing "the change of his good little boy into a rebellious adolescent, difficult at home and a real problem at school", wondered whether the teaching priests at the De La Salle school "weren't too strict...".<sup>2</sup> Eventually, James sent Eugene to the Betts School in Stamford, Connecticut. This school "made a speciality of problem children. A number of millionaires' sons--all with problems in schoolwork--attended Betts Academy".<sup>3</sup> But O'Neill's rebelliousness became even more pronounced. He "smoked in his own room, contrary to a school rule

---

1. A & B. Gelb, p. 73.

2. D. Alexander, p. 91.

3. Ibid., p. 91.

which banned all smoking";<sup>1</sup> "participated in the game of tying sheets together from a dormitory window and escaping into town after lights-out at nine o'clock";<sup>2</sup> and during "his last two years at Betts, Eugene was always taking off for New York...in quest of wine, women and song".<sup>3</sup> One of his teachers later said that "all this was part of his rebellion against discipline. He was constantly rebellious against the regulations of the school and critical of authority".<sup>4</sup>

While he was at school, his personal rebellion began to acquire a radical intellectual rationale. The "anguish he had suffered at Mount Saint Vincent made him question the Church's teachings about Divine Providence and a kind God"<sup>5</sup> and he discovered from his reading of Victor Hugo that "some people regarded the Catholic Church, not as a simple projection of Christ's teachings...but rather as a tool of oppression that

- 
1. A & B. Gelb, p. 77.
  2. Ibid., p. 78.
  3. D. Alexander, p. 95.
  4. Ibid., p. 96.
  5. Ibid., p. 73.



kept the masses servile...<sup>1</sup> By the time he entered Betts School, he was "ready to revolt against everything he had bowed down to as a child"<sup>2</sup> and this revolt "was to intensify with each year".<sup>3</sup> At Betts he read Ibsen who shewed him "how a moralistic middle-class society can turn any expression of joy in living into evil dissipation--".<sup>4</sup> From Ibsen he went on to George Bernard Shaw's Quintessence of Ibsenism which he "read and reread...underlining in red ink each passage that thrilled him, until finally hardly a sentence remained that wasn't underscored in red".<sup>5</sup> As he read Shaw,

Vistas of social and intellectual revolt opened before him. He saw how a corrupt drama stemmed from a corrupt society; he saw how false standards and hypocrisy create a false, artificial art.<sup>6</sup>

All this "set him on the path of political enquiry that would lead him eventually to Marx, Engels, and Kropotkin"<sup>7</sup> and when in 1912 he became a reporter on the New London

---

1. D. Alexander, p. 73.

2. Ibid., p. 73.

3. A & B. Gelb, p. 75.

4. D. Alexander, p. 95.

5. Ibid., pp. 95-96.

6. Ibid., p. 96.

7. Ibid., p. 96.

Telegraph, Frederick P. Latimer, its owner, said, "I thought Eugene was the most stubborn and irreconcilable social rebel I had ever met".<sup>1</sup> He was "a complete iconoclast" who sympathized "richly" with "the victims of man-made distress".<sup>2</sup>

O'Neill had a local reputation as "a sardonic poet" at this time. The Telegraph once referred to him in one of its editorials which was written in reply to a reader who complained that the paper did not have a consistent political policy. After jokingly describing the opposed political views of its contributors, the paper refers to an "important staff official", clearly O'Neill, who is called a "socialist and anarchist".

The editor goes on,

As far as possible we keep him off political assignments. But he writes satirical verse which is so really clever that we feel obliged to print it, albeit with the blue pencil in pretty constant use.<sup>3</sup>

O'Neill's satire was directed against capitalism and a few weeks before the 1912 Presidential Election, he wrote

- 
1. A & B. Gelb, p. 196.
  2. B.H. Clark, p. 26.
  3. A & B. Gelb, p. 201.





He invited the workers to refuse to fight:

Comrades, awaken to new birth!

.....  
And cry: "All workers on the earth  
Are brothers and WE WILL NOT FIGHT!"<sup>1</sup>

Before long, O'Neill had to make a personal decision about pacifism. In April 1917, the United States declared war on Germany, and Provincetown, Rhode Island, where O'Neill was living at the time, was required to provide a "draft quota" of volunteers. There was no shortage of volunteers and O'Neill even tried to join the Navy. His choice of Service is perhaps not surprising in view of his previous sea experience but when he was rejected, he steadfastly refused Army service, saying that "he was willing to serve his country, but he was not willing to commit suicide for it".<sup>2</sup> In the meantime his father "had boasted in print that the O'Neill's were fighters" and that "his two sons would most assuredly do their duty".<sup>3</sup> This statement may have intensified O'Neill's

---

1. R. Sanborn & B.H. Clark, p. 117.

2. C. Bowen, p. 86.

3. Ibid., p. 86.

bitter and cynical criticism of what he believed was a war caused by the greed of capitalists. At this time he was friendly with John Reed, a socialist reporter, who in an article to "The Masses" argued that the War was "a clash of traders" and that "England and France had grabbed the best colonies, so that German business could not expand. Now there was an open struggle for the colonies".<sup>1</sup> Eugene "agreed with him. He talked with Reed, too, of the conflict between capital and labor", except that he "was more savage than Reed in condemning the greed of the capitalists".<sup>2</sup> O'Neill's savagery extended to his arguments with those who disagreed with him. He quarrelled with his girl friend, Beatrice Ash, and "their divergent views about the war was one cause of their breakup".<sup>3</sup> He quarrelled, of course, with his father. James O'Neill was very distressed about his son's opinions which he felt were seditious. He "couldn't understand how a son of his could feel this way when he, the father, was such a loyal and devoted American citizen."<sup>4</sup>

---

1. D. Alexander, p. 230.

2. Ibid., p. 230.

3. C. Bowen, p. 87.

4. Ibid., p. 87.

When the War ended, O'Neill's pacifist opinions lost their acerbity and though he praised the "bitter unveiling of the 'heroic' soldier"<sup>1</sup> in Maxwell Anderson's What Price Glory (1924) as "one of the most significant events in the history of our theatre",<sup>2</sup> none of his own major plays has war as its theme. His anti-war sentiments are implicit in The Sniper (1915) where he illustrates the idiocy of war, in In the Zone (1917) where he shews how fear of enemy action can debase personal relationships, in Lazarus Laughed (1926) where in Caligula, we are shewn how military service can corrupt still further an already warped personality, and in Mourning Becomes Electra (1931) where Orin's description of his battle experiences shews how the violence of war can have pathological effects.

When we examine the nature of O'Neill's social protest we can see his uncertainty and changing views. In Fog and Warnings (1914) he is formally socialist in his condemnation of poverty, "the most deadly and prevalent of all diseases"<sup>3</sup> and in the way he sees the

---

1. A. Nicoll, p. 865.

2. From an interview given by O'Neill to a reporter, New York Herald Tribune, 16 March, 1924, O. Cargill, p. 111.

3. Fog, Ten "Lost" Plays, 1965, p. 89.



improvement of working-class conditions as the main answer to society's problems. He becomes more doctrinally Marxist in The Emperor Jones (1920) where he symbolizes the class-struggle by shewing a negro corrupted by the concomitants of the white man's slave owning society, the chain gang and the human auction mart and by the capitalist philosophy which Brutus summarizes:

For de little stealin' dey gits you in jail soon or late. For de big stealin' dey makes you Emperor and puts you in de Hall o' Fame when you croaks. If dey's one thing I learns in ten years on de Pullman ca's listenin' to de white quality talk, it's dat same fact.<sup>1</sup>

In The Hairy Ape (1921) he is anarchist. He abandons social solutions to society's problems:

Aw, to hell wit 'em! Dey're in de wrong pew....Cut out an hour offen de job a day and make me happy! Gimme a dollar more a day and make me happy! Tree square a day, and cauliflowers in de front yard--ekal rights--a woman and kids--a lousy vote--and I'm all fixed for Jesus, huh? Aw, hell! What does dat get yuh?<sup>2</sup>

---

1. E.J., I, p. 178.

2. H.A., VII, p. 250.

He now sees the problem as that of the individual exploited by organized society and attacks the fraudulent nature of society's democratic assumptions and practices. When Long says, "We must impress our demands through peaceful means--the votes of the on-marching proletarians of the bloody world!", Yank answers, "Votes, hell! Votes is a joke, see".<sup>1</sup> When Long argues, "I tell yer we got a case. We kin go to law--", Yank replies, "Hell, Law!" and when Long says, "As voters and citizens we kin force the bloody governments--", Yank retorts, "Hell! Governments!".<sup>2</sup> His anarchism outlasts his socialism. In the later nineteen twenties, he concentrates his attacks on the authority of the State and the Church which he regards as aspects of the same thing. In a letter to Barrett Clark, he says, "God with a change of whiskers becomes the State--and then there's always a Holy Book--dogmas--heresy trials--an infallible Pope--etc.--etc., until you become sick".<sup>3</sup> He frequently stresses this alliance between Church and State. In The Fountain (1922) the

---

1. H.A., V, p. 236.

2. Ibid., IV, pp. 228-229.

3. D. Alexander, "Eugene O'Neill as a Social Critic," O. Cargill, p. 401.

Cross follows the flag in ruthless exploitation of a native population. The monks, "itching for the rack to torture useful subjects of the Crown into slaves of the Church", are no better than "adventurers lusting for loot to be had by a murder or two".<sup>1</sup>

The monk, Quesada, an avid worker for the Church, has a comparable regard for the interests of the State.

His native parishioners are "dogs who will not pay their taxes" and who ought to be punished by forced labour. In this way, "the government will be paid, and we will have workers for our mines and fields".<sup>2</sup>

In All God's Chillun Got Wings (1925) the Church, whose doors slam contemptuously behind Ella and Jim Harris after their wedding, endorses society's banishment. In Marco Millions (1925) the three tableaux of Act One shew the ruler flanked by "on the right, the inevitable

1. The Fountain, II, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. I, Random House edn., p. 395. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to the text of The Fountain.

2. Ibid., III, p. 399.



warrior--on his left, the inevitable priest--the two defenders of the State".<sup>1</sup> But increasingly O'Neill's social protest becomes an expression of his personal discontent. It was not his nature anyway to devote himself to the welfare of others for very long. He once admitted to being a "philosophical anarchist" but added "which means, 'Go to it, but leave me out of it.'"<sup>2</sup> He did not wish to be an instrument of social protest. He told a socialist friend, "Art and politics don't mix" and "when a playwright starts writing propaganda he ceases to be an artist and becomes, instead, a politician".<sup>3</sup> His introspectiveness asserts itself in his work. He sees himself as a man struggling against a malevolent and destructive environment and in three of his plays, The Hairy Ape (1921), The Great God Brown (1925) and Marco Millions (1925), he translates his personal dilemma into the theme of society's destruction of the individual.

- 
1. Marco Millions, I. iii, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. II, Random House edn., p. 364. This edition will be used for subsequent references to Marco Millions.
  2. C. Bowen, p. 310.
  3. A & B. Gelb, p. 359.

In The Hairy Ape (1921) O'Neill's social theme found a suitably emphatic and diagrammatic form, one which relies heavily on expressionistic technique. In the stage directions for the first scene, he says, "The treatment of this scene, or of any other scene in the play, should by no means be naturalistic".<sup>1</sup> The endless imprisonment of the individual by society is conveyed visually in Scene One by a setting which shews "the bowels of a ship, imprisoned by white steel" where the seamen's "bunks...cross each other like the steel framework of a cage"<sup>2</sup> and in Scene Six by the "cells in the prison on Blackwells Island" which "disappear in the dark background as if they ran on, numberless, into infinity".<sup>3</sup> The regimentation of the individual is suggested by the engineer's whistle which frequently sounds "in a long, angry, insistent command",<sup>4</sup> by the "eight bells" which vibrate "through the steel walls as if some enormous brazen gong were imbedded in the heart of the ship",<sup>5</sup> and by the

- 
1. H.A., I, p. 207.
  2. Ibid., I, p. 207.
  3. Ibid., VI, p. 239.
  4. Ibid., III, p. 226.
  5. Ibid., I, p. 217.

obedience of the stokers who, at a signal, "jump up mechanically, file through the door silently close upon each other's heels in what is very like a prisoner's lockstep".<sup>1</sup> The debilitating and corrupting effect of capitalism is illustrated by settings of contrasting visual symbolism. Scene Two shews "the beautiful, vivid life of the sea all about--sunshine on the deck in a great flood, the fresh sea wind blowing across it. In the midst of this...two incongruous, artificial figures, inert and disharmonious...".<sup>2</sup> Scene Five depicts Fifth Avenue, the shop-window of capitalism, which has a "general effect" of "magnificence cheapened and made grotesque by commercialism, a background in tawdry disharmony with the clear light and sunshine on the street itself".<sup>3</sup>

The characters of the play, divided into those imprisoned by society and those debilitated by it, are caricatures. Yank is a symbol of exultant

- 
1. H.A., p. 217.
  2. Ibid., II, p. 218.
  3. Ibid., V, p. 233.



individual vitality. He is "de ting in coal dat makes it boin...steam and oil for de engines...de ting in gold dat makes it money".<sup>1</sup> Mildred symbolizes the individual that an impersonal capitalist society must inevitably produce, the "waste product in the Bessemer process"<sup>2</sup> whose vitality "had been sapped before she was conceived".<sup>3</sup> The stokers are beast-like robots with "low, receding brows above their small, fierce, resentful eyes"<sup>4</sup> who "shovel with a rhythmic motion, swinging as on a pivot from the coal which lies in heaps on the floor behind to hurl it into the flaming mouths before them"<sup>5</sup> and who reply to Yank's exhortations with voices of "a brazen metallic quality as if their throats were phonographic horns".<sup>6</sup> The effete bourgeoisie, which capitalist society has produced, are "gaudy marionettes, yet with something of the relentless horror of Franksteins in their detached, mechanical

- 
1. H.A., I, p. 216.
  2. Ibid., II, p. 219.
  3. Ibid., II, p. 218.
  4. Ibid., I, p. 207.
  5. Ibid., III, p. 223.
  6. Ibid., IV, p. 227.

unawareness".<sup>1</sup> They saunter "slowly and affectedly, their heads held stiffly up, looking neither to right nor left, talking in toneless, simpering voices".<sup>2</sup>

O'Neill symbolizes the individual's collision with society in Scene Five where Yank comes into actual physical collision with the marionettes. He bumps "viciously into them but not jarring them the least bit. Rather it is he who recoils after each collision".<sup>3</sup> When a "fat, high-hatted, spatted gentleman" bumps into him, it is the powerful "Yank, who is bowled off his balance".<sup>4</sup> The futility of the individual's attempt to make an impact on an arid, soulless society even through acts of extreme emotional intensity is symbolized when Yank "lets drive a terrific swing, his fist landing full on the fat gentleman's face. But the gentleman stands unmoved as if nothing had happened".<sup>5</sup> The impenetrableness of society causes the most acute frustration that the individual has to endure and O'Neill illustrates it repeatedly in the play, for example, when

---

1. H.A., V, p. 236.

2. Ibid., V, p. 236.

3. Ibid., V, p. 238.

4. Ibid., V, p. 239.

5. Ibid., V, p. 239.

Yank's brutal beating by the police goes unnoticed by the marionettes, when he is cynically rejected by the officials of the I.W.W. and when his fellow-prisoners on Blackwells Island fail to sympathize with him in his predicament. As a result of his frustration, he is out of tune with life. He has lost "his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not yet acquired"<sup>1</sup> in modern society. O'Neill's argument is that the alternatives of spiritual imprisonment or debilitation which society offers the aspiring individual are not acceptable to him and that his life becomes hopeless. Nevertheless, Yank, like Brutus Jones, will not compromise his individuality and he voluntarily embraces death. Yank's death indicates that society wantonly destroys its most vital elements and the only comfort we have is O'Neill's pious hope, expressed at the end of the play, that when the individual dies perhaps he "at last belongs".<sup>2</sup>

---

1. B.H. Clark, p. 127.

2. H.A., VIII, p. 254.



O'Neill continues to illustrate the individual's conflict with society in The Great God Brown (1925). As in The Hairy Ape he shews the destructive effect of modern society on two extreme types: the rebellious artist who "can paint beautifully and write poetry",<sup>1</sup> and the conforming materialist:

...the visionless demi-god of our new materialistic myth--a Success--building his life of exterior things, inwardly empty and resourceless, an uncreative creature of superficial preordained social grooves, a by-product forced aside into slack waters by the deep main current of life-desire.<sup>2</sup>

Both are destroyed by society. Because there can be no genuine spiritual impulse in the materialistic world, Dion's artistic inspiration is warped so that when he is invited to design a cathedral, he draws a "vivid blasphemy from sidewalk to the tips of its spires".<sup>3</sup> His death which comes after much spiritual agony is meant to indicate that art cannot survive in a materialistic environment. I think we can assume that this was O'Neill's own conclusion about trying to be

---

1. G.G.B., Prologue, p. 263.

2. B.H. Clark, p. 161.

3. G.G.B., II. iii, p. 297.

1. Ibid., p. 200.

a dramatist in the United States and it may have been one of his reasons for thinking that the play was "one of the most interesting and moving I have written".<sup>1</sup>

There was a good reason for his opinion. George Santayana, in an address to the Philosophical Union of the University of California, pointed to a dichotomy in American culture. He said:

America is not simply...a young country with an old mentality: it is a country with two mentalities....In all the higher things of the mind--in religion, in literature, in the moral emotions--it is the hereditary spirit that still prevails, so much so that Mr. Bernard Shaw finds that America is a hundred years behind the times. The truth is that one-half of the American mind, that not occupied intensely in practical affairs, has remained... becalmed...while, alongside, in invention and industry and social organization, the other half of the mind was leaping down a sort of Niagara Rapids.<sup>2</sup>

From these circumstances had grown the American "genteel tradition" which "forbids people to confess they are unhappy" and which precludes an atmosphere congenial to "serious poetry and profound religion".<sup>3</sup> The

- 
1. Clifford Leech, O'Neill, Edinburgh, 1963, p. 64.
  2. George Santayana, Winds of Doctrine, 1940, pp. 187-188.
  3. Ibid., p. 200.

"genteel tradition" certainly does not stop O'Neill from proclaiming his unhappiness and he exposes this tradition as the reason why Yank cannot "belong" and Dion cannot live. One of the play's most powerful ironies is the indication that society also tortures the successful materialist who realizes that he is "inwardly empty and resourceless". In his search for a soul, Billy Brown becomes "sick, ghastly, tortured, hollow-cheeked and feverish-eyed" with "self-loathing and life-hatred".<sup>1</sup> Because he seeks spiritual satisfaction, he becomes an affront to materialistic society which will not rest while he lives. Cybel warns him:

They must find a victim! They've got to quiet their fears, to cast out their devils, or they'll never sleep soundly again! They've got to absolve themselves by finding a guilty one! They've got to kill someone now, to live.<sup>2</sup>

O'Neill intends us to see Dion Antony and Billy Brown as opposed aspects of Everyman. This is made explicit in the last scene. Billy, who has worn Dion's mask

---

1. G.G.B., IV. i, p. 314.

2. Ibid., <sup>IV. ii,</sup> p. 320.



in order to find a soul, has been shot and when the policeman asks Cybel to establish the dead man's identity, she replies, "Man".

The success of The Great God Brown depends on the audience understanding that materialistic society forces a duality of personality on the individual human being. O'Neill tries to convey this duality by giving each major character a mask which he wears over his own face because he dare not shew his real nature to his fellow man. He achieves a striking irony when he shews how people respect and love the mask instead of the real self which cries out for recognition and affection. There are two instances of this: the first is when Margaret, who cringes away from the sight of Dion's real face, lifts her head "adoringly" to his mask and kisses it "on the lips with a timeless kiss";<sup>1</sup> the second is when the four Committeemen treat Brown's mask as though it were his body and sorrowfully carry it away. O'Neill's use of masks to express his theme in The Great God Brown is

---

1. G.G.B., Epilogue, p. 325.

ingenious, but it is not entirely successful. This is because he tries to make the masks express too many subtleties. In addition to their job of illustrating the struggle between the individual and society, he expects them to symbolize side contests between the artist and the philistine and between belief and unbelief. This is expecting too much from a rather inflexible stage property and his indiscriminate use of the mask weakens the statement of the main theme.

O'Neill makes a twofold assault on capitalism in Marco Millions (1925). He makes a general attack on various social types that are to be found in America. He parodies the American small-town demagogue in Marco, who when he arrives before the Kaan to give an account of his mayoralty by Yang Chau, "slaps a policeman on the back and asks his name", "chucks a baby under the chin",<sup>1</sup> "shakes hands with a one-legged veteran of the Manzi campaign" and "keeps his smile frozen as he notices an artist sketching him".<sup>2</sup> He ridicules the pomposity of the American politician in his description of Marco's face:

---

1. M.M., II. i, p. 388.

2. Ibid., II. i, p. 389.

...carefully arranged into the grave responsible expression of a Senator from the South of the United States of America about to propose an amendment to the Constitution restricting the migration of non-Nordic birds into Texas, or prohibiting the practice of the laws of biology within the twelve-mile limit.<sup>1</sup>

He satirizes the American love of regalia in the costumes that Marco's uncles wear that "recall the parade uniforms of our modern Knights Templar, of Columbus, of Pythias, Mystic Shriners, the Klan, etc".<sup>2</sup> He ridicules the sterile American "genteel tradition" when, in answer to the citizen's complaint that he is destroying their ancient culture, Marco replies:

Why, I even had a law passed that anyone caught interfering with culture would be subject to a fine! It was Section One of a blanket statute that every citizen must be happy or go to jail.<sup>3</sup>

He attacks the basic premises of the profit motive in Marco's proud explanation of his financial policy and its justification on democratic grounds. Marco says:

- 
1. M.M. II. i, p. 390.
  2. Ibid., II. i, p. 390.
  3. Ibid., II. i, p. 392.



Imagine a profit being excess!  
 Why, it isn't humanly possible! I  
 repealed it. And I repealed the  
 tax on luxuries....The tax wasn't  
 democratic enough to make it pay!  
 I crossed it off and I wrote on the  
 statute books a law that taxes every  
 necessity in life, a law that hits  
 every man's pocket equally, be he  
 beggar or banker!<sup>1</sup>

The satire against capitalism culminates in Marco's  
 ringing proclamation of its major benefits to mankind -  
 paper money and the cannon:

You conquer the world with this--  
 (He pats the cannon-model) and you pay  
 for it with this. (He pats the paper  
 money--rhetorically) You become the  
 bringer of<sup>2</sup> peace on earth and goodwill  
 to men....

O'Neill makes his particular attack on material-  
 istic society by illustrating how the profit motive  
 depraves character. Marco's gradual corruption is  
 presented symbolically in the First Act by shewing  
 his reactions to three almost identical tableaux which  
 represent humanity from the cradle to the grave. His  
 response to the first tableau is open, friendly and  
 tender. At seventeen, after some experience as a

- 
1. M.M., II. i, p. 392.
  2. Ibid., II. i, p. 396.

salesman, he looks on the second tableau with "the casual, indifferent attitude of the worldly-wise".<sup>1</sup> His response to the third tableau is that of a "brash, self-confident young man, assertive and talky".<sup>2</sup> There is one moment meant to reveal the death of all creative feeling in him as he denies the authorship of a poem he had previously written to his childhood sweetheart, Donata. The Prostitute, who has challenged him with writing it, replies:

You're lying. You must have.  
Why deny it? Don't sell your soul  
for nothing. That's bad business.  
(She laughs, waving the poem in her  
upraised hand, staring mockingly)  
Going! Going! Gone! (She lets  
it fall and grinds it under her feet  
into the earth--laughing) Your soul!  
Dead and buried!<sup>3</sup>

By the time he reaches China, Marco is "the flesh and blood product of our Christian civilisation",<sup>4</sup> the complete business man, "a sample case in each hand",<sup>5</sup> convinced that he is "a man made by Almighty God in His Own Image for His greater glory".<sup>6</sup> O'Neill then makes

---

1. M.M., I. iv, p. 370.

2. Ibid., I. v, p. 373.

3. Ibid., I. v, p. 375.

4. Ibid., I. vi, p. 379.

5. Ibid., I. vi, p. 377.

6. Ibid., I. vi, p. 379.

his ironical commentary. He puts Marco into situations where his barrenness of spirit is exposed. One example is the incident where Kukachin tells him that her heart is bursting with love for him, and he replies, "Then something must have disagreed with you. Will you let me see your tongue?".<sup>1</sup> Marco expresses corruptness in his remarks on profits, democracy and culture. O'Neill's final comment is the Kaan's contemptuous conclusion that Marco has "only an acquisitive instinct" in place of a soul. The play ends with an unactable epilogue in which Marco is seen to be sitting in the audience and which is meant to indicate to Americans that they should look for Marco within themselves. This epilogue represents his culminating pronouncement about the depraving influence of American society. The American Marco is the ultimate philistine, without conscience and without spirit, "sure of his place in the world" and quite beyond salvation as beast-like he settles down in his "luxurious limousine...with a satisfied sigh at the sheer comfort of it all".<sup>2</sup>

---

1. M.M., II. iii, p. 413

2. Ibid., Epilogue, p. 439.



O'Neill's concern with the profit motive has an irony that expands beyond his plays. Although he roundly renounced the commercial success that had undermined his father's integrity and bitterly attacked American materialism, he "progressively achieved that very financial success against which he inveighed".<sup>1</sup> There are signs that love of money and material objects overcame him as they overcame his father. When he noticed a drop in the box-office returns of The Great God Brown, he wrote, "Come on, you 'Brown'! Daddy needs a yacht!"<sup>2</sup> When the Directors of the Greenwich Village Theatre were slow in paying the royalties on The Great God Brown, he asked them, "Do you want me to begin selling the investments I made before I left New York, in order to pay my bills down here?"<sup>3</sup> When he was awarded his first Pulitzer Prize by Columbia University, he was not impressed until he heard that it would bring him a thousand dollars, whereupon he went "practically delirious".

---

1. F.I. Carpenter, p. 56.

2. A & B. Gelb, p. 599.

3. Ibid., p. 599.

As he became more successful, he lived in increasing elegance. His first home in France after he married Carlotta Monterey "was a forty-five room chateau"<sup>1</sup> and when they returned to America, he built an equally luxurious home that cost a hundred thousand dollars. But this does not necessarily make O'Neill a hypocrite. He was perceptive enough to see his own weaknesses and the reflection he saw of himself in his characters gave force to the bitterness of his attacks on capitalism. Like Brown, he doubted his creative artistry and he was afraid that success might corrupt him into becoming a creature like Marco. His failure to overcome his weaknesses and to resolve his problems as an individual led to an enveloping pessimism. His last defence against it was a hope that he might find a religious faith.

---

1. F.I. Carpenter, p. 57.

## CHAPTER 4

### RELIGIOUS THEMES

O'Neill's parents "were both devout Catholics".<sup>1</sup> His father "in his youth...had even thought for a time that he had the calling for the priesthood".<sup>2</sup> His mother "had thought of becoming a nun".<sup>3</sup> Their piety "had a genuine, gentle, mystic quality to it. Their faith was the great comforting inspiration of their lives. And their God was One of Infinite Love....a very human, lovable God Who became man for love of men

---

1. D.W.E., I, p. 510.

2. C. Bowen, p. 9.

3. D. Alexander, p. 5.



and gave His Life that they might be saved from themselves".<sup>1</sup> During his boyhood, Eugene "had every reason to believe in such a Divinity of Love as the Creator of Life. His home atmosphere was one of love. Life was love for him then. And he was happy....".<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, he suffered <sup>the</sup> two major shocks that undermined his certitude and happiness. He was sent at seven years old to an unsuitable boarding school and, not long afterwards, he discovered that his mother was a drug addict. The school "became associated with his feelings of 'betrayal' by his parents" and his dislike of the school was intensified because it "emphasized formal discipline and regulation rather than the home-like warmth which the lonely child needed".<sup>3</sup> O'Neill described his school in John Loving's words as a place where "he learned of the God of Punishment, and he wondered. He couldn't reconcile Him with his parents' faith".<sup>4</sup> One day, Eugene returned from school

---

1. D.W.E., I, p. 510.

2. Ibid., I, p. 510.

3. F.I. Carpenter, p. 27.

4. D.W.E., I, p. 510.

unexpectedly and saw his mother giving herself a morphine injection. "She was far more upset than Eugene....who barely comprehended what he had seen",<sup>1</sup> but later "the full force of his discovery gripped him".<sup>2</sup> Eugene turned to God for help. He prayed that his mother might be made well again and applied himself "with unprecedented zeal to his studies",<sup>3</sup> particularly divinity, but "in spite of his application to good works, Ella was not spared".<sup>4</sup> In Days Without End (1933), John Loving tells Father Baird how his mother fell seriously ill, how he prayed that she might recover and how he "vowed his life to piety and good works!...if his mother were spared to him!".<sup>5</sup> His mother died and Loving, "in a frenzy of insane grief....and, in revenge, promised his soul to the Devil--on his knees, when everyone thought he was praying!"<sup>6</sup> This account of the way Loving lost his religious belief is autobiographical and the "death" of Loving's mother represents the end of

---

1. A & B. Gelb, p. 72.

2. Ibid., p. 72.

3. Ibid., p. 73.

4. Ibid., p. 73.

5. D.W.E., I, p. 511.

6. Ibid., I, p. 511.

Eugene's idealized image of Ella O'Neill. She could no longer be the "old, beautiful ideal of wife and mother". This disillusionment with his mother was probably the greatest shock of all and accounts for the bitterness of his attacks on Christianity. O'Neill concludes that Christianity is a religion of unanswered prayers. He had "wanted to believe in any God at any price",<sup>1</sup> but he had found that God was "deaf and blind and merciless--a Deity Who returned hate for love and revenged Himself on those who trusted Him!".<sup>2</sup> He feels that, if God really exists, he must either be perverse or deranged. Dion Antony describes God as a motiveless malignity who locked his mother in "a dark closet without any explanation"<sup>3</sup> and the Great Kaan suspects that God "is only an infinite, insane energy which creates and destroys without other purpose than to pass eternity in avoiding thought".<sup>4</sup>

No one can argue that O'Neill is indifferent to God. His complaints always imply that there is a God to be

- 
1. S.I., II, p. 41.
  2. D.W.E., I, p. 511.
  3. G.G.B., I. iii, p. 282.
  4. M.M., III. i, p. 426.



denounced and his purpose seems to be to wound the God who has injured him. He attacks Christianity through a blasphemous parody of its teachings. He alters well-known biblical quotations to distort their meaning. In The Great God Brown (1925), he corrupts the beatitudes as in "Fear thy neighbor as thyself!"<sup>1</sup> and "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit graves! Blessed are the poor in spirit for they are blind!"<sup>2</sup> Dion Antony solicits a prostitute with "Blessed are the pitiful, Sister! I'm broke--but you will be rewarded in Heaven!"<sup>3</sup> He uses biblical language to illustrate his characters' most ungodly traits. Abraham Bentley selfishly upbraids his daughter for leaving him to get married and warns her, "The punishment of thine iniquity is accomplished, O daughter of Zion: he will visit thine iniquity, O daughter of Edom; he will discover thy sins".<sup>4</sup> He hates his son-in-law, calls him "Papist" and implores God to punish him for taking away his daughter.

---

1. G.G.B., II, iii, p. 294.

2. Ibid., I. i, p. 273.

3. Ibid., I. iii, p. 279.

4. The Rope, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol I, Random House edn., p. 579. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to The Rope.

Pour out thy fury upon the heathen  
that know thee not, and upon the families  
that call not on thy name: for they have  
eaten up Jacob, and devoured him, and  
consumed him, and made his habitation  
desolate.<sup>1</sup>

He welcomes his own son home after a long absence in  
the words of the parable of the Prodigal Son:

Bring forth the best robe, and put  
it on him; and put a ring on his hand,  
and shoes on his feet: And bring hither  
the fatted calf, and kill it; and let  
us eat and be merry: For this my son  
was dead, and is alive again; he was  
lost, and is found.<sup>2</sup>

We are shewn later, however, that Bentley is welcoming  
his son only because he wants to see him hang himself  
with the rope that has been waiting in the barn for years.  
In Days Without End (1933), O'Neill gives Loving a  
dialogue which is bitterly blasphemous from start to  
finish and, in The Great God Brown (1925), his main  
character, Dion Antony, designs a cathedral:

One vivid blasphemy from sidewalk to  
the tips of its spires!--but so concealed  
that the fools will never know. They'll

---

1. The R., p. 582.

2. Ibid., pp. 594-595.

kneel and worship the ironic Silenus  
who tells them the best god is never  
to be born!<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill also attacks Christian clergy and laity. He satirizes parsons in a series of caricatures which amplify clerical ungodliness. His method is to make a derisory comparison between their religious pretensions and their barely disguised cruelty, cowardice and hypocrisy. Menendez, a Franciscan friar, whose order was founded by the "most blameless and gentle of all saints",<sup>2</sup> has "the thin, cruel mouth, the cold, self-obsessed eyes of the fanatic",<sup>3</sup> stabs a Moorish poet to death and plots unscrupulously to ruin his enemy, Ponce de Leon. Hutchins Light, the non-conformist minister, whose Bible rests prominently on his table and whose parlour contains "several framed prints of scenes from the Bible...on the walls",<sup>4</sup> is a bullying "sermonizer" and a superstitious bigot who is terrified of lightning and who cloaks his hatred of the atheist, Fife, under a pretence of pious duty.

---

1. G.G.B., II. iii, p. 297.

2. Cassell's Book of Knowledge, Vol. IV, ed. H.F.B. Wheeler, 1929, p. 1497.

3. The F., I, p. 383.

4. Dyn., I, p. 421.



Hickey, of The Iceman Cometh (1939), ironically recalls his father, another parson, who flogged his son and exploited his parishioners in order to save their souls:

My old man used to whale salvation into my heinie with a birch rod. He was a preacher in the sticks of Indiana, like I've told you. I got my knack of sales gab from him, too. He was the boy who could sell those Hoosier hayseeds building lots along the Golden Street!<sup>1</sup>

The only clergyman O'Neill describes at all charitably is Father Baird in Days Without End (1933):

His appearance and personality radiate health and observant kindness-- also the confident authority of one who is accustomed to obedience and deference-- and one gets immediately from him the sense of an unshakable inner calm and certainty, the peace of one whose goal<sup>2</sup> in life is fixed by an end beyond life.

But this last description owes as much to O'Neill's remembrance of his father as it does to respect for the priesthood.

We might have expected that O'Neill would attack those regular churchgoers, who practise their faith

1. I.C. I, p. 622.

2. D.W.E., I, p. 500.

only on Sundays, but he probably felt that this was too easy a target. Instead, his Christians are people whose every thought and word is expressed in religious terms and whose every action has a religious justification. In fact, they are monstrously evil people whose religion is an expression of their own selfishness. Abraham Bentley, whose dialogue is full of religious terms and biblical quotations, has a pathological hatred of his son, daughter, son-in-law and granddaughter. He is an arid personality, hypocritical and miserly, violent and ungrateful to those who genuinely want to help him. His first words, spoken to his granddaughter, Mary, "Out o' my sight, you Papist brat! Spawn o' Satan! Spyin' on me!...Spyin' to watch me!"<sup>1</sup> illustrate his warped nature. Ephraim Cabot of Desire Under the Elms (1924) is an amplified version of Bentley. He, too, is a scripture-quoting hypocrite who pitilessly exploits his own sons. He openly hates them and tells them that

---

1. The R., p. 578.

he intends to live until he is a hundred "if on'y t' spite yer sinful greed!"<sup>1</sup> He expresses his lust for his young wife in the words of the Song of Solomon and uses biblical imagery to justify his greed and his selfishness. The Christians of Lazarus Laughed (1926) are a mob of cruel fanatics whose leader, Mary, prophesies that Christ "will gather a great army and He will seize His kingdom and all who deny Him shall be crucified!"<sup>2</sup> O'Neill remarks the discrepancy between Christian precept and practice by interjecting Martha's "Jesus teaches to be kind", Lazarus's "You forget the God in you" and Miriam's "Brothers" and "Mercy" as Mary incites her followers to riot and murder in the name of Jesus. But O'Neill reserves his angriest comments for those he regards as puritans, and one commentator has said that "no one denounces puritans so frequently and so ferociously as Mr. O'Neill, who spits and spews upon their tombs as if they had done him personal injury".<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. Desire Under the Elms, I. ii, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. I, Random House edn., p. 210. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to Desire Under the Elms.
  2. Lazarus Laughed, I. ii, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. I, Random House edn., p. 284. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to Lazarus Laughed.
  3. Anonymous, "Counsels of Despair," O. Cargill, p. 370.



There is no evidence that O'Neill suffered any personal injury from "puritans". It is true that non-conformist churches often criticized what they regarded as license in his plays and that the puritan Mayor of Boston banned Desire Under the Elms. But the Lord Chamberlain in London and leading citizens in other towns did so, too. His main attacks are on Puritanism where it stands "for a doctrine of suppression".<sup>1</sup> He attacks it as a false and unnatural teaching which impairs the development of the individual. This is plain in The Great God Brown (1925), where the conformitory pressures of a puritanical society are summarized by Dion Antony:

Wake up! Time to get up! Time to  
exist! Time for school! Time to learn!  
Learn to pretend! Cover your nakedness!  
Learn to lie! Learn to keep step! Join  
the procession! Great Pan is dead! Be  
ashamed!<sup>2</sup>

He attacks puritanism from many directions. He shews, in Diff'rent (1920), how obsession with sexual chastity depraves Emma Crosby and drives her to suicide, in Dynamo (1920), how rigorous religious indoctrination

---

1. S.K. Winther, p. 44.

2. G.G.B., Prologue, p. 267.

goads Reuben Light to murder and suicide and, in Mourning Becomes Electra (1931), how a relentless puritan rationale causes the destruction of a whole family. It is likely that he had an inbred Catholic dislike of Puritan ethics. Camillo Pellizzi remarks that "O'Neill, irreligious in his beliefs, does not perhaps perceive that, in his own particular form of anti-Puritanism there is implied a Catholic outlook in the strictest sense--".<sup>1</sup> But O'Neill has some unkind things to say about the Roman Catholic laity, too, and in The Fountain (1922), he describes the three Spanish noblemen, Oviedo, Castillo and Mendoza, as "knights of the true Cross, ignorant of and despising every first principle of real Christianity--yet carrying the whole off with a picturesque air".<sup>2</sup>

O'Neill's campaign against Christianity is not convincing. The aspects of Christianity and the faults of Christians that he satirizes are exasperatingly evident, but his attacks are often so

---

1. C. Pellizzi, "Irish-Catholic Anti-Puritan,"  
O. Cargill, pp. 354-355.

2. The F., I, p. 383.

crude and unrestrained that they become scurrilous and lose their satirical impact. His ambivalent attitude to his subject is an added weakness, and, even when his attacks on religion are at their most intense, it is plain that "for O'Neill, the ultimate quest has always been God".<sup>1</sup> When he succeeds in removing the remains of his old religious faith, he is shocked at his feeling of desolation. As he faces death, Dion Antony is horrified at his sense of hopelessness:

"Into thy hands, O Lord,"...(Then suddenly, with a look of horror) Nothing! To feel one's life blown out like the flame of a cheap match....!"<sup>2</sup>

Ponce de Leon asks, "Why have I lived? To die alone like a beast in the wilderness?".<sup>3</sup> These are questions that O'Neill is always asking himself because his real need is to find a religious faith. Nina Leeds cries, "Oh God...I want to believe in something! I want to believe so that I can feel!"<sup>4</sup> and John Loving, speaking

---

1. R.D. Skinner, Eugene O'Neill: A Poet's Quest, New York, 1964, p. 115.

2. G.G.B., II. i, p. 286.

3. The F., X, p. 438.

4. S.I., II, p. 43.



of himself in the third person, says, "He must go on! He must find a faith--somewhere!"<sup>1</sup> In The Fountain (1922), The Great God Brown (1925) and Lazarus Laughed (1928), he tries to work out a faith for himself.

O'Neill believed that the failure of Christianity which he termed "the death of the Old God" and "the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new One for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with"<sup>2</sup> was "the sickness of today". He felt that this problem was so important that it should be a major topic of literature:

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 simply scribbling around on the surface of things and has no more real status than a parlor entertainer.<sup>3</sup>

The Fountain (1922) is his first attempt to supply a solution. After illustrating the inadequacies of Christianity, the play makes two statements. The first

1. D.W.E., I, p. 498.
2. From a letter written by O'Neill to George Jean Nathan. See O. Cargill, p. 115.
3. Ibid., p. 115.

is that life must be lived with religious faith.

The kind of religion is unimportant: all faiths are "one and equal--within".<sup>1</sup> O'Neill illustrates his point in a dumb show where four "solemn figures" appear, representing the major religions of the earth: a Chinese poet "robed as a Buddhist priest", a Moorish minstrel "dressed as a priest of Islam", an American Indian, dressed as a medicine man, and a Christian monk. "Each one carries the symbol of his religion before him. They appear clearly for a moment, then fade from sight, seeming to dissolve in the fountain".<sup>2</sup> The "fountain" links the first statement with the second which is that human beings are immortal because they are a part of the process of eternal recurrence. As Juan watches the mime, the meaning of the "fountain" is revealed to him:

I see! Fountain Everlasting, time  
without end! Soaring flame of the spirit  
transfiguring Death! All is within! All  
things dissolve, flow on eternally! O  
aspiring fire of life, sweep the dark soul  
of man! Let us burn in thy unity!<sup>3</sup>

Death is an essential step to a new life, "a mist/Veiling sunrise".<sup>4</sup> Life, like the fountain, goes on for ever,

---

1. The F., X, p. 441.

2. Ibid., X, p. 441.

3. Ibid., X, p. 442.

4. Ibid., X, p. 441.

rising and falling steadily.

The Fountain (1922) is in many ways a morality play. There is the representation of Juan's spiritual problem as a journey and his gradual conversion during the course of it from arrogance to penitence. There is the Christian assumption that the individual is solely accountable for his sins. Juan is Everyman forced to make the journey not only because he is revolted by a materialistic society, but also because his earlier virtues have corroded into vices. The play shews how sin may appear as religious virtue. It illustrates the militant Christianity that teaches hatred to the infidel in order to "reconquer the Blessed Tomb of Christ for the True Faith".<sup>1</sup> It exposes the unholy alliance between Church and State which encourages personal greed in the name of religious patriotism. The monks who torture heathens to make them Christians are like the "adventurers lusting for loot to be had for a murder or two"<sup>2</sup> or the "nobles of Spain dreaming greedy visions of wealth to be theirs by birthright".<sup>3</sup>

---

1. The F., II, p. 394.

2. Ibid., II, p. 395.

3. Ibid., II, p. 395.



They are "looters of the land, one and all!"<sup>1</sup> Even Juan's patriotic altruism is a spiritual vanity not far from the pride which tempted Thomas Becket "to do the right deed for the wrong reason".<sup>2</sup> True religious faith comes to Juan when he willingly submits to death. As he submerges his individuality into the eternal cycle of life, he experiences peace and ecstasy. The play ends with a ringing affirmation of his gospel:

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 that make up  
happiness....(In an ecstasy)...I begin  
to know eternal youth! I have found my  
Fountain! O Fountain of Eternity, take  
back this drop, my soul!<sup>3</sup>

At this time, O'Neill suffered two more shocks that made his need for religious faith even more acute. His mother died in 1922, his brother in 1924 and the "horror of death" was very much upon him. Most of the responsibility for his mother's burial fell on Eugene because his brother, Jamie, went to pieces at the news of her death. O'Neill describes his brother's reaction

---

1. The F., II, p. 395.

2. T.S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, I, 1945, p. 44.

3. The F., XI, p. 448.

in A Moon for the Misbegotten (1943) when Jamie Tyrone says, "I went crazy. Couldn't face losing her! The old booze yen got me. I got drunk and stayed drunk".<sup>1</sup> The strain on Eugene as he awaited his mother's body in New York was very great and "the tension of attending final rehearsals of two plays and anticipating the arrival of his dead mother and drunken brother was almost too much for him",<sup>2</sup> When at last he saw his dead mother, O'Neill was shattered and numbed. He recalled her terrifying remoteness:

Practically a stranger. To whom I was a stranger. Cold and indifferent. Not worried about me any more. Free at last. Free from worry. From pain. From me. I stood looking down at her, and something happened to me. I found I couldn't feel anything.<sup>3</sup>

When Jamie died, O'Neill had influenza and was "too sick--emotionally and physically--to attend his brother's funeral".<sup>4</sup>

- 
1. A Moon for the Misbegotten, III, Cape edn., 1953, p. 131.
  2. A & B. Gelb, p. 496.
  3. A Moon for the Misbegotten, III, p. 131.
  4. A & B. Gelb, p. 532.

These bereavements stirred in O'Neill memories of his boyhood suffering and this may have been his reason for including himself and his family in The Great God Brown (1925). Billy Brown's father, a "bustling, genial, successful, provincial business man, stout and hearty"<sup>1</sup> and Dion's father, "obstinate to the point of stupid weakness",<sup>2</sup> are the two sides of James O'Neill. Dion's mother, with her "sweet and gentle face that had once been beautiful",<sup>3</sup> is Ella whose "hands alone had caressed without clawing".<sup>4</sup> Billy Brown is Jamie O'Neill who had made Eugene cry after he "had loved and trusted him" and whose cruelty had caused him to wear "a mask of the Bad Boy Pan".<sup>5</sup> Dion is O'Neill:

(His mask) is a fixed forcing of his own face--dark, spiritual, poetic, passionately supersensitive, helplessly unprotected in its childlike, religious faith in life--into the expression of a mocking, reckless, defiant, gayly scoffing and sensual young Pan.<sup>6</sup>

The source of his conflict is his family. His relationship with his father had always been uneasy and they

- 
1. G.G.B., Prologue, p. 257.
  2. Ibid., Prologue, p. 259.
  3. Ibid., Prologue, p. 259.
  4. Ibid., I. iii, p. 282.
  5. Ibid., II. iii, p. 295.
  6. Ibid., Prologue, p. 260.



had grown "hostile with concealed shame".<sup>1</sup> His brother, when he was a boy, had done him an injury that he could not forgive. As for his mother, the time came when his "sobs were ugly and meaningless to her virginity" and he "shrank away".<sup>2</sup> These are the reasons why he has lost religious faith, why he wears a mask and why he is lonely. O'Neill stresses the loneliness of the individual. When Dion makes his first appearance, he follows his parents "as if he were a stranger, walking alone".<sup>3</sup> His parents are out of touch with him and with each other. Margaret, his wife, thinks she loves him, but when he removes his mask, she asks, "Who are you! Why are you calling me? I don't know you!"<sup>4</sup> Billy Brown can win Margaret's affections only by wearing Dion's mask and Margaret can face the embarrassments of her married life only by wearing a mask of conventional matronliness. No one can afford to be himself. This great loneliness horrifies O'Neill and, along with his fear of the even

---

1. G.G.B., I. iii, p. 282.

2. Ibid., I. iii, p. 282.

3. Ibid., Prologue, p. 259.

4. Ibid., Prologue, p. 266.

greater loneliness of death, stimulates his search for fellowship with an infinite power.

Dion, like Juan, finds final redemption by way of a woman, although the women could hardly be less alike. Beatriz of The Fountain (1922) is "a beautiful young girl of eighteen or so, the personification of youthful vitality, charm and grace".<sup>1</sup> Cybel of The Great God Brown (1925) is a prostitute, but she has other implications. She is "an incarnation of Cybele, the Earth Mother"<sup>2</sup> and she personifies the eternal processes of nature. Her affiliations with nature are to be seen in "her movements slow and solidly languorous like an animal's", "her large eyes dreamy with the reflected stirring of profound instincts"<sup>3</sup> and in the wallpaper in her parlour which resembles "a blurred impression of a fallow field in early spring"<sup>4</sup> and which later becomes a "brilliant, stunning wall-paper, on which crimson and purple flowers and fruits tumble over one another in a riotously

1. The F., III, p. 404.
2. B.H. Clark, p. 160.
3. G.G.B., I. iii, p. 278.
4. Ibid., I. iii, p. 278.

profane lack of any apparent design".<sup>1</sup> Cybel leads Dion to spiritual truth. First, she deflates his self-pity. When he strikes a pose, she tells him, "Stop acting. I hate ham fats."<sup>2</sup> She then gives him the first element of her philosophy, "Life's all right, if you let it alone".<sup>3</sup> Eventually, she shews herself to be the embodiment of eternal recurrence. She quietens Dion's fear of death by telling him "You may be important but your life's not. There's millions of it born every second".<sup>4</sup> Life is "not sacred--only the you inside is. The rest is earth".<sup>5</sup> There is no need to fear death. To die is "born in the blood". "When the time comes", she tells Dion, "you'll find it's easy".<sup>6</sup>

Shortly after Cybel comforts Dion, he dies, but she has a similar therapeutic part to play with his antagonist, Billy Brown. This allows her to amplify her doctrine. When Billy is dying, she draws his head on to her shoulder and tells him that when he awakens,

---

1. G.G.B., II. i, p. 284.

2. Ibid., I. iii, p. 279.

3. Ibid., I. iii, p. 280.

4. Ibid., II. i, p. 286.

5. Ibid., II. i, p. 286.

6. Ibid., II. i, p. 286.



"the sun will be rising again".<sup>1</sup> Life will arise from decay and death.

Always spring comes again bearing life! Always again! Always, always forever again!--Spring again!--life again! summer and fall and death and peace again!--but always, always, love and conception and birth and pain again--spring bearing the intolerable chalice of life again!--bearing the glorious, blazing crown of life again!<sup>2</sup>

The epilogue confirms her words. The play comes full circle as, at "the same spot on the same dock as in (the) Prologue on another moonlight night in June"<sup>3</sup> when Dion had proposed to Margaret, their three sons are about to propose to the girls they will marry. Margaret "with a strange finality" bids them goodbye. When they have left her, she acknowledges that she is "still the same Margaret" and that "it's only our lives that grow old".<sup>4</sup> She tells us that "centuries only count as seconds" and that "after a thousand lives our eyes begin to open--".<sup>5</sup> We "live forever".

- 
1. G.G.B., IV. ii, p. 322.
  2. Ibid., IV. ii, pp. 322-323.
  3. Ibid., Epilogue, p. 324.
  4. Ibid., Epilogue, p. 325.
  5. Ibid., Epilogue, p. 325.

We find the most detailed statement of O'Neill's new belief in Lazarus Laughed (1926). He called the play "far the best...I've ever written".<sup>1</sup> He had his wedding ring engraved with a quotation from it, and George Jean Nathan records that, when he unguardedly confessed his disappointment with the play, O'Neill angrily retorted that "it was really a masterpiece".<sup>2</sup> Oscar Cargill shared O'Neill's opinion and claimed that the play was "as much superior to all other dramatic conceptions in its day as were Faust, Hamlet, and Oedipus Rex to the contemporary drama of their times."<sup>3</sup> We have to take all this with some charity. Lazarus Laughed is undoubtedly an important play, but not because of its place in world drama. It is important because it marks the only occasion when O'Neill expressed a religious faith strong enough to replace the Christian belief of his parents. This faith is a combination of Christianity and paganism, and Lazarus is a synthesis of Christ and Dionysus who preaches eternal recurrence in the phrases of Nietzsche's Superman, but who tempers

- 
1. E.A. Engel, The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953, p. 175.
  2. G.J. Nathan, "Portrait of O'Neill," O. Cargill, p. 52.
  3. O. Cargill, "Fusion-Point of Jung and Nietzsche," *Ibid.*, p. 412.

the harsh philosophy of natural selection with compassion and universal love.

In Lazarus Laughed (1926) O'Neill presents his gospel in three discourses. The first is an address Lazarus gives to a group of Old Men in which he explains their error. They have neglected their affinity with the processes of nature. He tells them, "You forget! You forget the God in you! You wish to forget!"<sup>1</sup> They do this because they are cowardly and will not accept "the high duty" to will their own deaths. Instead, they live a living death in which their eyes are "always either fixed on the ground in weariness of thought, or watching one another with suspicion".<sup>2</sup> He then announces the arrival of "Saviors". The star of Bethlehem had been a sign signalling the advent of "Sons of God" of whom Christ is only the first. They will appear "on worlds like ours to tell the saving truth".<sup>3</sup> He goes on to explain the paradox of these

- 
1. L.L., I. ii, p. 289.
  2. Ibid., I. ii, p. 289.
  3. Ibid., I. ii, p. 289.



Saviours. "The greatness of Saviors is that they may not save!"<sup>1</sup> Their purpose is to shew Man how to save himself by becoming a god. The second discourse describes death and explains how we ought to regard it:

In the dark peace of the grave the man called Lazarus rested. He was still weak, as one who recovers from a long illness....He lay dreaming to the croon of silence, feeling as the flow of blood in his own veins the past re-enter the heart of God to be renewed by faith into the future.<sup>2</sup>

As he lies there, he begins to understand the mistake of fearing death. "Men call life death and fear it.... Their fear becomes their living. They worship life as death!"<sup>3</sup> They have to learn that they are a part of the universe and subject to the laws of "eternal change and everlasting growth". They will achieve this if they will return to communion with nature:

Out with you! Out into the woods!  
Upon the hills! Cities are prisons  
wherein man locks himself from life.  
Out with you under the sky!<sup>4</sup>

The third discourse describes our origin and our function in the cosmic design:

- 
1. L.L., I. ii, p. 289.
  2. Ibid., II. i, p. 309.
  3. Ibid., II. i, p. 309.
  4. Ibid., II. i, p. 310.

Once as squirming specks we crept from  
the tides of the sea. Now we return  
to the sea! Once as quivering flecks  
of rhythm we beat down from the sun.  
Now we re-enter the sun!<sup>1</sup>

We have to regain our harmony with nature by giving  
"our lives for Life's sake!"<sup>2</sup> Each one of us must  
will his own death:

He must conceive and desire his own  
passing as a mood of eternal laughter and cry  
with pride, "Take back, O God, and accept  
in turn a gift from me, my grateful blessing  
for Your gift--and see, O God, now I am  
laughing with You!<sup>3</sup> I am Your laughter--  
and You are mine!"<sup>3</sup>

During Act Three, O'Neill shows how his faith will be  
an answer to individual loneliness. When a man realizes  
his fellowship with nature, he is "lonely no more".  
He has an affinity with "millions of laughing stars".<sup>4</sup>  
Within the cyclic rhythm, "the old, grown mellow with  
God, burst into flaming seed!"<sup>5</sup> There can be "no death,  
nor fear, nor loneliness!"<sup>6</sup> Finally, in Act Four, he  
makes another declaration of his faith in eternal  
recurrence:

- 
1. L.L., II. ii, p. 324.
  2. Ibid., II. ii, p. 324.
  3. Ibid., II. ii, p. 324.
  4. Ibid., III. ii, p. 348.
  5. Ibid., III. ii, p. 349.
  6. Ibid., III. ii, p. 349.

Men pass! Like rain into the sea! The sea remains! Man remains! Man slowly arises from the past of the race of men that was his tomb of death! For Man death is not! Man, Son of God's Laughter, is!<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill's Lazarus has many of the characteristics of Nietzsche's Superman. He is a fully integrated personality. He is Nietzschean in his denial of death, in his instruction that we must will our own death and in his belief that "the greatness of Man is that no god can save him--until he becomes a god!"<sup>2</sup> But there are important differences. Nietzsche preaches a selective gospel whereas O'Neill's is universal. Nietzsche believes that even the most successful of men can only be intermediate to the Superman, "a rope, fastened between animal and Superman--a rope over an abyss".<sup>3</sup> O'Neill's Lazarus is resurrected from a failure. His life has been one long misfortune: "one after another his children died"<sup>4</sup> and "he wished for death".<sup>5</sup> The Fourth Guest points

---

1. L.L., IV. i, pp. 359-360.

2. Ibid., I. ii, 289-290.

3. Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth, 1966, p. 43.

4. L.L., I. i, p. 276.

5. Ibid., I. i, p. 276.



out that "he could not blame bad luck for everything.... He was a bad farmer, a poor breeder of sheep, and a bargainer so easy to cheat it hurt one's conscience to trade with him!"<sup>1</sup> When Lazarus is resurrected, he opposes many of the ideas that would derive from a Nietzschean arrogance. He rejects hierarchies of power typified by Tiberius, the Herrenvolk illustrated in the Roman soldiery, religious intolerance seen in the orthodox priest, and bigoted evangelism represented by the Nazarenes. In their place, he proclaims humility and love. All this along with the complimentary references to Christ, argues that O'Neill's new faith is not so much a Nietzschean paganism as a Christian heresy. Paganism is certainly an element. The Greeks, hoping that Lazarus may turn out to be a reincarnation of Dionysus, await his arrival at Athens clad "in goat skins, their tanned bodies and masks daubed and stained with wine lees".<sup>2</sup> They are partly justified because Lazarus begins to resemble "the positive masculine Dionysus, closest to the soil of the Grecian gods, a

---

1. L.L., I. i, p. 276.

2. Ibid., II. i, p. 298.

Son of Man, born of a mortal".<sup>1</sup> The play, too, has faint echoes of Euripides' The Bacchae in the orgies of religious fury among the Jews and the drunken cruelty of the Romans. But there is nothing in Lazarus Laughed to compare with the terrible moment in The Bacchae when the mad Agave enters carrying her son's severed head, believing it to be a lion's. Nor is Lazarus Laughed a study of religious or bacchanalian frenzy as is The Bacchae, and O'Neill takes pains to identify Lazarus with eternal recurrence rather than Bacchus:

(He is) not the coarse, drunken Dionysus, nor the effeminate god, but Dionysus in his middle period, more comprehensive in his symbolism, the soul of the recurring seasons, of living and dying as processes in eternal growth, of the wine of life stirring forever in the sap and blood and loam of things.<sup>2</sup>

The most curious of all O'Neill's theatrical devices is his use of human laughter in Lazarus Laughed (1926). He told Elizabeth Serjeant that the idea of using laughter as a dominant dramatic symbol came to him as he read John 11, verse 32, "Jesus wept", but

---

1. L.L., II. i, p. 307.

2. Ibid., II. i, p. 307.

there is an additional possibility that it came to him as he read Nietzsche's "Thus Spoke Zarathustra". In the chapter, "Of the Vision and the Riddle", Zarathustra comes upon a shepherd into whose mouth a snake has crept while he was sleeping and has clung there biting. Zarathustra tells the shepherd to bite off the serpent's head.

The shepherd...bit as my cry had advised him; he bit with a good bite! He spat far away the snake's head--and sprang up. No longer a shepherd, no longer a man--a transformed being, surrounded with light, laughing! Never yet on earth had any man laughed as he laughed!<sup>1</sup>

This incident, allegorizing escape from death, with its reference to a person "transformed...surrounded with light" who celebrates his escape in relieved and joyful laughter, suggests Lazarus whose body, "freed now from the fear of death",<sup>2</sup> is "illumined by a soft radiance as of tiny phosphorescent flames"<sup>3</sup> and whose laughter is a "profound assertion of joy in living".<sup>4</sup> O'Neill and a friend, Manuel Komroff, once talked about

---

1. Thus Spoke Zarathustra, p. 180.

2. L.L., I. i, p. 274.

3. Ibid., I. i, p. 274.

4. Ibid., I. i, p. 279.



Freud's and Bergson's theories of the origins of laughter. Freud believed that the source of laughter was deep in the unconscious mind and that it was connected with the sex instinct, aggressiveness, sadism and suppressed desires to return to an infantile state of mind. This did not suit O'Neill's purpose in Lazarus Laughed, but Bergson's suggestion that laughter has a corrective function in curbing anti-social behaviour is close to O'Neill's practice where Lazarus's laughter provokes shame, embarrassment and terror in his antagonists. O'Neill and Komroff agreed that they "weren't satisfied with the ideas in Freud's Wit and the Unconscious or Bergson's Laughter."<sup>1</sup> Komroff recalled his conversation with O'Neill:

Gene and I talked about the salty underneath part of laughter, which neither of these theories covered; Freud's theories were erotic, related to sex, and Bergson's were based on laughter as mainly mechanistic. Gene and I agreed that laughter was a kind of uncontrollable emotional overflow that we were unable to explain.<sup>2</sup>

Lazarus's laughter, which comes to him as he lies in

---

1. A & B. Gelb, p. 600.

2. Ibid., p. 600.

his grave, seems to be this kind of "emotional overflow". It springs "from his heart as though his life, so long repressed in him by fear, had found at last its voice and a song for singing".<sup>1</sup> But O'Neill uses the device in other ways to indicate anger, doubt and madness. The Old Men laugh "miserably and discordantly" and Lazarus detects in their laughter a note of guilt. It is a "hyena laughter, spotted, howling its hungry fear of life".<sup>2</sup> The orthodox Jew is convulsed with a "ghastly spasmodic laughter" which expresses his increasing rage till it becomes a howl. Caligula's laughter grows from a "warped grin" to a harsh cackle which "cracks through the other laughter with a splitting discord"<sup>3</sup> until, when he orders his legionaires to kill Lazarus's followers, his laughter is "fanatically cruel and savage, forced from his lips with a desperate, destroying abandon".<sup>4</sup> Laughter forces Crassus to sway and stagger

---

1. L.L., II. i, p. 309.

2. Ibid., I. ii, p. 289.

3. Ibid., II. i, p. 308.

4. Ibid., II. ii, p. 319.

"like a man in a drunken stupor".<sup>1</sup> Marcellus, the assassin, half-sobs, half-laughs hysterically and, filled with remorse, kills himself. Tiberius, before his conversion, is capable only of a malignant grin, a harsh chuckle and eventually a grovelling laughter forced out of him by the "agony and terror of death".<sup>2</sup> The mob, infected by Lazarus into paroxysms of laughter, "writhe and twist distractedly, seeking to hide their heads against each other, beating each other and the floor with clenched hands" until tortured to exhaustion, their convulsions become an "agonized moan of supplicating laughter".<sup>3</sup> Lazarus, however, has found the secret of life and death and his laughter is "full of a complete acceptance of life, a profound assertion of joy in living, so devoid of all self-consciousness or fear, that it is like a great bird song triumphant...proud and powerful, infectious with love....".<sup>4</sup>

- 
1. L.L., II. i, p. 311.
  2. Ibid., III. ii, p. 349.
  3. Ibid., III. ii, p. 349.
  4. Ibid., I. i, p. 279-280.



It would be satisfying to feel that Lazarus Laughed represents O'Neill's final salvation and peace of mind, but it does not. His quarrel with God is irrevocable. To O'Neill God is always a Being who bears him an inexplicable hatred, who is guilty of the most appalling crimes against humanity and who some day will have to settle a staggering account. In The Web (1913), Rose Thomas cries, "Gawd! Gawd! Why d'yuh hate me so?".<sup>1</sup> In The Sniper (1915) when a priest tells Rougon who is about to be executed to make his peace with God, the doomed man spits on the floor and says, "That for your God who allows such things to happen!"<sup>2</sup> In All God's Chillun Got Wings (1923) when Ella asks Jim if God will forgive her for what she has done, Jim answers, "Maybe He can forgive what you've done to me; and maybe He can forgive what I've done to you; but I don't see how He's going to forgive--Himself".<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. The Web, Ten "Lost" Plays, 1965, p. 53. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to The Web.
  2. The Sniper, Ten "Lost" Plays, 1965, p. 207. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to The Sniper.
  3. All God's Chillun Got Wings, II. iii, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Vol. II, Random House edn., p. 341. This edition will be used for all subsequent references to All God's Chillun Got Wings.

But there are times, too, when O'Neill takes a look at himself and sees that the cause of his torment is his failure to control the divisions of his mind. In Lazarus Laughed he draws a grotesque self-portrait in Caligula. Caligula has a half-mask which accentuates "his bulging, prematurely wrinkled forehead, his hollow temples and his bulbous, sensual nose".<sup>1</sup> His "large, troubled eyes...glare out with a shifty feverish suspicion at everyone".<sup>2</sup> Above his mask however, "his hair is the curly blond hair of a child of six or seven",<sup>3</sup> the age at which O'Neill was sent to school. Caligula's violently unstable and conflicting nature reflects O'Neill's. Like O'Neill, "one part of his personality" is "organized around a core of love, the other around a core of hate".<sup>4</sup> The source of O'Neill's own destructiveness is revealed when Caligula asks, "...tell me why I love to kill?" and Lazarus answers,

- 
1. L.L., II. i, p. 299.
  2. Ibid., II. i, p. 299.
  3. Ibid., II. i, p. 299.
  4. D. Alexander, p. 88.

"Because you fear to die!"<sup>1</sup> Like O'Neill, Caligula has an intense desire to cleanse himself and to experience happiness through religious faith and loving contact with his fellow-man:

I would be clean! If I could  
only laugh your laughter, Lazarus!  
That would purify my heart. For I  
could wish to love all men, as you  
love them--as I love you! If only  
I did not fear them and despise them!  
If I could only believe--believe in  
them--in life--in myself!--<sup>2</sup>

Caligula, however, has destroyed his capacity to believe in anything. Although Lazarus assures him, "Fear not, Caligula! There is no death!",<sup>3</sup> he alternates helplessly between defiance and remorse, shouting at one moment, "All the same, I killed him and I proved there is death!" and at the next whining, "Fool! Madman! Forgive me, Lazarus! Men forget!"<sup>4</sup> O'Neill knew well enough that, for him as for Caligula, there could be no lasting belief and equally no end to his search for it.

- 
1. L.L., II. i, p. 308.
  2. Ibid., IV. i, p. 358.
  3. Ibid., IV. ii, p. 371.
  4. Ibid., IV. ii, p. 371.



## CHAPTER 5

### PSYCHOLOGICAL THEMES

As O'Neill searches unsuccessfully for religious belief, there grows in his mind a scepticism that tends to replace Christian ideas of sin and retribution with psychological explanations of human motive and behaviour. In All God's Chillun Got Wings (1923), he remarks that "we're never free--except to do what we have to do"<sup>1</sup> and elsewhere he concludes that there are "impelling, inscrutable forces behind life"<sup>2</sup> that predetermine conduct. I want to shew how O'Neill finds old terms inadequate to convey his new

- 
1. A.G.C.G.W., I. iii, p. 315.
  2. From a letter written to Barrett Clark. See O. Cargill, p. 100.

ideas and how he begins to refer to "forces" which he sees as motivating human beings. I shall shew how he identifies the "forces" as tribal inhibitions in All God's Chillun Got Wings (1923), as conflicting parental loyalties in Desire Under the Elms (1924) and as opposed maternal and paternal ideologies in Mourning Becomes Electra (1931). By demonstrating the destructive power of these forces, O'Neill invests his psychological themes with a sense of fate.

In his "Memoranda on Masks", O'Neill called for a new kind of drama "projected from a fresh insight into the inner forces motivating the actions and reactions of men and women (a new and truer characterization, in other words)...".<sup>1</sup> He ran into difficulty when he tried to define the forces. In a letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn he wrote;

I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind--Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it--Mystery certainly--and of the one eternal tragedy of Man

---

1. See O. Cargill, p. 116.

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.<sup>1</sup>

He is in a muddle here, because he has not worked out what he is trying to define. He is bunching together conceptions that cannot be closely associated: an impersonal "biological past" etc. cannot be tightly linked to a personalized "God", nor can an orderly evolutionary process be identified with a capricious "Fate". His preoccupation with cyclical rebirth in The Great God Brown (1925) and eternal recurrence in Lazarus Laughed (1926) suggests that "biological past creating our present", vague though it is, is perhaps closest to what he is trying to say. But the most significant part of the passage is that which suggests that human tragedy comes out of the clash between the individual's aspiration and the forces that shape him. He made the point more explicitly in an interview with Oliver M. Sayler:

---

1. See O. Cargill, pp. 125-126.



...life is struggle, often, if not usually, 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>1</sup>

O'Neill illustrates this "something" as external and internal forces that trap the individual. In earlier plays, he externalizes the forces. Rose Thomas, in The Web (1914), is trapped by circumstances that rise about her almost by coincidence:

She realizes the futility of all protest, the maddening hopelessness of it all....She seems to be aware of something in the room which none of the others can see--perhaps the personification of the ironic life force that has crushed her.<sup>2</sup>

This "ironic life force" is nothing like Shaw's "Life Force" or Bergson's élan vital. It is an implacable combination of circumstances that blindly destroys the individual. The same callous inevitability of events is present in The Sniper (1915) where the entire Rougon family are the innocent victims of war. In later

1. See O. Cargill, p. 107.

2. The W. p. 53.

plays, he internalizes the forces and in The Emperor Jones (1920), they are subconscious motives stimulated by tribal fears and centuries of slavery. They are to some extent personalized because they are shewn to be outraged and vengeful. By objectifying them O'Neill makes us aware of some kind of law to which the individual is subject and which punishes him if he does not acknowledge it. Because the civilized human being only imperfectly understands these forces within himself and their imperative demands on him, he is inevitably "born to sin and punishment".<sup>1</sup> Most of O'Neill's plays refer in one way or another to the individual and his motivating forces, but All God's Chillun Got Wings (1923), Desire Under the Elms (1924) and Mourning Becomes Electra (1931) take this human problem as a theme and in quite different ways illustrate its tragic implications.

- 
1. Eugene O'Neill, "Working Notes and Extracts from a Fragmentary Work Diary," European Theories of the Drama with a Supplement on the American Drama, ed. Barrett H. Clark, New York, 1957, p. 531. In subsequent references this title will be abbreviated to "Working Notes," European Theories of the Drama.

All God's Chillun Got Wings (1923) reveals the disaster that can overtake those who defy tribal taboos. The breadth of his subject was not readily recognized in the United States where people were mainly concerned about the racial feeling the play might arouse. They could hardly be blamed for this. O'Neill had used racial antipathies in America as a framework and in doing so had not taken into account "the susceptibilities of those good Americans who have laid down the law as to how far a negro may go in his relations with whites, but recognize no law as to how far a white may go with a negro".<sup>1</sup> When the text of the play was published, he had to suffer a good deal of abuse:

It seemed for a time there as if all the feeble-witted both in and out of the K.K.K. were hurling newspaper bricks in my direction--not to speak of the anonymous letters which ranged from those of infuriated Irish Catholics who threatened to pull my ears off as a disgrace to their race and religion, to those of equally infuriated Nordic Kluxers who knew that I had Negro blood, or else was a Jewish pervert masquerading under a Christian name in order to do subversive propaganda for the Pope!<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. B.H. Clark, pp. 144-145.
  2. Ibid., p. 145.

The tension increased when it was announced that a negro would act the part of Jim Harris and that the white woman who was to play Ella would be required to kiss his hand. Eventually, pressure from influential members of the public forced the New York District Attorney to take some restrictive action, but in spite of his intervening by "not permitting the children to act in the first scene",<sup>1</sup> the play was successfully presented to a private audience.

O'Neill felt that the play had been maligned and that he ought to explain his intention in writing it. He said that it was "primarily a study of the two principal characters, and their tragic struggle for happiness",<sup>2</sup> and added that "the play, itself...is never a 'race problem' play".<sup>3</sup> This claim cannot possibly be maintained. The play is not primarily about twentieth century problems of race relationships, but O'Neill certainly draws attention to racial characteristics and conflicts. He uses laughter to

---

1. B.H. Clark, p. 145.

2. A & B Gelb, p. 550.

3. Ibid., p. 550.



express differences of racial temperament. The inhibited white people laugh "constrainedly, awkward in natural emotion": the uninhibited negroes laugh unselfconsciously "frankly participating in the spirit of Spring".<sup>1</sup> He shews the two races living in sharply divided communities. "In the street leading left, the faces are all white; in the street leading right, all black".<sup>2</sup> When Jim and Ella are married, people in the district run from their homes to watch them.

(The) whites (come) from the tenement to the left, blacks from the one to the right. They hurry to form into two racial lines on each side of the gate, rigid and unyielding, staring across at each other with bitter hostile eyes.<sup>3</sup>

He vividly illustrates the growth of racial separation as children become adults. When Jim, Ella and Mickey are young, they play together unselfconsciously, but after "nine years have passed", Mickey refers to Jim as a "damned nigger" and Ella will hardly speak to him. He shews the implacable nature of racialism when Ella

- 
1. A.G.C.G.W., I. i, p. 301.
  2. Ibid., I. i, p. 301.
  3. Ibid., I. iv, p. 319.

and Jim emerge married from the church and the doors "slam behind them like wooden lips of an idol that had spat them out".<sup>1</sup> O'Neill can hardly claim that he did not write a "race problem" play. On the other hand, he is most skilful in shewing that the surface barriers to racial integration are not insurmountable. He points out that his race does not prevent Jim's father becoming a successful business man. Jim goes to school and graduates with white pupils, studies law with white students and takes his examination in fair competition with them. He marries a white woman and lives with her in France among white people without any interference or unpleasantness at all. In spite of some difficulties with white people in the early part of the play, he never complains about them, indeed, he says, "They're kind. They're good people. They're considerate".<sup>2</sup>

O'Neill's purpose is to illustrate "inscrutable forces" and he identifies them in this play as the compulsions that the tribe exerts upon the individual.

- 
1. A.G.C.G.W., I. iv, pp. 319-320.
  2. Ibid., I. iii, p. 316.

The tribe's first instinct is to preserve its identity and it is opposed to miscegenation. If anyone marries outside the tribe he is punished. The tribe shews its disapproval through individuals: Joe quarrels with Jim about betraying his race and Mickey and Shorty ostracize Ella. But this is slight compared to the deep-rooted tribal inhibitions within the wrongdoers themselves. Both Ella and Jim reject their tribe. Ella does so because she suffers ill-treatment and degradation at the hands of white men and she turns greedily to Jim who feeds her vanity with servile devotion. She marries him, but her tribal instincts of superiority will not let her consummate the marriage which is at its happiest when Jim demonstrates slave-like tendencies and at its breaking point when he tries to demonstrate his equality. Her sense of superiority becomes an obsession and O'Neill shews it in her fear of racial contamination which she expresses in hallucinatory remarks such as "Black! Black! Black as dirt!...I can't wash myself clean!"<sup>1</sup>, in her campaign to ensure Jim's failure in his law

---

1. A.G.C.G.W., II. iii, p. 339.

examination, and in her hatred of the Congo mask which embodies her fear of the negro race. Jim rejects his tribe because he feels it is inferior. He is obsessed by the longing to be a white man. The racial indignities that he suffers increase the intensity of this desire and he becomes an imitative and masochistic personality who identifies himself with his enemies and flagellates himself for being what he is. His failure is inevitable because the outraged tribal inhibitions are too powerful for him. When he is on the threshold of success in the examination room, they make him forget his facts:

I know each answer--perfectly. I take up my pen. On all sides are white men starting to write. They're so sure--even the ones that I know know nothing. But I know it all--but I can't remember any more--it fades--it goes--it's gone.<sup>1</sup>

This is an example of what O'Neill means when he speaks of that "something within us which prevents us from accomplishing what we dream and desire".<sup>2</sup> But the best example of a pent-up, vengeful, subterranean tribal

---

1. A.G.C.G.W., I. iii, p. 316.

2. O. Cargill, p. 107.



force making its impact on an individual is to be found at the point where Ella agrees to be Jim's wife. Taken off his guard by the unexpected ease with which he seems to have succeeded in joining the white race, Jim pours out all his ancestral servility in gratitude:

I don't ask you to love me--I  
don't dare to hope nothing like that!  
I don't want nothing--only to wait--  
to know you like me--to be near you--  
to keep harm away...to serve you--to  
lie at your feet like a dog that loves  
you--to kneel by your bed like a nurse  
that watches over you sleeping...to  
become your slave!--yes, be your slave--  
your black slave that adores you as  
sacred!<sup>1</sup>

As he ends this speech, Jim "beats his head on the flagstones "in a frenzy of self-abnegation".<sup>2</sup> The end of the play shews how the tribe finally punishes the individuals who betray it. The destructive effect of inherent tribal compulsions allow Jim and Ella only a "tawdry substitute" for married happiness. Ella regresses to childish idiocy and Jim is driven to an ecstatic religious delusion.

---

1. A.G.C.G.W., I. iii, p. 318.

2. Ibid., I. iii, p. 318.

In Desire Under the Elms (1924), O'Neill continues to explore the "inscrutable forces" that influence human beings. Unlike the tribal compulsions of the previous play which are not malignant and vengeful until they are outraged, the forces illustrated in Desire Under the Elms are conflicting parental loyalties which actively use human beings as pawns. I referred to the struggle of parental loyalties in Chapter 2, and O'Neill's return to this preoccupation in Desire Under the Elms is a reminder of the autobiographical pressures that were upon him. In this play, too, O'Neill's intention was misunderstood and Desire Under the Elms was more badly received than All God's Chillun Got Wings. It was first produced at the Greenwich Theatre in November, 1924. Because its profits there were low, it was moved to "uptown" New York. By the following February, the production was running into trouble because "District Attorney Joab H. Banton, a Southerner who was hell-bent on cleaning up the Broadway stage, had demanded that the play be closed".<sup>1</sup> He described it as "too thoroughly bad to

---

1. A & B. Gelb, p. 575.

be purified by a blue pencil"<sup>1</sup> and eventually he authorized a "citizen play jury" to see the play, presumably hoping that its members would advise either its suppression or its correction. They did neither. Later, the play was banned in Boston by the Mayor and in England "by the Lord Chamberlain, in spite of O'Neill's willingness to make some minor revisions in the dialogue".<sup>2</sup> When it was presented in Los Angeles, "members of the City Vice Squad...were there to see the performance".<sup>3</sup> At the end, "all the actors were placed under arrest and taken to the Central Police Station. They were accused of having presented a lewd, obscene, and immoral play"<sup>4</sup> and they were put on trial before a jury. Some drama critics, too, were offended. Alan Dale spoke of the "theatrical miasma" that rose from the production, making "even the subway station directly beneath the cantankerous, cancerous proceedings in the playhouse seem delicious".<sup>5</sup> It would be easy to complain now that the play's

---

1. A & B. Gelb, p. 576.

2. Ibid., p. 577.

3. C. Seiler, "Los Angeles Must be Kept Pure," O. Cargill, p. 443.

4. Ibid., p. 443.

5. A & B. Gelb, p. 570.

opponents were prejudiced and sanctimonious. But their anxiety was understandable. The play does contain as its central incident a scene of passionate sexual seduction and it does stress hatred, vengeance, theft, incest and infanticide without any hint of condemnation. It was the absence of censure that worried those who did not want the theatre to undermine standards of public morality. What they missed or did not care about was O'Neill's intention to shew in all their power the subterranean impersonal forces that motivate human beings.

At this point, I should like to look at some possible influences behind the play. The first is Freud. In 1918, six years before Desire Under the Elms was written, Freud's Totem and Taboo was translated into English. It became popular reading with American intellectuals and O'Neill "is known to have read"<sup>1</sup>it. In Totem and Taboo, Freud discusses the source of religion and the growth of conscience. He suggests that religion started in the struggle within the primal horde between the all-powerful father and his aspiring sons whose primitive urge was to possess

---

1. W.D. Sievers, p. 112.



the mother and obtain the father's power. Eventually, the sons overcame the father and slew him, but they quickly felt a sense of remorse which was the beginning of conscience and they sought to appease his spirit by stressing his spiritual power. From this had grown paternalistic religion with its assumption of innate sinfulness, the need for atonement and the representation of the Father-God as a hard and vengeful deity who expects his worshippers to live in his image. All these elements are present in Desire Under the Elms. Ephraim Cabot is what we might expect the father of Freud's primal horde to be: the pitiless leader, physically and spiritually stronger than the rest of his family whom he puts under a rigorous discipline. The revolt of the primeval sons is to be seen in Simeon's and Peter's desertion of the Cabot farm and the primitive urges to possess the mother and to obtain the father's power are shewn in Eben's adultery with his step-mother and his efforts to acquire the farm.

☛ Ephraim is the embodiment of paternalistic religion, the god of the Old Testament, jealous, pitiless and lonely. Ephraim's religion is an atonement for his lapse when he left his stony farm for a softer life

and it expresses itself in unremitting and punishing labour. He has worked two wives to death and, when Peter and Simeon leave the farm after half a life-time working for him, he calls on the "Lord God o' Hosts" to "smite the undutiful sons with Thy wust cuss!"<sup>1</sup> His creed is "God's hard, not easy! God's in the stones! Build my church on a rock--out o' stones an' I'll be in them! That's what He meant t' Peter!"<sup>2</sup> The characters of the play have Old Testament names: Eben, short for Ebenezer, Abbie, short for Abigail, Ephraim, Peter and Simeon. O'Neill may have used these names because they were typical New England names of the middle of the nineteenth century, but he may also have intended to bring out the Old Testament associations. Ephraim of the Book of Genesis was the second son of Joseph who gave him the name because "God hath caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction".<sup>3</sup> It would be characteristic of O'Neill's contempt for religion that he should give the name to the most arid

- 
1. D.U.E., I. iv, p. 227.
  2. Ibid., II. ii, p. 237.
  3. Gen., xli. 52.

of all his characters. Abigail, wife of Nabal, "was a woman of good understanding, and of beautiful countenance: but the man (her husband) was churlish and evil in his doings".<sup>1</sup> Peter, whose name means "rock", is identified in the play with the stones of the Cabot farm. He talks of "stones atop o' stones--makin' stone walls--year atop o' year--him 'n' yew 'n' me 'n' then Eben--makin' stone walls fur him to fence us in!"<sup>2</sup> and it is he who first picks up a stone to fling through the farmhouse window at his father. Simeon, whose namesake in Genesis "dugged down a wall",<sup>3</sup> in the play "takes the gates off its hinges" and says, "the stone walls air crumblin' an' tumblin'" and "we harby 'bolishes shet gates an' open gates,..by thunder!"<sup>4</sup> The name, Ebenezer, means "a token of gratitude". Neither gratitude nor ingratitude is important in Eben's nature and I have gone as far as I should in reading significance into O'Neill's choice of names for his characters.

The influence of Jung also appears to be present in Desire Under the Elms. O'Neill was more drawn to Jung than to Freud. He says;

- 
1. I Sam. xxv. 3.
  2. D.U.E., I. i, p. 204.
  3. Gen. xlix. 6.
  4. D.U.E., I. iv, p. 221.

As far as I can remember, of all the books written by Freud, Jung, etc., I have read only four, and Jung is the only one of the lot who interests me. Some of his suggestions I find extraordinarily illuminating in the light of my own experience with hidden human motives.<sup>1</sup>

Jung, unlike Freud, sees the mother and not the father "in every way the nearest and most powerful experience; and the one moreover that occurs in the most impressionable period of a man's life".<sup>2</sup> He goes on to say that she is a "powerful, primordial image" that determines "in the individual conscious life our relation"<sup>3</sup> to women. In other words, our filial and sexual instincts are closely linked. The powerful influence of the mother image on a son and the connection between his filial and sexual instincts are two salient points in Desire Under the Elms. Eben's dead mother dominates his thinking and her ghost haunts him. He says that he still sees her in the house. "She still comes back--stands by the stove thar in the evenin'--"<sup>4</sup>. He identifies himself with her. "I'm Maw", he says, "every drop of blood!"<sup>5</sup> The connection between filial and sexual

---

1. W.D. Sievers, p. 97.

2. E.A. Engel, p. 134.

3. Ibid., p. 134.

4. D.U.E., I. ii, p. 209.

5. Ibid., I. ii, p. 207.



instincts is illustrated in the scene where Abbie is alone with Eben in his mother's parlour. By talking in intensely sympathetic terms to Eben about his mother, Abbie is able to attune herself to the maternal influences playing upon him. Eventually, maternal and sexual forces combine in her and, when she succeeds in seducing him, "there is a sincere maternal love in her manner and voice--a horribly frank mixture of lust and mother-love" as she tells him, "I'll take yer Maw's place!"<sup>1</sup>

The play also has autobiographical overtones. Dr. Philip Weissman, "a specialist in the psychiatric aspects of the creative process",<sup>2</sup> said after reading Desire Under the Elms that the play was an "unconscious autobiography". This view would be supported by the report that "O'Neill once told Walter Huston that he had dreamed one night the whole of Desire Under the Elms"<sup>3</sup> and by the remark made by O'Neill in a letter to Kenneth Macgowan, "I have always loved Ephraim so much! He's so autobiographical!"<sup>4</sup> O'Neill seems to use Ephraim

---

1. D.U.E., II. iii, p. 243.

2. A & B. Gelb, p. 538.

3. F.I. Carpenter, p. 105.

4. A & B. Gelb, p. 541.

and Eben as alternate reflections of himself. When Ephraim complains of "somethin'" that makes him uneasy in the house and which he describes as "droppin' off the elums, climbin' up the roof, sneakin' down the chimney, pokin' in the corners!",<sup>1</sup> he reflects O'Neill's own uneasiness as he worked on the play at Ridgefield where he said that he heard "footsteps outside during the night going round the house, and during the day when he was writing he would feel someone looking over his shoulder".<sup>2</sup> To find peace, Ephraim goes off to sleep in the barn and in doing so repeats one of O'Neill's own practices at Ridgefield when "on weekends he would often flee to the barn" in order "to escape the company with which Agnes", his wife, "filled the house".<sup>3</sup> Eben expresses O'Neill's filial hates and loves. His hatred of the stingy, scripture-quoting Ephraim conveys O'Neill's contempt for his father's parsimony, religious piety and love of quoting Shakespeare. His tortured remembrance of his dead mother revives O'Neill's bitter remorse at the memory of Ella O'Neill:

---

1. D.U.E., III. i, p. 253.

2. A & B. Gelb, p. 541.

3. Ibid., p. 541.

Although Ella had been dead two years when O'Neill began writing the play, he had been considering its theme for some time; Jamie's death, just before he began the actual writing, had revived O'Neill's sense of loss for his mother and turned his thoughts with renewed intensity to what he considered Ella's outrageous suffering at the hands of both Jamie and James.<sup>1</sup>

Eben complains that his father worked his mother to death. He describes her domestic slavery: how she would "come back all cramped up t' shake the fire, an' carry ashes, her eyes weepin' an' bloody with smoke an' cinders..."<sup>2</sup> He says, "She'd got too tired. She'd got too used t' bein' too tired. That was what he done".<sup>3</sup> He also believes that his father swindled his mother out of the ownership of their farm and O'Neill's own sense of grievance that his father and brother competed with him for his mother's love is expressed in Eben's complaint that Ephraim, Peter and Simeon are trying to deprive him of his inheritance.

Superficially, the plot of Desire Under the Elms consists of a love triangle involving an old man, his son and a young woman, but the nature and violence of

---

1. A & B. Gelb, pp. 538-539.

2. D.U.E., I. ii, p. 209.

3. Ibid., p. 209.

its incidents, the homicidal hatred of son for father, the incest and infanticide remind us of those Greek myths that deal with similar topics. Edgar F. Racey, in "Myth as Tragic Structure in Desire Under the Elms", argues O'Neill's "effective...reliance on the Hippolytus of Euripides (and perhaps on Racine's treatment of the theme)".<sup>1</sup> He cites similarities of plot and similar retributory conceptions such as Theseus's curse, said to be echoed by Ephraim, and his final desolation, also experienced by Ephraim. But Frederick Carpenter said that "Desire never pretended to domesticate classical myth in modern terms"<sup>2</sup> and Edwin Engel claimed that "if O'Neill's play has a kinship with Oedipus, it is with the complex rather than Rex".<sup>3</sup> I would agree. O'Neill never admitted Greek influence here and those critics who have stressed it have ended by mistaking the plot for the theme. The theme is not derived from ancient myth, but from a recent idea that subliminal parental forces fight for dominance in the individual mind. O'Neill has tried to indicate the conflict visually.

---

1. J. Gassner, p. 57.

2. F.I. Carpenter, p. 106.

3. E.A. Engel, p. 132.



At the beginning of the play, he draws our attention to his stage setting which shews a farmhouse framed by elm trees. The framing elm trees "bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption".<sup>1</sup> In this way, O'Neill conveys his two salient ideas that domestic life is contained within the power of elemental forces and that maternal forces dominate human events. The contending forces are suggested through visual symbols. Paternity is represented by the stone walls, the rocky soil, the Cabot brothers, Peter and Simeon, and Ephraim who is its embodiment. Maternity is symbolised by the elms, the cows and by its agent, Abbie.

The language of the individual characters directs us to the subterranean factors of the play. The elemental nature of the coming struggle is suggested by the animal imagery in the dialogue. Simeon and Peter have an affection for the livestock. They discuss

---

1. D.U.E., Preamble, p. 202.

the cows who, they claim, "knows us" "an' likes us". They insist that the horses, pigs and chickens "knows us like brothers".<sup>1</sup> Simeon's dead wife had hair like "a hoss's tail". Eben, describing his affair with Min, tells how he "begun t' beller like a calf".<sup>2</sup> Ephraim is described as "a mule" and reference is made to his "old snake's eyes" and his "mule's grin". The opposed qualities of the paternal and maternal influences are reflected in the imagery expressed by their respective agents. Ephraim reflects paternity's aridity in his "They hated me 'cause I was hard. I hated them 'cause they was soft",<sup>3</sup> and its desolateness in "God's lonesome, hain't He? God's hard an' lonesome".<sup>4</sup> Abbie is the embodiment of maternity, containing within herself overwhelming forces of maternal and sexual love. Her language is full of erotic images as she tries to overcome the inhibitions instilled in Eben by his father. "An' upstairs--that be my bedroom--an' my bed!"<sup>5</sup> and

---

1. D.U.E., I. iv, p. 218.

2. Ibid., I. iii, p. 214.

3. Ibid., II. ii, p. 238.

4. Ibid., III. iv, p. 268.

5. Ibid., I. iv, pp. 226-227.

"Look at yer eyes! They's lust fur me in 'em, burnin' 'em up! Look at yer lips now! They're tremblin' an' longin' t' kiss me".<sup>1</sup> The frequent juxtaposition of these characters' contrasting imagery repeatedly reminds us that the struggle is between parental ideologies of self-denial and self-fulfilment.

The plot traces the course of the parental conflict and, because its incidents require interpretation some narrative seems necessary. At the beginning of the play, paternal influences are dominant. The Cabot farm is occupied entirely by men. The maternal influences are symbolically imprisoned in Eben's mother's parlour where her spirit is said to dwell. The weeping elms, brooding over the farmhouse, illustrate a bereaved and vengeful maternity which awaits an opportunity to reassert itself. The opportunity occurs when Abbie arrives at the farmhouse. Her attempts to seduce Eben are in reality attacks made by maternal influences on paternal dominance. They fail at first because Eben regards her as a usurper, because she has not identified

---

1. D.U.E., II. ii, p. 240.

herself with his mother in his mind and because his mother's spirit is still imprisoned in the parlour. Abbie symbolically releases the maternal powers when she enters the parlour which has been locked since Eben's mother died. There, aided by maternal influences, Abbie succeeds in satisfying Eben's filial, sexual and incestuous urges and his desire for oedipal revenge. This is a victory for maternal influences and Eben's mother "kin rest now an' sleep content. She's quits..."<sup>1</sup> Paternity makes a counter attack when Ephraim suggests to Eben that Abbie had her child to ensure her possession of the farm. Eben upbraids Abbie and tells her that the child is the main impediment to their continuing association. If Abbie were to lose Eben it would mean the end of natural love which maternal influences encourage and a return to loveless paternal dominance. So she kills her baby.

Some critics have found this incident implausible.

Barrett Clark says:

Now I do not believe that Abbie would deliberately murder her baby. I believe she would have killed Ephraim, and I think that that is what she ought to have done in the play....The murder is not convincing. I think it is a mistake....<sup>2</sup>

---

1. D.U.E., II. iv, p. 246.

2. B.H. Clark, p. 153.



Clifford Leech, too, feels that "despite the admiration that the general conduct of the action arouses, we may hesitate over Abbie's killing of her child".<sup>1</sup> But I think O'Neill was right. If Abbie had killed Ephraim, she would have solved nothing. She would not have removed Eben's suspicions of her motive: she would more likely have reinforced them. The suddenly critical situation in the parental conflict makes the infanticide inevitable. When Eben announces that he has done with Abbie, the forces of paternity threaten to regain the ascendancy because sexual love which reproduces children will be thwarted and maternal influences will be weakened. The need to preserve the processes of reproduction overrides the affection of a mother for an individual baby and as Abbie sees the matter she must destroy her child to keep her lover. In terms of the parental conflict, the infanticide is decisive because paternity can make no comparable sacrifice. The effect of Abbie's action is delayed as Eben reports her to the sheriff, but it is irresistible and when Eben returns to share her punishment, he makes a reciprocal sacrifice.

---

1. C. Leech, p. 52.

Una Ellis Fermor, in Frontiers of Drama, has drawn attention to the "equilibrium of tragedy" which she describes as a balance observable in tragedy between contrary readings of life. These readings convey to an audience an intuitive and undefined apprehension of another universe which is underneath the surface of life and which has other values. Desire Under the Elms has this "equilibrium" because the outer action of adultery and infanticide is based on the inner action of warring psychic forces and O'Neill makes use of it to convey a sense of tragic fate in the actions of his characters. All the major characters feel that they know exactly why they act as they do and that they are completely in control of their own destinies. But O'Neill shews the psychic forces working surreptitiously through their conscious and subconscious minds. Abbie remembers her hard past life, "oceans o' trouble an' nuthin' but wuk fur reward".<sup>1</sup> She was "a orphan early an' had t' wuk fur others in other folks' hums".<sup>2</sup> When her drunkard husband and her baby died, she thought that, at last, she was free to live her own life, but she

---

1. D.U.E., I. iv, p. 226.

2. Ibid., I. iv, p. 226.

was free only "t'wuk agen in other folks' hums, doin' other folks' wuk...".<sup>1</sup> At thirty-five, "there is strength and obstinacy in her jaw, a hard determination in her eyes"<sup>2</sup> and her second marriage is a calculated act from which she hopes to emerge the beneficiary. When she sees her new home for the first time, all her memories of deprivation rise in her mind and she says, "(with lust for the word) Hum!"<sup>3</sup> She has no intention of altering her conscious purpose or losing her new home through a passion for Eben. In fact, she hopes to use him to secure her hold on the farm. What she does not understand is the power of her own sensuality which will get out of hand or her own need for affection which will cause her to sacrifice her baby and say to Eben, "I don't care what ye do--if ye'll on'y love me agen--".<sup>4</sup> Through these subliminal desires, maternal influences make use of her. Eben does not understand his own motives either. He thinks he is fighting his father, his brothers and later Abbie for the ownership of the

- 
1. D.U.E., I. iv, p. 226.
  2. Ibid., I. iv, p. 221.
  3. Ibid., I. iv, p. 221.
  4. Ibid., III. iii, p. 262.

Cabot farm, but what he really wants is his mother or a mother substitute. This obsession with the memory of his mother ensures his seduction by Abbie and makes the subsequent tragedy inevitable. Ephraim Cabot is the most grossly deceived of all the characters. He believes that he is the chosen instrument of God, "the servant o' His hand", that God speaks to him, ordering him to turn arid land into fertile soil, to make his stony farm a "church on a rock" and to take a wife who will give him a new heir. In fact, his God is a reflection of his own ego which speaks to him from his possessiveness and lust. His endless efforts to cultivate a stony land are a penance for his presumptuousness in stifling emotional growth in those he dominates. At the end of the play, he is confirmed in his continuing loneliness, "his face stony" as he goes about his meaningless routine "t'round up the stock".

In All God's Chillun Got Wings (1923) and Desire Under the Elms (1924), O'Neill shews tribal compulsions and parental loyalties as agencies which work through the individual but exist outside him. He knew, however,



from the way these plays had been misunderstood, that modern audiences did not readily accept such supernatural motivation and machinery. He felt that audiences might be moved by a "sense of fate" if it were manifestly rooted in the personalities of the characters and their relationships with each other. He believed that under different circumstances Greek tragedy had best conveyed this "sense of fate" and thought he would create a similar atmosphere in his own plays if he could remind his audiences of Greek precedents. He decided to make Mourning Becomes Electra (1931) a "modern psychological drama using one of the old legend plots of Greek tragedy" as his framework. In this way, he hoped "to get (a) modern psychological approximation of (the) Greek sense of fate...which an intelligent audience of today, possessed of no belief in gods or supernatural retribution, could accept or be moved by".<sup>1</sup> The "old legend" he chose to use was the Oresteia (458 B.C.) of Aeschylus.

The two forces that dominate the characters in Mourning Becomes Electra are a paternal puritan rationale which denies life and imprisons the spirit and its

---

1. Eugene O'Neill, "Working Notes," European Theories of the Drama, p. 530.

antithesis, a maternal affirmation of life which will release the human spirit to happiness. The inhibiting nature of puritanism is conveyed through a number of visual symbols. The exterior of the Mannon house where the puritans live has a "white Grecian temple portico" whose "white columns cast black bars of shadow on the gray wall behind them"<sup>1</sup> like prison bars. The house is locked up behind a "white picket fence and a tall hedge". The petrifying effect of the house on its occupants is illustrated in the mask-like quality of the facial expressions and in the "wooden, square-shouldered military bearing"<sup>2</sup> of the Mannons. The sadism that can grow in a puritan is illustrated in the portrait of Ezra Mannon which shews him "seated stiffly in an armchair, his hands on the arms, wearing his black judge's robe", his face "cold and emotionless"<sup>3</sup> and in the ancestral portraits of the Mannon library which contain one of "a grim-visaged minister of the witch-burning era".<sup>4</sup> The viciousness of puritanism is

---

1. Homecoming, I, M.B.E., p. 5.

2. Ibid., I, p. 10.

3. Ibid., II, p. 28.

4. The Hunted, II, M.B.E., p. 79.

reflected in the descriptions of the townsfolk. Amos Ames is a "garrulous gossip-monger", his wife is "a similar scandal-bearing type, her tongue...sharpened by malice" and her cousin, Minnie, is an "eager-listener type, with a small round face, round stupid eyes, and a round mouth pursed out to drink in gossip".<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill shews in *Ezra Mannon* that a strict puritan upbringing impairs the individual's emotional development. When Ezra was a boy, "his mother was stern with him".<sup>2</sup> He was taken to "the white meeting-house on Sabbaths" where "they" meditated on death".<sup>3</sup> He was taught that "Life was a dying. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born".<sup>4</sup> As a result, he has become a man who stands and sits "in stiff posed attitudes" and who speaks in a deep voice that has "a hollow repressed quality, as if he were continually withholding emotion from it".<sup>5</sup> His conscience has become over-developed. He is so plagued by a sense of sex-guilt that he cannot even express his affection for

---

1. *Homecoming*, I, M.B.E., p. 6.

2. *Ibid.*, III, p. 44.

3. *Ibid.*, III, p. 54.

4. *Ibid.*, III, p. 54.

5. *Ibid.*, III, p. 46.

his wife in a natural way. He tells Christine, "Something queer in me keeps me mum about the things I'd like most to say....Something keeps me sitting numb in my own heart--like a statue of a dead man in a town square".<sup>1</sup> His inability to express tenderness turns his love-making into lust and Christine describes her wedding night as an experience which "turned his romance into--disgust".<sup>2</sup> Her revulsion extends to the daughter born of this lust and Christine tells Lavinia, "I never could make myself feel you were born of any body but his! You were always my wedding night to me--and my honeymoon!".<sup>3</sup> Lavinia says, "So I was born of your disgust! I've always guessed that, Mother....ever since I can remember--your disgust!".<sup>4</sup> Both Ezra and Christine's sexual incompatibility and the resultant antipathy between Christine and Lavinia derive ultimately from Ezra's emotional maladjustment and in this way the puritan influence is seen to be a major cause of the family tragedy.

The counter influence is the maternal affirmation of life which is suggested through verbal and visual images.

- 
1. Homecoming, III, M.B.E., p. 55.
  2. Ibid., II, p. 31.
  3. Ibid., II, p. 31.
  4. Ibid., II, p. 31.



There is a frequent reference to an archetypal image of maternity which symbolizes a secret domination of the male characters. Marie Brantome, although she never appears on the stage, is this image of womanhood to whom the Mannons are instinctively drawn. Adam Brant tells Lavinia, "Abe Mannon, as well as his brother, loved my mother (Marie Brantome)"<sup>1</sup> and Seth remarks to Lavinia, "Oh, everyone took to Marie-- couldn't help it. Even your Paw (Ezra). He was only a boy then, but he was crazy about her, too..."<sup>2</sup> From Marie, there is a psychic line of descent to Christine and Lavinia. They are related in two ways. They all display affinities with nature when their womanhood is blooming. Marie was "frisky and full of life--with something free and wild about her like an animile".<sup>3</sup> Christine in her prime moves "with a flowing animal grace"<sup>4</sup> and after Christine's death, Lavinia's body acquires the "feminine grace her mother's had possessed".<sup>5</sup> They all have the same emblem of

- 
1. Homecoming, I, M.B.E., p. 25.
  2. Ibid., III, p. 44.
  3. Ibid., III, p. 44.
  4. Ibid., I, p. 9.
  5. The Haunted, I. ii, M.B.E., p. 139.

sexual attraction. Christine has "thick curly hair, partly a copper brown, partly a bronze gold, each shade distinct and yet blending with the other".<sup>1</sup> Lavinia has "the same peculiar shade of copper-gold hair"<sup>2</sup> and Seth tells Lavinia that Marie had "hair just the color of your Maw's and yourn she had".<sup>3</sup> There are several indications of the sexual fascination this hair colour has for the Mannons. When Brant, Marie's son, is trying to win Lavinia's confidence, he refers romantically to this three-fold similarity of hair colour. He says, "You're so like your mother in some ways....You won't meet hair like yours and hers again in a month of Sundays. I only know of one other woman who had it....It was my mother".<sup>4</sup> When Ezra falteringly approaches his wife, he leans towards her "his voice trembling with desire and a feeling of strangeness and awe--touching her hair with an awkward caress".<sup>5</sup> When Orin talks lovingly to his mother of his boyhood, he says, "You've still got the same beautiful hair, Mother" and "he reaches up and touches her hair caressingly".<sup>6</sup>

---

1. Homecoming, I, M.B.E., p. 9.

2. Ibid., I, p. 10.

3. Ibid., III, p. 44.

4. Ibid., I, p. 22.

5. Ibid., III, p. 52.

6. The Hunted, II, M.B.E., p. 90.

When he later makes an incestuous approach to his sister, he says, "There are times now when you don't seem to be my sister, nor Mother, but some stranger with the same beautiful hair--(He touches her hair caressingly....)"<sup>1</sup>

There is a verbal image which symbolizes the yearning of all the characters to return to the protection of the mother. This is the image of the "Blessed Isles" where the clouds lie "like down on the mountain tops",<sup>2</sup> where the sea sings "a croon in your ears like a lullaby"<sup>3</sup> and where the inhabitants are happy because they have "never heard that love can be a sin".<sup>4</sup> Brant believes that there you can "forget... all men's dirty dreams of greed and power".<sup>5</sup> Ezra, weary of war and domestic trouble, asks Christine to go with him on a voyage "to the other side of the world" to "find some island" where they can be alone together. Orin tells his mother of an island of peace he used to dream about during the war. It represented "peace and warmth and security" and he identifies it with her.

---

1. The Haunted, III, M.B.E., p. 165.

2. Homecoming, I, M.B.E., p. 24.

3. Ibid., I, p. 24.

4. Ibid., I, p. 24.

5. Ibid., I, p. 24.

He tells her, "The breaking of the waves was your voice. The sky was the same color as your eyes. The warm sand was like your skin. The whole island was you".<sup>1</sup> When Christine is dead, Orin and Lavinia set off to find these islands. They reach them and Lavinia learns to love them. She says, "They finished setting me free. There was something mysterious and beautiful--a good spirit--of love--coming out of the land and sea. It made me forget death".<sup>2</sup>

O'Neill shews these conflicting parental influences motivating his characters through subconscious loyalties. He was led to this view of human motivation through reading "What's Wrong With Marriage" whose co-author was his friend, Kenneth Macgowan. This book was based on an investigation made by Dr. Hamilton into the "premarital, marital and extramarital sex lives" of "one hundred married men and one hundred married women"<sup>3</sup> among whom were O'Neill himself and his second wife, Agnes. "What's Wrong With Marriage" claims that the influence most destructive to

---

1. The Hunted, II, M.B.E. p. 90.

2. The Haunted, I. ii, M.B.E., p. 147.

3. A & B. Gelb, p. 596.



happiness in married life is the puritan prohibitive attitude of conscience which regards all sexual practice as sinful. This prohibitive conscience causes the male assault to be unrestrainedly lustful, causes disgust and revulsion in the female and leads to sexual conflict. The animosity is conveyed to the children who take the side of the parent they prefer. O'Neill plainly has this motivation of family behaviour in mind and intends to convey it symbolically by way of facial resemblances when he writes in his Working Notes for Mourning Becomes Electra (1931):

Aegisthus (Adam Brant) bears strong facial resemblance to Agamemnon (Ezra) and Orestes (Orin)...his resemblance to her father attracts Electra (Lavinia)--Electra adores father, devoted to brother (who resembles father), hates mother--Orestes adores mother, devoted to sister (whose face resembles mother's) so hates his father--Agamemnon, frustrated in love for Clytemnestra (Christine), adores daughter, Electra, who resembles her, hates and is jealous of his son.<sup>1</sup>

All the main characters of the play faithfully follow the sketched plan, displaying an excessive affection

---

1. Eugene O'Neill, "Working Notes," European Theories of the Drama, p. 531.

for the parent of the opposite sex and a hatred of the parent or child of the same sex.

But O'Neill adds authenticity to his characters by shewing that the children have a concealed yearning for the parent they hate. Lavinia betrays her thwarted love of her mother in her wincing and harsh stammering when Christine tells her that she is the child of her disgust. When Christine is dead, Lavinia begins to bear "a striking resemblance to her mother in every respect, even to being dressed in the green her mother had affected".<sup>1</sup> Orin, who hates his father because he thinks that he is the main rival for his mother's love, nevertheless, "chuckles to himself with a queer affectionate amusement" when he sees him lying dead in his coffin and says, "You never cared to know me in life--but I really think we might be friends now you are dead".<sup>2</sup> Even Brant, who detests Ezra as the man who allowed his mother to die after she had asked for help and who is the husband of the woman he loves, "unconsciously...takes the same attitude as Mannon, sitting erect, his hands on the arms of the chair--"<sup>3</sup> as he looks at Ezra's portrait in the study.

- 
1. The Haunted, I. i, M.B.E., p. 137.
  2. The Hunted, III, M.B.E., p. 94.
  3. Homecoming, II, M.B.E., p. 36.

At the conclusion of "What's Wrong With Marriage", its co-authors, Dr. Hamilton and Kenneth Macgowan, expressed their "immense pessimism" about family relationships:

Their pessimism was "despair over the way in which the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. In this respect the family circle seems a vicious circle. It seems indeed the greatest vicious circle ever conceived; for its circumference has become the straight line of descent from parent to child, world without end."<sup>1</sup>

This pessimistic attitude to the family is probably what O'Neill has in mind when he refers to the "driving insistent compulsion of passions engendered in family past, which constitute family fate".<sup>2</sup> In his "Working Notes", he describes how he will convey this fate by use of furies as the Greeks did. He is, however, more ruthless than his Greek predecessors. He complains about Greek "weakness" in allowing Electra to "escape unpunished" in the Oresteia. "Why", he asks, "did the chain of fated crime and retribution ignore her mother's murderess?"<sup>3</sup> In the Oresteia, the furies pursue Orestes who escapes because Athens casts her vote in his favour, but O'Neill

---

1. C. Bowen, p. 242.

2. Eugene O'Neill, "Working Notes," European Theories of the Drama, p. 534.

3. Ibid., p. 530.

makes Lavinia return home from the Pacific to face her furies, which are objectified in the family portraits in the Mannon sitting-room. Lavinia stands "(directly under them in front of the fireplace. She suddenly addresses them in a harsh, resentful voice) Why do you look at me like that? I've done my duty by you!"<sup>1</sup> But she is wrong. After her quarrel with Orin, she fights a compelling desire for his death and, terrified at her thoughts, she cries out to them for mercy. "Don't let me think of death! I couldn't bear another death! Please! Please!"<sup>2</sup> Orin kills himself and "the eyes of the Mannons in the portraits" fix "accusingly on her".<sup>3</sup> She makes a final determined attempt to escape the furies by marrying Peter Miles, but she fails because the influence of the past and "the dead are too strong".<sup>4</sup> Mourning Becomes Electra can be said to make three points. "Homecoming" illustrates the drastic consequences of a restrictive puritanism; "The Hunted" asks, "How far are we allowed to take the law into our own hands?" and "The Haunted"

---

1. The Haunted, I. ii, M.B.E., p. 139.

2. Ibid., III, p. 157.

3. Ibid., III, p. 168.

4. Ibid., IV, p. 177.



shews that those who do take the law into their own hands are made to punish themselves. Christine, who killed her husband, shoots herself. Orin, who was responsible for his mother's death, also shoots himself. Lavinia, whom Orin describes as "the most interesting criminal of us all",<sup>1</sup> punishes herself too when she condemns herself to live with her furies. She says:

I'm not going the way Mother and Orin went. That's escaping punishment. And there's no one left to punish me. I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself! Living alone here with the dead is a worse act of justice than death or prison! I'll never go out or see anyone! I'll have the shutters nailed closed so no sunlight can ever get in. I'll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die!...I know they will see to it I live for a long time! It takes the Mannons to punish themselves for being born!<sup>2</sup>

The autobiographical implications of the play are strong. Lavinia loses "in rapid succession (and in the same order as O'Neill) first her father, then her mother, then her brother"<sup>3</sup> and when she decides to "live alone with the dead", she acts out what O'Neill

---

1. The Haunted, II, M.B.E., p. 153.

2. Ibid., IV, p. 178.

3. A & B. Gelb, p. 721.

had been doing all his life. He too had lived alone with memories of his dead family that had pursued his conscience like furies until, in Long Day's Journey Into Night (1941), he had tried "to face" his "dead at last".<sup>1</sup> The struggle between paternal and maternal influences to dominate the characters of Mourning Becomes Electra reflects the conflict of parental loyalties in his own mind. But the most significant autobiographical implication occurs when Lavinia rejects both life and death as she "marches woodenly into the house, closing the door behind her".<sup>2</sup> This final curtain symbolizes the end of O'Neill's lingering faith in the meaning and purpose of human life and its replacement with nihilistic pessimism. In the next chapter, I shall try to trace the growth of this pessimism in his mind.

- 
1. From the inscription, Long Day's Journey Into Night, 1956, p. 7.
  2. The Haunted, IV, M.B.E., p. 179.

## CHAPTER 6

### PESSIMISM

As a result of the sociological, religious and psychological enquiries that O'Neill makes in the plays of this period, he comes to the conclusion that sensitive men are social outcasts, that there is no God, and that the universe is chaotic and meaningless. His discovery that life is different from what he expected it to be causes him anger and mental conflict. He is divided between scepticism, arising from his bitter experiences and his reading of radical writers, and subconscious superstitions bred by early religious teaching.

1. *A.S.C.W.*, IV, 111, p. 142.

2. *A.S.C.*, IV, 11, p. 151.

3. *A.S.C.*, I, 1, p. 102.

One or two of his plays suggest that he half-expected his dilemma to be resolved by some divine revelation like that experienced by Jim Harris in All God's Chillun Got Wings when at the moment of defeat, he says, "Now I see Your Light again! Now I hear Your Voice! Forgive me, God, for blaspheming You!"<sup>1</sup> or like that of John Loving in Days Without End who suddenly converted to faith, cries, "Ah! Thou hast heard me at last! Thou hast not forsaken me! Thou has always loved me! I am forgiven!...I can believe!"<sup>2</sup> His actual experience was nearer to that of Dion Antony in The Great God Brown who reading of God's promise, "Come unto me all ye who are heavy laden and I will give you rest", replies, "I will come--but where are you, Savior?"<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, O'Neill never quite lost his need to see certain religious beliefs justified. The most important of these was the belief in the immortality of the individual soul. From this premise, he could reason that there must be a purpose in an individual's existence. If the individual had a purpose, then he must be a part of a greater purpose and this in turn argued the presence of a directing universal agency or God. These ideas recur in The Fountain

---

1. A.G.C.G.W., II. iii, p. 342.

2. D.W.E., IV. ii, p. 565.

3. G.G.B., I. i, p. 269.



and Lazarus Laughed, but often his scepticism is at hand to undermine his belief and to confuse him so that, in The Great God Brown and Days Without End, we find him attacking the existence of God at the same time as he exalts the immortality of the individual. Denied his Christian faith, O'Neill searched for an alternative and when he was eighteen, settled on Nietzsche whose philosophy appeared to exalt the individual, offer immortality through eternal recurrence and to answer scepticism. Nietzsche was a "new savior" who would reveal "how we can be saved from ourselves, so that we can be free of the past and inherit the future and not perish by it!"<sup>1</sup> But O'Neill's scepticism sometimes persuaded him that even Nietzsche's gospel was "more nonsense, of course", a convenient palliative in "times of stress and flight when one hides in any old empty barrel!"<sup>2</sup>

These alternations of belief and unbelief contributed to O'Neill's emotional and intellectual instability and very probably to the uneven quality of much of his work.

---

1. D.W.E., III. ii, p. 543.

2. Ibid., III. ii, p. 543.

What remained unchangingly with him, however, was "a horror of death" and "a dread of life--as if he constantly sensed a malignant Spirit hiding behind life, waiting to catch men at its mercy, in their hour of secure happiness--".<sup>1</sup> If a "horror of death" and "a dread of life" do not indicate a pessimistic outlook on life, I cannot think what does, but O'Neill did not think of himself as a pessimist. In answer to a charge that his plays reflected an "unmitigated gloom", he replied, "There is a skin deep optimism and another higher optimism, not skin deep, which is usually confounded with pessimism. To me, the tragic alone has that significant beauty which is truth."<sup>2</sup> Some critics support him. Barrett Clark calls him "an optimist" and describes him as "a militant apostle of Life with a capital L".<sup>3</sup> Sophus Winther, with a little more caution, remarks on the "affirmative value" in O'Neill's outlook which "may be called a kind of optimism".<sup>4</sup>

---

1. D.W.E., III. i, p. 535.

2. Eugene O'Neill, "Damn the Optimists," O. Cargill, p. 104.

3. B.H. Clark, p. 147.

4. S.K. Winther, p. 235.

I cannot agree. I believe that despite O'Neill's attempts to make himself into an optimist, the ingrained pessimism of his mind was too much for him.

O'Neill's basic pessimism is betrayed by the small and almost accidental details of his plays which accumulate into a pervading atmosphere of gloom and despair. His pessimism is most evident in his attitude to other human beings. As we read his plays, we find it hard to escape the conclusion that although he exalts the heroic character, he dislikes people. He is depressed by the places where ordinary men and women live. Cities "are prisons wherein man locks himself from life".<sup>1</sup> City streets are evil places where human beings divide into hostile racial groups, where pavement noises are "dulled with a quality of fatigue" and where one meets "faces with a favorless cruelty".<sup>2</sup>

---

1. L.L., II. i, p. 310.

2. A.G.C.G.W., I. iii, p. 312.

He feels that houses develop "from their intimate contact with the life of man...an appalling humaneness".<sup>1</sup> Nina Leeds, in Strange Interlude, says of her husband's spiritless home, "It's a queer house, Ned. There is something wrong with its psyche....I feel it has lost its soul and grown resigned to doing without it."<sup>2</sup> The Cabot house in Desire Under the Elms has a conspiratorial personality which grows out of the intrigue between Abbie and Eben. The Mannon house in Mourning Becomes Electra reflects from its white painted front all that is menacing, sterile and tragic in the Mannon family. The "white columns cast black bars of shadow on the gray wall behind them",<sup>3</sup> suggesting the prison-like effect the house has on its inmates. Its portico "is like an incongruous white mask fixed on the house to hide its sombre gray ugliness",<sup>4</sup> matching the

- 
1. D.U.E., Preamble, p. 202.
  2. S.I., III, p. 49.
  3. Homecoming, I, M.B.E., p. 5.
  4. Ibid., I, p. 5.



mask-like faces behind which the Mannons conceal themselves. O'Neill likes to give his houses a resemblance to discouraging facial expressions. In All God's Chillun Got Wings, the buildings about the church where Jim and Ella are married "have a stern, forbidding look". The shades on the windows are drawn down "giving an effect of staring, brutal eyes that pry callously at human beings without acknowledging them".<sup>1</sup> The windows of the Mannon house "reflect the sun's rays in a resentful glare"<sup>2</sup> and "tears trickle down" the Cabot house when it rains and "rot on the shingles".<sup>3</sup> Rooms reflect the less attractive aspects of their owners' personalities. Professor Leeds' room in Strange Interlude is a "cosy, cultured retreat, sedulously built as a sanctuary where...a fugitive from reality can view the present safely...as a superior with condescending disdain, pity, and even amusement".<sup>4</sup> When he dies, the drawn shades give the windows "a suggestion of lifeless closed eyes...making the room seem more withdrawn from life than

---

1. A.G.C.G.W., I. iv, p. 318.

2. Homecoming, I, M.B.E., p. 5.

3. D.U.E., Preamble, p. 202.

4. S.I., I, p. 3.

before".<sup>1</sup> The official study of Menendez, the powerful churchman, has a "rigid, narrow ecclesiasticism" which "possesses a sombre power over the imagination by the force of its concentration"<sup>2</sup> and which reflects exactly the overbearing personality of its user. The locked parlour in Desire Under the Elms where the restless spirit of Eben's dead mother dwells is a "grim, repressed room like a tomb in which the family has been interred alive".<sup>3</sup>

O'Neill uses the furniture in a room to reflect family divisions and ideological disagreements within a race. In All God's Chillun Got Wings, he describes the clash of old and new furniture in the Harris parlour which symbolizes not only the conflict between Jim and his sister, Harriet, but also the struggle between imitative and indigenous cultures that goes on in the twentieth century negro mind as his race acquires maturity. In Strange Interlude, he suggests that an intrusive and alien influence in a room can knock its furniture's psyche out of joint. When Sam Evans takes over the dead Professor's room, his untidy nature is so much at variance

---

1. S.I., II, p. 24.

2. The F., IV, p. 406.

3. D.U.E., II. iii, p. 241.

with "the Professor's well-ordered mind" that we see the "table has become neurotic".<sup>1</sup> The notable point about all this illustration is its gloom. O'Neill seems to be unable to repress his aversion to what Marsden in Strange Interlude describes as "the stench of human life". It is quite likely that Ephraim Cabot was expressing O'Neill's own feelings when he said, "They's no peace in houses, they's no rest livin' with folks. Somethin's always livin' with ye".<sup>2</sup>

O'Neill's pessimism is most evident in his delineation of human relationships. Apart from Ah, Wilderness! all his plays return more or less to the barrenness of human nature. In The Hairy Ape, the stokers are little more than animals. They "are hairy-chested, with long arms of tremendous power, and low, receding brows above their small, fierce, resentful eyes".<sup>3</sup> Yank is "their most highly developed individual" which means that he is "broader, fiercer, more truculent, more powerful, more sure of himself than the rest".<sup>4</sup>

---

1. S.I., IV, p. 66.

2. D.U.E., III. i, p. 253.

3. H.A., I, p. 207.

4. Ibid., I, p. 208.

The stokers' attitude to one another is invariably resentful, scornful, contemptuous or threatening. Their remarks to one another are punctuated with "cat-calls, hisses, boos, hard laughter".<sup>1</sup> People at the other end of the social scale are no better, indeed in a sense, they are worse. Of those who travel "first cabin", Mildred Douglas is a "fretful, nervous and discontented" girl of twenty whose listlessness indicates that "the vitality of her stock had been sapped before she was conceived"<sup>2</sup> and her aunt is a pompous and proud "gray lump of dough touched up with rouge".<sup>3</sup> Respectable society is made up of affected, hypocritical churchgoers, overdressed women and insensitive overfed men. The underworld exists in prison cells that "disappear in the dark background as if they ran on, numberless, into infinity".<sup>4</sup> It expresses itself in raucous, bitter comment and "hard

- 
1. H.A., I, p. 212.
  2. Ibid., II, p. 218.
  3. Ibid., II, p. 218.
  4. Ibid., VI, p. 239.



barking laughter". O'Neill's sophisticated characters frequently have a prominent boorish trait. They are often people whom he regards as being sensitive and with whom, presumably, he expects us to sympathize. But they sometimes seem sensitive only to their own wounds. Anna Christie who is loudly vocal in condemnation of those who use her badly, sneers at a not unfriendly wharf whore, "You're me forty years from now. That's you!"<sup>1</sup> Dion Antony who upbraids his friends for their unkindness, calls a prostitute who has befriended him and who alone understands him, a "sentimental old pig" and asks her "jeeringly", "Are you falling in love with your keeper, old Sacred Cow?"<sup>2</sup> Jamie Tyrone, himself an alcoholic, describes his drug-addict mother as "the hophead". Above all, Long Day's Journey Into Night shews the sadistic verbal cruelties that the O'Neill's inflicted upon one another in their everyday lives. Almost every conversation they hold contains recrimination and bitterness. Tyrone tells Jamie:

You never wanted to do anything except loaf in barrooms! You'd have been content to sit back like a lazy lunk and sponge on me for the rest of your life! After all

---

1. A.C., I, p. 15.

2. G.G.B., II. i, p. 285.

the money I'd wasted on your education,  
and all you did was get fired in  
disgrace from every college you went  
to!...I wouldn't give a damn if you ever  
displayed the slightest sign of gratitude.  
The only thanks is to have you sneer at  
me for a dirty miser, sneer at my  
profession, sneer at every damped thing  
in the world--except yourself.<sup>1</sup>

He humiliates his wife by reminding her of the time she  
went to pieces because of drugs:

I hope you'll lay in a good stock  
ahead so we'll never have another night  
like the one when you screamed for it,  
and ran out of the house in your night-  
dress half crazy, to try and throw  
yourself off the dock!<sup>2</sup>

Ella taunts her husband for giving her an inferior  
home. She says, "It never was a home....You forget I  
know from experience what a home is like. I gave up  
one to marry you--my father's home".<sup>3</sup> Jamie blames  
Edmund for their mother's drug addiction:

And it was your being born that  
started Mama on dope. I know that's not  
your fault, but all the same, God damn you,  
I can't help hating your guts--!<sup>4</sup>

He admits that he has deliberately corrupted his brother:

- 
1. L.D.J.I.N., I, p. 32.
  2. Ibid., II. ii, p. 86.
  3. Ibid., II. ii, p. 72.
  4. Ibid., IV, p. 166.

Did it on purpose to make a bum  
 of you....Made getting drunk romantic.  
 Made whores fascinating vampires instead  
 of poor, stupid, diseased slobbs they  
 really are. Made fun of work as sucker's  
 game....Wanted you to fail. Always  
 jealous of you. Mama's baby, Papa's pet!<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the play, the members of this family alternate between hatred for one another and remorse. No wonder O'Neill's characters spend much of their time building barrier-like defences between themselves and others.

We can see O'Neill's pessimism in his apparent expectation that human trust will invariably be betrayed. Juan Ponce de Leon is betrayed by the Indian guide he trusts. Billy Brown is betrayed by the mask that the "Christian martyr" bequeaths to him. John Loving and Dion Antony both betray their trusting wives. Christine Mannon and Nina Leeds both betray their unsuspecting husbands. Ephraim Cabot is betrayed by his wife and his son. Reuben Light believes himself to be betrayed by his father, his mother and his girl friend. John Loving, Dion Antony and Jim Harris feel that they have

---

1. L.D.J.I.N., IV, p. 165.

been betrayed by God. We may be deceived by our nobler sentiments and, for example, when people marry, their motives may not be what they seem. In All God's Chillun Got Wings, Ella admits that her reason for marrying Jim Harris is that she is alone and has "got to be helped". Jim who is a model of devoted loyalty to his wife, is prompted by his racial inferiority to marry Ella. In Welded, Michael and Eleanor Cape marry to satisfy a kind of mental cannibalism in which one partner tries compulsively to devour the personality of the other. Eleanor complains to her husband:

I feel a cruel presence in you  
paralyzing me, creeping over my body,  
possessing it so it's no longer my  
body--then grasping at some last inmost  
thing which makes me me--my soul--  
demanding to have that, too!<sup>1</sup>

And he replies:

At every turn you feel your  
individuality invaded--while at the same  
time, you're jealous of any separateness  
in me. You demand more and more while  
you give less and less. And I have to  
acquiesce. Have to? Yes, because I  
can't live without you!<sup>2</sup>

---

1. Weld., I, p. 453.

2. Ibid., I, p. 453.



Eventually, O'Neill moved to the even less bearable conclusion that human motive has its source outside the individual. He may be the victim of conflicting parental forces as in Desire Under the Elms. He may be destroyed by a series of personal and impersonal inadvertencies that mount up against him. This is the fate of the major characters of Mourning Becomes Electra. The wrongs committed before the play begins; the emotional predispositions of the characters and their half-understood loyalties and hatreds ensure the mesh of murder, suicide and madness that envelops everyone. No one can turn the tragedy aside. Yet each of the characters thinks that he acts independently and in his own interest. In fact, the individual is completely deluded. We can understand why O'Neill concluded that men are punished for being born.

Nevertheless, O'Neill makes a courageous and sustained effort to overcome his pessimism. He has two fears: he is afraid of death and he is afraid that

the universe is chaotic and purposeless. He acknowledges his fear of death and admits that it is "the cause of all man's blundering unhappiness".<sup>1</sup> He believes that men "hide from it in horror. Their lives are spent in hiding. Their fear becomes their living. They worship life as death!"<sup>2</sup> His answer to this fear he gives in The Fountain, The Great God Brown and Lazarus Laughed where he points out that death is no more than an essential step from one kind of being to another. It is a natural process through which all living things pass. The individual should, therefore, co-operate in the process.

This must Man will as his end and  
his new beginning! He must conceive  
and desire his own passing as a mood of  
eternal laughter....<sup>3</sup>

His loneliness will then disappear. He will find himself in fellowship with "millions of laughing stars" born, like him, "of dust eternally". His existence will consist of never-ending cycles of life and death in harmony with the universal law.

---

1. E.A. Engel, p. 177.

2. L.L., II. i, p. 309.

3. Ibid., II. ii, p. 324.

O'Neill argues that life has meaning by trying to shew that the individual has a purpose in the universal scheme of things. He stresses the individual's urge to perpetuate himself and implies that the intensity of the instinct argues the individual's value, place and purpose in an overall design. In sexual activity we are driven to perpetuate ourselves physically and in artistic activity to perpetuate personality and influence. But even here there are pessimistic implications. In spite of their energetic promiscuity, only one of O'Neill's poetic heroes, Dion Antony, has children, and in appearance and personality they resemble the anti-hero, Billy Brown, rather than their real father. Although Michael Cape has "the forehead of a thinker, the eyes of a dreamer",<sup>1</sup> Dion Antony has a face which is "dark, spiritual, poetic, passionately supersensitive...."<sup>2</sup>

---

1. Weld., I, p. 443.

2. G.G.B., Prologue, p. 260.

and Robert Mayo has "a touch of the poet about him expressed in his high forehead and wide, dark eyes",<sup>1</sup> they are all artistically futile and none creates anything likely to outlast him.

Fortunately, O'Neill is capable of better things and his more memorable characters are those who pit their individuality against the forces that try to restrict them. These characters court almost certain failure and sometimes their own destruction. In one of his more confident moments, O'Neill said:

The people who succeed and do not push on to a greater failure are the spiritual middle classers....The man who pursues the mere attainable should be sentenced to get it--and keep it.... Only through the unattainable does man achieve a hope worth living<sub>2</sub> and dying for--and so attain himself.

Some of his characters shaped in this heroic mould are rewarded at the point of defeat and death. Yank in The Hairy Ape acknowledges his final rejection and defeat by society when he embraces the gorilla, but in his immediately following death he "at last belongs".

1. B. the H., I. i, p. 81.

2. Eugene O'Neill, "Damn the Optimists," O. Cargill, p.104.



Jim Harris's last bitter humiliation is instantly followed by a religious exaltation that transforms his despair to faith and happiness. In The Fountain, the insignificant forest spring to which Ponce de Leon is lured to be killed becomes the means whereby he reaches understanding and serenity as he dies. Some other characters are not given this final revelation and they represent O'Neill's finest examples of defiant individuality. Undoubtedly, they have a noble indestructibility. Brutus Jones, harried to his death by atavistic forces, defies them in his last words with "You don't git me yit!"<sup>1</sup> Ephraim Cabot, for the moment stunned by a succession of personal disasters, says sadly, "It's a-goin' t' be lonesomer now than ever it war afore--an' I'm gittin' old, Lord--ripe on the bough...." then, "stiffening", he continues, "Waal--what d'ye want? God's lonesome, hain't He? God's hard an' lonesome!"<sup>2</sup> Lavinia Mannon is the most memorable of them all. Accepting on her own shoulders the whole weight of her family's guilt, she meets her furies head on and accepts their punishments with a "strange cruel smile of gloating

---

1. E.J., VII, p. 202.

2. D.U.E., III. iv, p. 268.

over the years of self-torture".<sup>1</sup> She declares, "I'll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out".<sup>2</sup> The curse can never really be paid out and O'Neill suggests that she will suffer her living death for ever, "staring into the sunlight with frozen eyes".<sup>3</sup> Characters of this fibre challenge us to deny that their existence could be futile or purposeless and O'Neill's portrayal of Lavinia Mannon, along with his affirmation of the meaningfulness of life in Lazarus Laughed, marks the highest point of his determination to be optimistic.

In Strange Interlude (1927), however, pessimism finally overcomes O'Neill's mind. This play demonstrates that the individual's urge to perpetuate himself and to defy his fate are futile and O'Neill admits at last that the universe is meaningless and chaotic. As in Desire Under the Elms, we have to look at the symbolical under-

- 
1. The Haunted, IV, M.B.E., p. 178.
  2. Ibid., IV, p. 178.
  3. Ibid., IV, p. 179.

structure of the play. Because O'Neill relies more on verbal symbolism than on theatrical devices (masks for instance) to convey his meaning, I give some account of the plot. The play has four major characters, Nina Leeds, Charles Marsden, Edmund Darrell and Sam Evans who represent conflicting factors in human relationships. Nina Leeds, as a young woman, is the embodiment of vigorous individuality. She is "twenty, tall with broad square shoulders, slim strong hips and long beautifully developed legs--a fine athletic girl of the swimmer, tennis player, golfer type".<sup>1</sup> Before the action of the play, she has been prevented from marrying the man she loved by her father and is frustrated and shattered. She revenges herself on her father by leaving him to die alone and embarks on a campaign of personal degradation. A year later, she has lost her self-respect, her "sense of security" and her feeling of "being worth something to life".<sup>2</sup> When she goes back home after her father's death, she is the typical O'Neillian wounded individual, her face

---

1. S.I., I, p. 12.

2. Ibid., II, p. 37.

"a pale expressionless mask drained of all emotional response to human contacts".<sup>1</sup>

Charles Marsden represents passive acceptance of life. He is an extension of Professor Leeds who discouraged natural love between two young people. Marsden is the antithesis of the aspiring individual. He has no wish to perpetuate himself physically and prays, "God, never bless me with children!"<sup>2</sup> He is a novelist but he will never perpetuate himself artistically. His work is "just well-written surface... no depth, no digging underneath". He lacks courage and will not face life because he is "afraid he'll meet himself somewhere".<sup>3</sup> His one sexual experience has left him with feelings of "intense pain and disgust". He is extraordinarily sensitive to a sexually charged atmosphere and when he enters a room where Nina and Darrell have been interrupted as they reaffirmed their love for each other, he becomes "morbidly agitated" and thinks, "Darrell!...and Nina!...there's something in this room!...something disgusting!...like a brutal,

---

1. S.I., II, p. 39.

2. Ibid., I, p. 15.

3. Ibid., II, p. 34.



hairy hand, raw and red, at my throat!"<sup>1</sup> Nina sees him sitting "beside the fierce river" of life "immaculately timid". There is "an indefinable feminine quality about him" and Darrell regards him as "one of those poor devils who spend their lives trying not to discover which sex they belong to!"<sup>2</sup>

Edmund Darrell is an unsuspecting pawn. At the beginning of the play he is presumptuously aware of his self-interest and seems unlikely to let his emotions endanger his future. He considers himself "immune to love through his scientific understanding of its real sexual nature".<sup>3</sup> Darrell is more vulnerable than he knows. He is "handsome and intelligent". There is a quality about him "provoking and disturbing to women, of intense passion which he has rigidly trained himself to control...".<sup>4</sup> His arrogance prompts him to agree to a "scientific" experiment to give Nina a child. In this, Darrell is like Abbie Putnam in Desire Under the Elms who also thought she could play with powerful emotions. The sexual act between Darrell and Nina releases the expression of O'Neill's pessimism.

- 
1. S.I., V, p. 99.
  2. Ibid., II, p. 34.
  3. Ibid., II, p. 33.
  4. Ibid., II, p. 33.

The actual seduction scene is ironical in its portrayal of an opinionated scientist being seduced by a woman who uses pseudo-scientific arguments to persuade him to fertilize her. It is interesting to see how O'Neill falls back on expressionistic methods to make an unlikely action acceptable to an audience. Nina's persuasion of Darrell has a "monotonous insistence" and Darrell adopts an "ultra-professional manner--like an automaton of a doctor".<sup>1</sup> Both characters, hitherto individualized representations, become more like puppets. They carry on their conversation in the third person and this has a distancing effect which depresses their individuality and stresses their symbolic function. The scene also shews how sex can delude us into believing that consummation will bring happiness. Both Nina and Darrell as their excitement grows become convinced that what they are going to do will make them happy. Nina quietens her conscience by arguing to herself, "I must take my happiness!"<sup>2</sup> Darrell convinces himself that he is acting for Nina's happiness when he thinks, "I kissed

---

1. S.I., IV, p. 85.

2. Ibid., IV, p. 87.

her once...her lips were cold...now they would burn with happiness for me!"<sup>1</sup> Increasingly the two speak of happiness. When, at last, Darrell agrees to Nina's plan, he falls on his knees, kisses her hand and says, "Yes--Yes, Nina--yes--for your happiness--in that spirit!" As he speaks, he thinks, "I shall be happy for a while!" and Nina thinks, "I shall be happy!...I shall make my husband happy!"<sup>2</sup>

From that moment Darrell's individuality is doomed. The next time we see him "there is an expression of defensive bitterness and self-resentment about his mouth and eyes".<sup>3</sup> When he looks at Nina, he thinks, "Sometimes I almost hate her!...if it wasn't for her I'd have kept my peace of mind...no good for anything lately, damn it!"<sup>4</sup> and "she used my desire!...but I don't love her!...I won't!...she can't own my life!"<sup>5</sup> He sees that he has been duped by his passion and that what he thought was happiness through sexual consummation was "a form of insanity".<sup>6</sup> Frantically, he argues to

---

1. S.I., IV, p. 87.

2. Ibid., IV, p. 89.

3. Ibid., V, p. 95.

4. Ibid., V, p. 96.

5. Ibid., V, p. 97.

6. Ibid., V, p. 102.

himself that he must break with her otherwise, she will "own me!...ruin my career!"<sup>1</sup> This is, of course, what his "strange interlude" with Nina does. He cannot bear to be away from her: he cannot bear to be with her. Although he goes to Europe to forget her and to further his career, he comes back confessing, "I didn't study! I didn't live! I longed for you--and suffered!"<sup>2</sup> He is no longer his own master. Eventually, he gives up what we understand was a brilliant medical career for "years of pain", a son who will never acknowledge him as his father and the barrenness of being a family hanger-on.

Sam Evans represents human aspiration. In earlier plays, a "divine discontent" in human beings has been O'Neill's major argument that there is purpose and meaning in the universe, but in Strange Interlude, aspiration is shewn to be a random expression of energy. At first, Sam Evans has "a lack of self-confidence, a lost and strayed appealing air about him".<sup>3</sup> There is, however, "a hint of some unawakened obstinate force beneath his apparent weakness".<sup>4</sup> Ironically, this "force" is not released until he has been made a cuckold. When his

- 
1. S.I., V, p. 103.
  2. Ibid., VI, p. 130.
  3. Ibid., II, p. 29.
  4. Ibid., II, p. 29.



wife, Nina, has her baby, which has been fathered by his best friend, there is a "startling change" in him. Before long, "he has matured, found his place in the world,"<sup>1</sup> As his material success grows, he becomes as spiritually barren as Marco Polo and Billy Brown. Marsden says of him:

I preferred him the old way...futile but he had a sensitive quality...now he's brash...a little success...oh, he'll succeed all right...his kind are inheriting the earth...hogging it, cramming it down their tasteless gullets!<sup>2</sup>

In the end, Evans's energy proliferates until it gets out of hand and becomes his master. Again Marsden observes:

What a fount of meaningless energy he's tapped!...always on the go... typical terrible child of the age... universal slogan, keep moving...moving where? ...never mind that...don't think of ends... the means are the end ...keep moving!<sup>3</sup>

In Desire Under the Elms, the idea that we are used by forces stronger than ourselves is not pessimistic. The victorious maternal force appears to have some purpose

1. S.I., VI, p. 111.

2. Ibid., VI, p. 113.

3. Ibid., VI, p. 122.

which O'Neill associates with a universal good.

At the end of the play, for instance, Abbie and Eben gaze at the sunrise "raptly in attitudes strangely aloof and devout".<sup>1</sup> But in Strange Interlude the forces that drive us are shewn as meaningless. As Marsden puts it, "Everything in life is so contemptuously accidental!"<sup>2</sup> There is a sad reminder of O'Neill's need for religious faith when Nina says;

I wanted to believe in any God at any price--a heap of stones, a mud image, a drawing on a wall, a bird, a fish, a snake, a baboon--or even a good man preaching the simple platitudes of truth, those Gospel words we love the sound of but whose meaning we pass on to spooks to live by!<sup>3</sup>

But if there is any God at all, He is "only an infinite, insane energy which creates and destroys without other purpose than to pass eternity in avoiding thought".<sup>4</sup> To search for happiness is a waste of energy and time. The answer is "to rot away in peace". After Evan's death, Darrell is still "all heat and energy and the tormenting drive of noon",<sup>5</sup> but Nina wants peace. She

---

1. D.U.E., III. iv, p. 269.

2. S.I., II, p. 24.

3. Ibid., II, p. 41.

4. M.M., III. i, p. 426.

5. S.I., IX, p. 196.

says, "Peace!...yes...that is all I desire...I can no longer imagine happiness".<sup>1</sup> The only fit companion for Nina, now "in love with evening", is Marsden. Nina had guessed years before "what a perfect lover he would make for one's old age!...what a perfect lover when one was past passion!"<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this chaste, undemanding love is the purest of all. Marsden declares that it is:

My love is finer than any she has known!...I do not lust for her!...I would be content if our marriage should be purely the placing of our ashes in the same tomb...our urn side by side and touching one another...could the others say as much, could they love so deeply?<sup>3</sup>

It would seem that Nina, Marsden and perhaps even O'Neill have joined "the race of men, whose lives are long dyings" and who become "so sick of life that by the time death comes they are too lifeless to fear it".<sup>4</sup> They see life "as an interlude, of trial and preparation...

1. S.I., IX, p. 197.
2. Ibid., VII, p. 149.
3. Ibid., VII, p. 148.
4. L.L., IV. i, p. 352.

in which our souls have been scraped clean of impure flesh and made worthy to bleach in peace".<sup>1</sup> We can hardly get farther than this from O'Neill's earlier conception of an unconquerable individual fighting a "glorious--self-destructive struggle". Coming after his investigation of human nature in sociological, religious and psychological contexts, it represents a generalised pessimism and a personal confession of exhausted defeat.

---

1. S.I., IX, p. 199.



### Section 3

#### Technique: 1921-1931.

How the community imposed its discipline on his primitive instincts. This discipline was a source of conflict not only between the individual and society but also within the individual himself. Jones believed that these conflicts were so fundamental to human experience that they were beyond the power of

CHAPTER 7THE CHORUS

Robert Edmond Jones, a famous American scenic designer and friend of O'Neill, believed that there was a great potential dramatic tension in the effect of the herding instinct on the individual. He observed how the individual was drawn into the community by conscious and subconscious urges and how the community then imposed its discipline on his primitive instincts. This discipline was a source of conflict not only between the individual and society but also within the individual himself. Jones believed that these conflicts were so fundamental to human experience that they were beyond the power of

1. Kenneth Hoggan, The Theatre of Tomorrow, 1923, p. 274.

individual characters to convey on the stage. He advocated the use of "group beings"<sup>1</sup> who should rank as a protagonist and whose function should be to interpret the theme of the play. Another and perhaps less pretentious name for them would be the Chorus and Jones's ideas were close to Greek choric practice. The Greek Chorus, too, although originally a group of men performing a religious rite in song and dance, gradually acquired a commentary function and became a protagonist.

English dramatists have never seemed fond of the Chorus, although they have used it from time to time. Where the Elizabethans used the Chorus, they often imitated Seneca. Norton and Sackville's Gorboduc (1562) closely resembles Senecan practice with its use of the classical messenger to relate events, its dumb show and the appearance of Eubulus, the King's Secretary, at the end to interpret the theme and round off the play. Thomas Kyd also used

---

1. Kenneth Macgowan, The Theatre of Tomorrow, 1923, p. 274.

the Chorus in The Spanish Tragedy (1592), but he modified Senecan practice. His Chorus consists of two characters, "The Ghost of Andrea, a Spanish nobleman" and his constant companion, "Revenge". His use of Chorus is interesting because not only do these characters comment on the action, but also develop a tension between themselves. The result is that The Spanish Tragedy has two parallel actions which influence each other although the characters of the actions never come into contact.

Shakespeare uses the Chorus sparingly. He uses something like a Chorus in Rumour, the Presenter, in King Henry IV, Part Two (circa 1591). Rumour is a woman "painted full of tongues" who appears before the play begins to announce;

King Harry's victory;  
Who in a bloody field by Shrewsbury  
Hath beaten down young Hotspur and his troops,  
Quenching the flame of bold rebellion  
Even with the rebel's blood.<sup>1</sup>

Here, she is a true Chorus. But she has another and more important function of spreading alarm and bringing

---

1. 2.H. IV, Induction, ll. 23-27.



"smooth comforts false, worse than true wrongs".<sup>1</sup>

She reminds us of this when she ironically recalls her real nature in "But what mean I/To speak so true at first?"<sup>2</sup> It seems that here Shakespeare is using the Court pageant convention of Rumour which derives from Virgil's portrait of Fame in the fourth book of the *Aenied* rather than the Greek Chorus. He comes very close, however, to the epic Chorus in King Henry V (1599). In this play, the Chorus speaks a prologue and an epilogue, links the acts together and gives information to "those that have not read the story".<sup>3</sup> He has, too, some of the best lines of the play. They contain vivid images such as that of "Expectation" who sits "in the air", his sword blade buried "from hilts unto the point/With crowns imperial, crowns and coronets,/Promised to Harry and his followers."<sup>4</sup> There are lines of picturesque description which call on the audience to imagine the English ships as they sail to France:

Play with your fancies, and in them behold  
Upon the hempen tackle ship-boys climbing;  
Hear the shrill whistle, which doth order give  
To sounds confused; behold the threaden sails,  
Borne with th' invisible and creeping wind,

- 
1. 2 H. IV, l. 40.
  2. Ibid., Induction, ll. 27-28.
  3. H.V., V, l. 1.
  4. Ibid., II, ll. 9-11.

Draw the huge bottom through the furrow'd sea,  
Breasting the lofty surge.<sup>1</sup>

The Chorus encourages the audience to identify itself with the patriotism of the play:

Now all the youth of England are on fire,  
And silken dalliance in the wardrobe lies;<sup>2</sup>

He makes a provocative comparison of the "over-lusty French" with the "low-rated English" and he appeals to our sympathy for the underdog with his poignant "little touch of Harry in the night". He establishes a rapport with his audience by appealing to them good-naturedly to use their imaginations to make good the deficiencies of the play and the theatre in which it is being performed. He also contributes to dramatic economy by relating events that would otherwise require additional scenes. Altogether, he is a master of ceremonies who unquestionably has the status of a protagonist and his significance is shewn by the number of actors who value playing his part almost as much as that of Henry himself.

---

1. H.V., III, ll. 7-13.

2. Ibid., II, ll. 1-2.

Modern dramatists, particularly those writing in verse, seem to find the Chorus or some modifications of it useful in stressing their theme or in attaching an air of universality to the action. In Yeats's At the Hawk's Well (1917), a group of "Musicians" describe the actions of the characters and sing the sad, pessimistic theme:

"O wind, O salt wind, O sea wind!"  
Cries the heart, "it is time to sleep;  
Why wander and nothing to find?  
Better grow old and sleep."<sup>1</sup>

Gordon Bottomley, in his Fire at Callart (1939), uses a Chorus of three men, "A Curtain Bearer", "A First Folder" and "A Second Folder", who carry a flame patterned curtain which they fold and unfold with stylized gesture from time to time during the play. They have speaking parts in which they outline the episodic plot, explain the symbolism of the play and interpret the theme. John Drinkwater, in his Abraham Lincoln (1918), uses an individual Chorus which, like that of Henry V, speaks a prologue and an epilogue,

---

1. W.B. Yeats, At the Hawk's Well, The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats, ed. Russell K. Alspach, 1966, p. 402.

acts as a link between scenes and interprets the events of the play. The Chorus speaks a sonorous verse and this, along with the air of history unfolding and the noble prose of Lincoln, gives the play a poetic force and universality.

One of the most powerful uses of the Chorus in the modern theatre is T.S. Eliot's in Murder in the Cathedral (1935). Eliot has modestly remarked that he used the Chorus as an expedient because "the essential action of the play--both the historical facts and the matter which I invented--was somewhat limited",<sup>1</sup> because he "was more at home" in writing choral verse than dramatic dialogue, and because the use of a Chorus "concealed the defects of" his theatrical technique. Eliot had no need, in my opinion, to be defensive about his Chorus. It is a powerful factor in the emotional impact of the play, especially in a performance, where the Chorus stirs in the audience their brooding suspicion of life:

---

1. T.S. Eliot, Poetry and Drama, 1951, p. 25.



Ill the wind, ill the time, uncertain the  
 profit, certain the danger.  
 O late late late, late is the time, late  
 too late, and rotten the year;  
 Evil the wind, and bitter the sea, and  
 grey the sky, grey grey grey.<sup>1</sup>

He arouses their fear of death, particularly violent  
 death:

Numb the hand and dry the eyelid,  
 Still the horror, but more horror  
 Than when tearing in the belly.

Still the horror, but more horror  
 Than when twisting in the fingers,  
 Than when splitting in the skull.<sup>2</sup>

By taking up these vague unformed emotions in his  
 audience and expressing them, his Chorus performs a  
 cathartic function. In addition, he ensures the  
 audience's personal involvement by drawing his Chorus  
 from the ordinary people of Canterbury who are familiar  
 with troubles that could descend on us all.

There is also a second group of characters who have  
 a choric function. They are The Four Knights who  
 although they have a role within the action, step outside  
 it to address the audience and comment on the plot.

- 
1. T.S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, I, 1945, p. 18.
  2. Ibid., II, pp. 70-71.

This device of detached commentary, most commonly associated with Brecht, is a deliberate reminder to the audience that they are in a theatre watching and listening to people pretending to be somebody else. Its shock effect, called alienation, is the reverse of dramatic illusion. The alienation scene in Murder in the Cathedral is a stroke of theatrical skill.

Eliot has put the scene immediately after the murder of Becket and before the Chorus's "Te Deum". It is, therefore, an unexpected anti-climax between a scene of horrifying violence and a hymn of religious exaltation. It takes an audience off guard and assaults the conscience of those who might have been preparing to reject the play. The Knights with their ingratiating appeals to patriotism, "You are Englishmen, and therefore will not judge anybody without hearing both sides of the case",<sup>1</sup> their false modesties such as "I am afraid I am not anything like such an experienced speaker as my old friend Reginald Fitz Urse would lead you to believe";<sup>2</sup>

---

1. Murder in the Cathedral, II, p. 78.

2. Ibid., II, p. 78.

the obsequious "hear hear's" and their smooth persuasions implicit with menace (especially sinister in 1935), "and I suggest that you now disperse quietly to your homes. Please be careful not to loiter in groups at street corners, and do nothing that might provoke any public outbreak",<sup>1</sup> represent secular hypocrisy and ruthlessness. Eliot has also allowed the Knights to express views that might have passed through the minds of the audience; for example, that the Knights had "more to lose than to gain",<sup>2</sup> that the political murder was "a pretty stiff job",<sup>3</sup> and that "the Archbishop had to be put out of the way".<sup>4</sup> Eliot assumes that, being ashamed that their feelings are expressed by murderers, the audience will be emotionally conditioned to accept the "Te Deum" at the end.

In another play about a martyr, A Man for all Seasons (1960), Robert Bolt uses a Chorus whom he calls The Common Man. This Chorus, who represents

- 
1. Murder in the Cathedral, II, pp. 83-84.
  2. Ibid., II, p. 78.
  3. Ibid., II, p. 78.
  4. Ibid., II, p. 79.

"that which is common to us all",<sup>1</sup> speaks a prologue and an epilogue, but also has a variety of parts in the play such as Thomas More's steward, a boatman and a gaoler. He acts as a link between the scenes and he makes ironical comment on the action of the play. Like Eliot's Chorus, he expresses the audience's feeling as they watch the play and an example of this occurs in the Alternative Ending to the play where after More's execution, Common Man says:

I'm breathing....Are you breathing too?...  
It's nice isn't it? It isn't difficult to  
keep alive friends...just don't make trouble--  
or if you must make trouble, make the sort of  
trouble that's expected. Well, I don't need  
to tell you that.<sup>2</sup>

Of all modern dramatists, O'Neill uses the Chorus most frequently and comprehensively. When he uses a single individual as a Chorus, he often chooses a symbolic prostitute. He seems to feel that a prostitute, as a symbol, has a readily recognizable significance as a detached commentator on life and he draws attention to her as representative of something more than herself.

---

1. Robert Bolt, A Man for All Seasons, Preface, 1964, p. xviii.

2. Ibid., p. 100.



The "Woman" of Welded (1923) has eyes with a "glazed look". She is a "bovine, stolid type". Michael Cape tells her, "You're a symbol! You're all the tortures man inflicts on woman--and you're the revenge of woman! You're love revenging itself upon itself!"<sup>1</sup> Still, she is hardly a choric figure, although she expresses one or two banalities that hold a grain of truth such as her comments on marital compromise, "Go home. Kiss and make up. Ferget it! It's easy to ferget--when you got to!"<sup>2</sup> and on the value of a sense of humour in life, "You got to laugh, ain't you? You got to loin to like it!"<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the prostitute in Marco Millions (1925) has choric traits. She stresses her universal quality in "I sell to all nations".<sup>4</sup> She is an essential stage in every man's growth. In the second of the three short scenes that symbolize Marco's growth from a boy to a man, she tells him, "You need only me now to make you into a real man--"<sup>5</sup> and, in the next scene, she tells him that she has done with him "now that you're a man".<sup>6</sup> She has other

- 
1. Weld., II.ii, p. 475.
  2. Ibid., II.ii, pp. 476-477.
  3. Ibid., II.ii, p. 478.
  4. M.M., I.iii, p. 367.
  5. Ibid., I.iv, p. 371.
  6. Ibid., I.v, p. 375.

functions. She ironically comments on the mercenary outlook that O'Neill is satirizing with her "Don't sell your soul for nothing. That's bad business".<sup>1</sup> She symbolically marks the death of Marco's soul when she grinds his love poem into the ground with her heel and says, "Your soul! Dead and buried!".<sup>2</sup> Cybel of The Great God Brown (1925) has a commentary choric function. Her remarks about life are often obvious and banal like "It takes all kinds of love to make a world",<sup>3</sup> but at times they are rather more original:

You may be important but your life's not. There's millions of it born every second. Life can cost too much even for a sucker to afford it--like everything else. And it's not sacred--only the you inside is.<sup>4</sup>

Cybel, however, has divine characteristics. Although she sometimes wears a mask of "the rouged and eye-blackened countenance of the hardened prostitute",<sup>5</sup> her eyes are "dreamy with the reflected stirring of

---

1. M.M., I. v, p. 375.

2. Ibid., I. v, p. 375.

3. G.G.B., II. i, p. 285.

4. Ibid., II. i, p. 286.

5. Ibid., I. iii, p. 279.

profound instincts".<sup>1</sup> She has an affinity with the recurring seasons and this is symbolized by the wallpaper in her room. At first, it is "a dull yellow-brown, resembling a blurred impression of a fallow field in early spring".<sup>2</sup> In the next scene, it represents the summer of life and is a "brilliant, stunning wallpaper, on which crimson and purple flowers and fruits tumble over one another...".<sup>3</sup> At the end of the play, Cybel stands "like an idol of Earth, her eyes staring out over the world".<sup>4</sup>

O'Neill uses a multiple Chorus in four plays. In The Fountain (1922), his Chorus has similarities to Greek, Roman and Elizabethan choruses. The group

---

1. G.G.B., I. iii, p. 278.

2. Ibid., I. iii, p. 278.

3. Ibid., II. i, p. 284.

4. Ibid., IV. ii, p. 323.

5. The Fountain, p. 438.

6. Corbaccio, The Order of the Dumb Show, Five Elizabethan Tragedies, ed. A.E. Mollath, 1917, p. 75.

has a leader, a woman, who directs the movements of the other four members in the fashion of the Greek exarchon. She wears a "pale mask with features indistinguishable save for the eyes that stare straight ahead with a stony penetration that sees through and beyond things".<sup>1</sup> The Chorus dances and mimes in the manner of the Roman pantomime. There is a final dumb show when the members of the Chorus join hands to make a circle that represents eternal recurrence. This mime recalls the dumbshow of Gorboduc (1561) where "six wild men, clothed in leaves" carry out a mime to signify that a state "being divided, is easily destroyed".<sup>2</sup> When the Chorus of The Fountain makes a second appearance, it is to stress that religion is indivisible. The various members of the Chorus do this by dressing as "a Buddhist priest", "a priest of Islam", a "Dominican monk" and a medicine man "decked out in all the paint and regalia of his office".

---

1. The F., X, p. 438.

2. Gorboduc, The Order of the Dumb Show, Five Elizabethan Tragedies, ed. A.K. McIlwraith, 1945, p. 73.



They make a third appearance and are joined by two additional members. There is an old woman who changes before our eyes into a young woman symbolizing the juxtaposition of age and youth in the cycle of eternal recurrence. There is the figure of Death who by changing into the young girl, Beatriz, shews that death is a step to renewed life. This Chorus has no speaking part. It appears on the stage to draw our attention to the theme of eternal recurrence, to add an air of mysticism and to encourage by dance and gesture the atmosphere of religious certitude in which O'Neill wants his play to end.

In Marco Millions (1925), O'Neill uses several Choruses. There is a group of Chorus-like figures in the Prologue. One is a Christian merchant; a second is a Zoroastrian trader and a third is a Buddhist pedlar. They resemble one another physically, but they are also alike in their religious bigotry, their lasciviousness and their vulgarity. Their conversation illustrates

the depraving influence of the profit motive and their fate, to be harnessed like animals to pull the coffin of the dead Kukachin back to China, symbolizes the brutishness of the confirmed capitalist.

There is too a minor group of figures consisting of "a mother nursing a baby, two children playing a game, a young girl and a young man in a loving embrace, a middle-aged couple, an aged couple, a coffin".<sup>1</sup>

They represent the cycle of existence from birth to death. They do not move or speak. "Only their eyes move, staring fixedly...at the Polos, who are standing at center."<sup>2</sup> At first, Marco, an innocent boy, looks at the group "full of curiosity and wonder". In the next scene, when "some of the freshness of youth has worn off",<sup>3</sup> he adopts to the group "the casual, indifferent attitude of the worldly-wise".<sup>4</sup> In the next scene, when he has become "a brash self-confident young man", he "hardly glances at them". These incidents are O'Neill's way of indicating Marco's growing insensitivity.

1. M.M., I. iii, p. 364.

2. Ibid., I. iii, p. 364.

3. Ibid., I. iv, p. 369.

4. Ibid., I. iv, p. 370.

The play, has, in addition, four orthodox Choruses. The first is a group of sailors whose commentary is led by a Boatswain. They describe the hazards of Kukachin's voyage to meet her future husband, chanting "Great were the waves!", "Fierce were the winds!", "Long was the voyage!" and "Many have died!".<sup>1</sup> They are joined by a Chorus of women who refer to Kukachin's conflict of mind caused by her love for Marco and who stress that her sense of duty to her future husband and her royal obligations must override her personal feelings. They also comment on the cyclic nature of love, marriage and family life and the key position in it held by the woman:

The lover comes,  
Who becomes a husband,  
Who becomes a son,  
Who becomes a father--  
In this contemplation lives the woman.<sup>2</sup>

In the great funeral scene, there is a third Chorus "of nine singers, five men and four women, all of them aged, with bent bodies, their thin, cracked voices accompanying

---

1. M.M., II. iii, pp. 408-409.

2. Ibid., II. iii, p. 417.

the music in queer, breaking waves of lamentation".<sup>1</sup> They are masked and are dressed in black. They represent unrelieved pessimism and they repeatedly chant, "Death is". They also chant sad responses to the Chronicler's lament such as "We must be humble" and "All Gods are powerless". They are closely followed by a fourth Chorus of "young girls and boys, dressed in white with black edging, moving slowly backward in a gliding, interweaving dance pattern".<sup>2</sup> These characters are not masked, but their faces are "fixed in a disciplined, traditional expression of bewildered, uncomprehending grief that is like a mask".<sup>3</sup> They carry silver censers which "they swing in unison toward the corpse of the Princess Kukachin".<sup>4</sup> They later place their censers about the Princess's body so that the incense ascends "in clouds...as if it were bearing her soul with it".<sup>5</sup> Finally, "the young boys and girls take up their censers and dance their pattern out backward, preceded by the musicians".<sup>6</sup> Where

---

1. M.M., III. ii, p. 433.

2. Ibid., III. ii, p. 433.

3. Ibid., III. ii, p. 433.

4. Ibid., III. ii, p. 433.

5. Ibid., III. ii, p. 434.

6. Ibid., III. ii, p. 437.



O'Neill allows his symbolical figures to appear unmasked, he usually means that they are as yet unspoilt by life. This Chorus may well represent Kukachin's innocence and the fact that their grief is "uncomprehending" supports this interpretation. O'Neill gives no explanation and it may be that he saw them as nothing more than a minor contribution to the ritual and spectacle of the funeral scene.

As T.S. Eliot in Murder in the Cathedral has allowed the Chorus to express the vague fears of his audience, so O'Neill in Lazarus Laughed (1926), makes the Chorus express the fluctuating hope and despair of the audience regarding life and death. They ask, "Is there hope of love...?", "wherein lies happiness?" and "Why are we born to die?". When Lazarus is present, they chant exultantly, "There is no death", but when he is absent, they intone dully:

Death slinks out  
Of his grave in the heart!  
Ghosts of fear  
Creep back in the brain!  
We remember fear!  
We remember death!<sup>1</sup>

---

1. L.L., I. ii, p. 296.

There are eight Choruses in this play. There is a Chorus of Old Men who represent those people who are too warped to regain joy in living. They wear masks of double size and this indicates the bloated putrefaction of their senile introversion. They are marshalled in "a formation like a spearhead" always at the head of discontent, inciting hatred and shouting,

We burn!  
We kill!  
We crucify!  
Death! Death!<sup>1</sup>

There is a Chorus of Lazarus's followers who wear masks, "resembling him...in<sup>\*\*\*</sup><sub>A</sub> expression of fearless faith in life, the mouth shaped by laughter".<sup>2</sup> Their wearing of masks indicates that they are beyond salvation. They are only imitators. There are two Choruses which represent vicious national pride. A proud conquered race is represented by the Chorus of Greeks who "are clad in goat skins, their tanned bodies and masks daubed and stained with wine lees, in imitation of the old followers of Dionysus".<sup>3</sup> They believe that Lazarus is

- 
1. L.L., I. ii, p. 288.
  2. Ibid., I. ii, p. 285.
  3. Ibid., II. i, p. 298.

the reincarnation of their old god. They hope that he will give them back their "lost laughter" and they call on him to raise their freedom from the dead by freeing them from Rome. The depraved conquerors are represented by the Chorus of the Roman Senate who are "all masked in the Roman mask, refined in them by nobility of blood but at the same time with strength degenerated, corrupted by tyranny and debauchery to an exhausted cynicism".<sup>1</sup> A Chorus of Youths and Girls represents humanity in the final stages of degradation. They wear masks which shew the males to be effeminate and the females to be masculine. The youths wear female wigs and "are dressed in women's robes". The girls have "straight hair cut in short boyish mode" and are dressed as males. The "whole effect of these two groups is of sex corrupted and warped, of invented lusts and artificial vices".<sup>2</sup>

All these "group beings" are further particularized by their individual masks which shew them to be

---

1. L.L., II. ii, p. 312.

2. Ibid., III. ii, p. 336.

"Introspective, Self-Tortured", "Proud, Self-Reliant", "Cruel, Revengeful" and so on. These masks reflect the pessimistic and depressing aspects of human nature. In fact, O'Neill deliberately stresses their worldly negativeness in order to heighten Lazarus's spiritual optimism. These Choruses are not detached commentators and their remarks do not express the audience's intuition of life. They have a didactic function and are an important persuasive element in their author's argument. It is not easy to ascertain how far O'Neill was influenced in this play by Greek choric practice. There are similarities, but they may be fortuitous. His Chorus of Old Man stand, as would a Greek Chorus, with their backs to the audience. They are seven in number like "the tragic Chorus depicted on the wall-painting at Cyrene".<sup>1</sup> They are drawn up in a crescent shape in the manner of the old dithyrambic Choruses. O'Neill's Choruses do not retain these formations. On one occasion, they sit

---

1. A.E. Haigh, The Attic Theatre, Oxford, 1907, p. 290.



in a single line facing front,<sup>1</sup> on another they are drawn up in spearhead formation,<sup>2</sup> and on a third, they divide into two groups which sit at each side of a dais.<sup>3</sup> They move about energetically contributing to the changing atmosphere of the play by their movement across the stage in their "bright-colored diaphanous robes" and by their patterned and sometimes grotesque dancing. They are like the classical Choruses, however, in the way they relate Lazarus's resurrection and explain the relationship between mankind and eternal recurrence.

When we come to Mourning Becomes Electra (1931), we find O'Neill using the Chorus in a new way. Each play of the trilogy is introduced by a Chorus of citizens. In Homecoming, the Chorus consists of artisans: a gardener, a carpenter and women of their social group. In The Hunted, they are middle-class citizens: the manager of a shipping line, a non-conformist minister, a physician and their wives. In

- 
1. L.L., II. ii, p. 312.
  2. Ibid., II. i, p. 298.
  3. Ibid., III. ii, p. 336.

The Haunted, they are a miscellaneous group: a clerk, a fishing boat captain and a farmer. They "are types of townsfolk rather than individuals, a chorus representing the town come to look and listen and spy on the rich and exclusive Mannons".<sup>1</sup> They are all unpleasant types. One has "a shrill, rasping voice", another has "a hoarse bass voice" and a third, whose "yellowish brown eyes are sly", "talks in a drawling wheezy cackle".<sup>2</sup> They are caricatures and O'Neill wants them to be seen as symbols of an ill-disposed and envious public opinion.

These Choruses have other functions. The Chorus of Homecoming provides essential background information and sets the tone of mystery before the action of the play begins. The individual members tell us through their conversation that the American Civil War is ending and that Ezra Mannon will shortly return home. They give us details of Ezra Mannon; for example, that he made his money in shipping and that he became successively a soldier, a judge, mayor of the town and, when he

---

1. Homecoming, I, M.B.E., pp. 6-7.

2. The Haunted, I. i, M.B.E., p. 129.

returned to the Army to fight in the Civil War, a general. They also refer to Christine, his wife, and arouse our interest by describing her as "Furrin' lookin'" and "queer". Later, they amplify this remark with "Ayeh. There's somethin' queer lookin' about her face" and add a sinister note with "Secret lookin' --'s if it was a mask she'd put on. That's the Mannon look. They all has it. They grow it on their wives".<sup>1</sup> The idea of dark deeds within the family is stressed as one of the Chorus remarks, "They don't want folks to guess their secrets" and another member of the group "breathlessly eager" asks, "Secrets?".<sup>2</sup> In this way, the Chorus strikes an initial note of tension.

The second Chorus has a linking function. It looks back at the first play by telling us how Christine and Lavinia are taking Ezra's death and by shewing us how easily the townsfolk have been deceived in the murder.

---

1. Homecoming, I, M.B.E., p. 9

2. Ibid., I, p. 9.

It also looks forward to The Hunted. It draws our attention to the forthcoming conspiracy between Lavinia and Orin against their mother when we hear that Lavinia has gone "to the train with Peter Miles to meet Orin".<sup>1</sup> It puts the idea of ordained destiny into the minds of the audience when Borden remarks of Mannon's death, "It's queer. It's like fate".<sup>2</sup>

O'Neill's use of the third Chorus is quite masterly. Its first function is to accustom the audience to the idea of the punishing furies. Seth Beckwith and his mates refer to them as "ghosts" and the word is reiterated throughout their little play. At first, the word is used playfully. Seth, complaining about the way Abner Small is consuming their whiskey, remarks, "He's aimin' to git so full of Injun courage he wouldn't mind if a ghost sot on his lap!"<sup>3</sup> The idea is then related to the Mannon tragedy when Joe says, "By God, if ghosts look like the livin', I'd let Ezra's woman's ghost set on my lap!"<sup>4</sup> An ominous note

---

1. The Hunted, I, M.B.E., p. 68.

2. Ibid., I, p. 69.

3. The Haunted, I. i, M.B.E., p. 130.

4. Ibid., I. i, p. 130.



is introduced when Small says with an uneasy glance at the house, "It's her ghost folks is sayin' haunts the place, ain't it?".<sup>1</sup> There follows more talk of "ghosts" and one of the Chorus takes a wager to brave the "ghosts" of the Mannon house. But, at the end of the tomfoolery, Seth Beckwith explains the real nature of the "ghosts":

Oh, don't git it in your heads I take stock in spirits trespassin' round in windin' sheets or no sech lunatic doin's. But there is sech a thing as evil spirit. An' I've felt it, goin' in there daytimes to see to ~~see~~ things--like somethin' rottin' in the walls! ...There's been evil in that house since it was first built in hate--and its kept growin' there ever since, as what's happened there has proved.<sup>2</sup>

Almost the first words Lavinia speaks on her return to the house after her visit to the Pacific islands refer to the "ghost" when she asks Orin "Well? You don't see any ghosts, do you?".<sup>3</sup> She then identifies them with the dead Mannons when she says, "That is all past and finished! The dead have forgotten us!".<sup>4</sup> She is wrong, of course, and in the next scene she addresses the personification of the "ghosts", the Mannon portraits in the sitting room, with "Why do you look at me like

---

1. The Haunted, I. i, p. 130.

2. Ibid., I. i, M.B.E., pp. 135-136.

3. Ibid., I. i, p. 138.

4. Ibid., I. i, p. 138.

that? I've done my duty by you! That's finished and forgotten!"<sup>1</sup> The third Chorus has another function that strongly argues O'Neill's dramatic maturity. The scene of inconsequential horseplay among ordinary people marks more distinctly Lavinia and Orin's banishment from the everyday world. The horror of this isolation is expressed by Orin:

No, we've renounced the day, in which  
normal people live--or rather it has  
renounced us. Perpetual night--darkness  
of death in life--that's the fitting  
habitat for guilt!<sup>2</sup>

The playfulness of this scene comes between Christine Mannon's suicide and Lavinia's dreadful punishment and the momentary relief intensifies the pity and terror of the last play.

O'Neill's use of the Chorus is highly experimental and his success variable. His rather half-hearted and sketchy use of the individual Chorus in Welded, Marco Millions and The Great God Brown, suggests that, like Robert Edmond Jones, he did not think that it could

---

1. The Haunted, I. ii, M.B.E., p. 139.

2. Ibid., II, p. 150.

adequately convey his themes. He is more determined and ambitious with his multiple Choruses, but he tries to make them do too much. The worst example of this is in Lazarus Laughed where the Choruses introduce the play, give background information, comment on the action, reiterate the theme of eternal recurrence, contribute to the spectacle, play subordinate parts and provide dancers, musicians and choral speakers. Their masks convey all sorts of subtleties: national, religious and social characteristics, the stages of human life and Jungian psychological types. In Mourning Becomes Electra, however, O'Neill's use of the Chorus is more effective. The Chorus of townsfolk gives essential information, acts as a link between the plays and primes the audience for events to come. In the voice of Seth Beckwith, the Chorus reiterates the theme at various points throughout the play. He sings,

Oh, Shenandoah, I long to hear you  
 A-way, my rolling river  
 Oh, Shenandoah, I can't get near you  
 Way-ay, I'm bound away.

"Shenandoah" represents the elusive happiness that all the Mannons search for and fail to find.

The Chorus stresses "life's frustration" which O'Neill sees as being universal. He did not use the Chorus again. Where he felt he needed an "ideal spectator" or commentator, he used a single character, like Father Baird in Days Without End, Marsden in Strange Interlude and Larry Slade in The Iceman Cometh, who from time to time detaches himself briefly from the action of the play to make a general philosophical comment related to the theme. ek

1. E. J. Carrigan, p. 12.
2. C. Lynch, p. 11.
3. D. Alexander, p. 101.
4. Ibid., p. 129.



## CHAPTER 8

### STRUCTURE

O'Neill had a thorough theoretical and practical dramatic training. Much of his theoretical background came from his reading. Frederic Carpenter says that O'Neill steeped "himself in the works of the great dramatists, both ancient and modern. His father, of course, had supervised his education in Shakespeare...".<sup>1</sup> O'Neill also acquired "a substantial knowledge of dramatic history"<sup>2</sup> at Harvard as well as a systematic knowledge of working with scenario<sup>3</sup> and had from Professor Baker, the "encouragement, to be helped to believe in the dawn of a new era in our theatre".<sup>4</sup>

- 
1. F.I. Carpenter, p. 34.
  2. C. Leech, p. 11.
  3. D. Alexander, p. 197.
  4. Ibid., p. 199.

The practical experience he picked up from his father's company was negligible. The part he had in his father's production, The Count of Monte Cristo, consisted of speaking two words, "Is he--?" which, we are given to understand, he frequently bungled.<sup>1</sup> As assistant company manager, he merely kept his eye on the box office.<sup>2</sup> His experience with the Provincetown Players, whom he joined in 1916, was entirely different. Here, he had ready production of his plays, the opportunity to act his own parts and, perhaps most important of all, a regular audience on whom he could experiment. Edna Kenton says:

...he had our "subscription list," and he used its members, bill after bill, season after season, in ways they could never dream of; played with them and never need for a thought of them except as stark laboratory reactions to his own experimentations.<sup>3</sup>

His experience of practical theatre shows plainly in his craftsmanship, especially in construction. He was careful about the beginnings of his plays. He understood the heterogeneous and often philistine

- 
1. A & B. Gelb, p. 176.
  2. Ibid., p. 143.
  3. B.H. Clark, pp. 43-44.

nature of the average theatre audience and knew the importance of summoning its undivided attention to the stage at the outset. He therefore makes use of striking visual and auditory devices in his opening scenes. The first scene of The Fountain has an exotically coloured decor. It consists of a courtyard at the centre of which is "a large splendid fountain of green marble with human and animal figures in gilt bronze". The peristyle of the gallery is "supported by slender columns of polished marble, partly gilded" the interspaces of whose arches are "filled with arabesques, texts from the Koran, red, blue and gold".<sup>1</sup> In Welded the curtain rises on a darkened stage. It is then illuminated by two circles of light which focus on the two main characters and follow them as they move across the stage. Lazarus Laughed begins with a tableau of richly costumed and masked supernumeraries grouped about a table at whose centre sits Lazarus "his head haloed and his body illumined by a soft radiance as of tiny phosphorescent flames".<sup>2</sup> At other times, O'Neill makes

---

1. The F., I, p. 377.

2. L.L., I. i, p. 274.

a bold auditory attack such as Eben Cabot's ringing of the dinner bell in Desire Under the Elms, "awakening a deafening clangor", or the initial "loud, imperious knocking, as of someone pounding with the hilt of a sword"<sup>1</sup> in The Fountain, or the "confused, inchoate uproar" of the stokehold in The Hairy Ape. To cover the noise of latecomers, he sometimes uses inconsequential conversation such as the merchants' talk about the weather in Marco Millions, the children's chatter about their game of marbles in All God's Chillun Got Wings, and the playful ribaldry of Seth Beckwith in Mourning Becomes Electra. Sometimes he uses a fairly extensive pantomime like that of Eleanor in Welded who opens, reads and kisses a letter, or that of Smithers in The Emperor Jones who watches, stalks and apprehends a native woman. Having made such concessions, O'Neill moves quickly to the point. In All God's Chillun Got Wings, when the game of marbles ends, the coloured boy, Jim, and the white girl, Ella, are left together in the middle of the stage and the audience is

---

1. The F., I, p. 377.



quickly introduced to the racial and sexual nature of the theme. In Lazarus Laughed the early disconnected superstitious mutterings of the guests are brushed aside by Lazarus's declaration of his leit-motiv, "There is no death!". In Mourning Becomes Electra, after Beckwith's brief bantering, the chorus gets down to a rapid exposition of the background to the play - the end of the Civil War, the wealth and importance of the Mannons, Ezra's image to the townsfolk, and the perpetration of an ancient wrong.

Most of O'Neill's plays have a marked symmetry in their structure and he seems to get satisfaction from balancing parts and scenes against one another. The Hairy Ape (1921) is in two parts, the first set in the stokehold, the second outside it. In the first part, Yank is confident and "belongs": in the second, he is disconcerted and lost. The play depicts man's loss of harmony with nature as he becomes more civilized and this division into contrasting parts, which sharply stresses the sense of loss, is a structure which symbolizes and emphasizes the theme. The thesis of

Welded (1923) is that love between two married people is one stage in a biological and psychological cycle of separation and reunion. Separation begins "with the splitting of a cell a hundred million years ago... leaving an eternal yearning to become one life again".<sup>1</sup> Then as the cells become man and woman, "life guides" them back together until Michael can say to his wife, "I've become you! You've become me! One heart! One blood! Ours!"<sup>2</sup> The structure of the play suits this theme. Act One shews the divisive influences playing on Michael and Eleanor. Act Two bifurcates to shew, in Scene One, Eleanor's defection and subsequent contrition and, in Scene Two, Michael's almost identical behaviour. Act Three shews their reunion.

Where O'Neill wants to illustrate futile ambition at work in his characters, he often uses a three-part structure consisting of rising action, climax

---

1. Weld., I, p. 448.

2. Ibid., I, p. 448.

or turning point and falling action. In the rising action the main character aspires and works towards his ambition, in the climax he seems to get what he wants and in the falling action he drops into defeat and disillusionment. Three plays have this structure. In the first three scenes of All God's Chillun Got Wings (1923), Jim Harris struggles to acquire a "white" identity; in the climax he thinks he becomes "white" by marrying a white woman; and in the last scenes he is shewn the hollowness of his success. In the first part of The Great God Brown (1925), Brown tries to annex another man's soul; in the middle scene he appears to succeed in assuming the new personality; in the last scene he loses his mind. In the first part of Desire Under the Elms (1924), Abbie Putnam conspires to obtain the Cabot farm; in the middle scene she seems to succeed when she seduces her main contender into giving her a child who will become Ephraim's heir; but in the final scenes she is denied possession by the forces of passion she has released.

O'Neill is especially successful in the way he uses the pivotal scenes ironically. In the climax of each of these plays, he shews the main character basking in

an "hour of secure happiness", unaware of the "malignant spirit behind life, waiting to catch men at its mercy". The "malignant spirit" strikes quickly. At the end of the scene in which Jim and Ella are married, they are faced with an intolerable racial hostility that leaves Jim "on the verge of collapse, his face twitching, his eyes staring".<sup>1</sup> Although Billy Brown exults as he obtains Dion's mask with "Say what you like, it's strong if it is bad! And this is what Margaret loved, not you!",<sup>2</sup> in the next scene, "he tears off his mask and reveals a suffering face that is ravaged and haggard, his own face tortured and distorted by the demon of Dion's mask".<sup>3</sup> The irony of the pivotal scene is augmented by an irony in the falling action. The second irony shews that although we "try in desperation to clutch our dream", we have to be satisfied with a "tawdry substitute". Jim Harris can have a white wife only if she is an imbecile, Brown can have only the dead likeness of a soul and Abbie can have only a prison cell as a final home.

---

1. A.G.C.G.W., I. iv, p. 321.

2. G.G.B., II. iii, p. 299.

3. Ibid., III. i, p. 305.



O'Neill's histories are quests and have a linear, journey-like structure. The plot of The Fountain (1922) traces a gradual change of heart in Juan Ponce de Leon from that of a romantic dreamer to that of a seeker for spiritual reality. Part One reveals Juan's restlessness, Part Two shews his successive rejection of religion and militarism as means of attaining happiness, and Part Three shews his final integration as he recognizes the truth of eternal recurrence. The play has little merit and gains a meagre dramatic tension from melodramatic scenes like Menendez's murder of the Moor and Juan's recognition of Beatriz as the image of his past love. Lazarus Laughed (1926) is episodic and Lazarus is seen successively to overcome religious sectarianism, nationalism, militarism, treachery and his own loneliness. Because Lazarus is superhuman, O'Neill cannot create dramatic suspense from ironical manipulation of his weaknesses. He relies therefore on externals such as the uncertainty that surrounds the conversion of the unbelievers, Caligula, Pompeia and Tiberius. The most intractable unbeliever is the person nearest to him, his wife, and dramatic suspense is at its most

intense when Miriam dies and Lazarus confesses his loneliness. Unfortunately, O'Neill can think of a no more imaginative resolution of this irony than by a providential intervention when Miriam rises momentarily from death to cry, "There is only life! Lazarus, be not lonely!"<sup>1</sup>

Marco Millions (1925) is constructed very curiously. It was originally written as two separate plays of which the first was to illustrate the materialism of the West and the second the spirituality of the East. The producers of its first performance, however, "procrastinated until O'Neill cut and combined the two parts into one".<sup>2</sup> The whole play is enclosed in a prologue and epilogue which stress the theme of materialism's depraving influence on humanity. Within this frame, O'Neill draws two portraits, Marco Polo who is a product of Western materialism and Kublai Kaan who is nourished in the spirituality of the East. The first part of the play, whose main character is Marco, is a satire on capitalism. It shews Marco's growing spiritual blindness

---

1. L.L., III. ii, p. 348.

2. F.I. Carpenter, p. 112.

as he obtains material success and uses his increasing vulgarity to make ironical comment on American society. The second part of the play, whose main character is Kublai Kaan, is a romantic tragedy. It shews Kublai's spiritual growth as he passes through disillusionment and bereavement and, by contrasting his dignity with Marco's brashness, drives home the satirical attack on America. Because he has combined two separate plays, O'Neill makes special efforts to give Marco Millions unity. He dovetails the two structures so that elements of one are present in the other. He alternates scenes of the parallel actions. He includes scenes where the stage is divided between the two actions and the players of one action comment on the players of the other. In the middle scenes, the two protagonists are presented as foils to each other and their conversations give point and intensity to O'Neill's attack upon the profit motive. He does not succeed in fusing the two parts. The meetings between Marco and Kublai Kaan tend to stress differences rather than to relate the actions. When Marco and Kublai are apart, they dominate their own sectors and remind us of the

autonomy of the two parts. The parts use almost diametrically opposed techniques, social satire and romantic tragedy, which O'Neill not surprisingly fails to combine. The emotional effect on the audience is confusing and we are unfortunately left asking not only who is the true hero of the play, but also "Did the author intend realistic satire? Or did he wish to create romantic myth?"<sup>1</sup> There is a failure of construction here which results in dislocation and uncertainty.

When we come to Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra, we find O'Neill using far more sophisticated structural techniques. The elephantine size of Strange Interlude (1927) tends to blur the theme and obscure the structure, but the play is concerned with the nature of life itself and O'Neill thought it was necessary to shew the slow maturing of events. Although this play shews O'Neill's pessimism it also expresses his belief that human beings attain a kind of grandeur when they accept the pressures that determine them. To shew this, he contrasts individuals

---

1. F.I. Carpenter, p. 113.



against groups and groups against social taboos. In Part One, he shews how young and inexperienced individuals provoke situations which disrupt the stability of the group, and how older people apply their experience and patience to redress the balance. Nina's rejection of her father's home, her promiscuity and her illicit relationship with Darrell are disruptive, but the steady loyalty of Evans, Darrell and Marsden to her provides a counter weight and brings stability. In Part Two, he illustrates the legacy of anguish left by events like those of Part One. He also shews a parallel benevolence of life, working through long-standing friendships, family visits and social occasions, and a gradually developing code of rational behaviour among the characters which diminishes passion and makes suffering tolerable. O'Neill complained that the public was blind to the structure of Strange Interlude "without which its successful production would have been impossible". He explained that "the first part rounded out a complete section of Nina's life with a definite beginning and end and yet contained the suspense at its end which called for Part Two".<sup>1</sup> As O'Neill says, the two parts of the

---

1. Eugene O'Neill, "Working Notes," European Theories of the Drama, p. 536.

play are structurally separate and each has its own turning point which contributes to the statement of the theme. The turning point of the first part occurs when Nina is told by her mother-in-law that she must not bear her husband's child because of his family's congenital insanity. This leads to the dislocation of several lives and the general sense of human disorder at the end of Part One. The climax of Part Two is almost a repetition of the first when Nina plans to retain her son by lying to his fiancée that his child would suffer the family madness. But Darrell thwarts her and as a result events again change their course, leading this time to acceptance of life and serenity after suffering.

Mourning Becomes Electra (1931) has many intentional similarities to the Greek Oresteia, but O'Neill's Working Notes on the play suggest that the structural likeness arose out of expediency rather than deliberate imitation. He certainly used Greek analogies in his early sketching of the plot, "first play Agamemnon's homecoming and murder--second, Electra's revenge on mother and lover, using Orestes to help her--third play, retribution Orestes and Electra".<sup>1</sup> The play's total

---

1. Eugene O'Neill, "Working Notes," European Theories of the Drama, p. 532.

structure, too, resembles the Oresteia. Homecoming shews Ezra Mannon's (Agamemnon's) return from the war and his murder. The Hunted shews Lavinia's (Electra's) revenge on her mother, Christine (Clytemnestra) and her mother's lover, Adam Brant (Aegisthus), using her brother, Orin (Orestes) to help her. The Haunted shews the retribution of psychical furies released by acts of unnatural revenge. But the Notes also indicate that the needs of his play were foremost in O'Neill's mind. He says, "No chance of getting full value material into one play or even two--must follow Greek practice and make it trilogy".<sup>1</sup> Indeed, he is proud of his originality and claims that Mourning Becomes Electra represents a "unique thing in dramaturgy--each play complete episode completely realized but at same time, which is the important point, not complete in that its end begins following play and demands that play as inevitable sequel".<sup>2</sup> Mourning Becomes Electra has, in fact, two structures, an outer and an inner. O'Neill sets down his plan for the outer structure in his Working Notes. He says;

Obtain more fixed formal structure  
for first play which succeeding plays  
will reiterate--pattern of exterior and

- 
1. Eugene O'Neill, "Working Notes," European Theories of the Drama, p. 532.
  2. Ibid., p. 536.

interior scenes, beginning and ending with exterior in each play --with the one ship scene at the center of the second play....<sup>1</sup>

He keeps to the plan only in part. The second and third plays do not repeat the pattern of scenes in the first play. Homecoming does not end with an exterior scene as does the others. He does, however, juxtapose internal and external scenes and he sharpens the dramatic tension of the former by setting them against the lighter action of the latter. All the scenes, except the "ship scene", are set either inside the Mannon house or immediately outside it and this reiteration of locality reminds us of the baleful grip that the "temple of death" has on its occupants.

The minor structure, the "composition (in musical sense)", O'Neill builds up by means of a frequent "recurrence of themes ('Island' death fear and death wish, the family past, etc.).<sup>2</sup> These "themes" are really images frequently repeated in the dialogue. All the Mannons refer to a "blessed island" where they will be able to forget "all men's dirty dreams of greed

---

1. Eugene O'Neill, "Working Notes," European Theories of the Drama, p. 533.

2. Ibid., 535.



and power".<sup>1</sup> Ezra wants to "find some island" where he can be alone with Christine and escape his fear of death. To his son, Orin, the "island" symbolizes a death wish, a return to the "peace, warmth and security" of the womb. The influence of the family past upon the present is indicated by the repetition of a scene "sometimes even in its exact words, but between different characters...Mannon & Christine (about Brant) in 1st play, Christine & Orin (about Brant) in second play--Mannon & Christine in 4th act, 1st play, Lavinia & Orin in 2nd Act, 3rd play--etc."<sup>2</sup> To strengthen the play's inner structure, O'Neill had intended to include soliloquies that would recur "in a fixed pattern throughout, fitting into structural pattern repeated in each play--"<sup>3</sup> He would also try to write a dialogue "with simple forceful repeating accent and rhythm" which would "express driving

- 
1. Homecoming, I, M.B.E., p. 24.
  2. Eugene O'Neill, "Working Notes," European Theories of the Drama, p. 535.
  3. Ibid., p. 534.

insistent compulsion of passions engendered in family past, which constitute family fate".<sup>1</sup> He eventually abandoned the soliloquies, but he persevered with the prose until he achieved to his own satisfaction the "right rhythm", a "monotonous simple" prose of "driving insistence". The inner structure seems to work successfully; it influences us subliminally, creating in our minds an awe for the forces that we feel to be at work and which give the play "a psychological modern approximation of the fate in the Greek tragedies".<sup>2</sup>

The sheer size of O'Neill's later plays almost precludes their having a theatrical performance at all. Strange Interlude was originally written to be performed in two consecutive evenings. O'Neill then cut it to make it playable at one sitting, but, in spite of his restraint, the first performance "began at 5-30 in the afternoon, paused for an eighty-minute dinner intermission, and ended after eleven at night".<sup>3</sup> Performances of Mourning Becomes Electra "began at five and ran until nearly midnight".<sup>4</sup> Critics have speculated about

- 
1. Eugene O'Neill, "Working Notes," European Theories of the Drama, p. 534.
  2. Ibid., p. 536.
  3. A & B. Gelb, p. 629.
  4. Ibid., p. 751.

O'Neill's liking for very long plays. Clifford Leech remarks that the way O'Neill had to travel all over the United States as a child ensured that "there was never to be a stability of background in his life"<sup>1</sup> and suggests that the playwright's "cult of the play whose length defied ordinary theatre-arrangements" manifested his desire for security.<sup>2</sup> Croswell Bowen is obviously thinking much the same thing when he says, "Wherever he (O'Neill) lived the houses he bought were always big, as if their very size would insure stability and permanence".<sup>3</sup> There is the same expansiveness in his time schemes. The action of All God's Chillun Got Wings extends over sixteen years; The Great God Brown eighteen years; The Fountain twenty years; Marco Millions twenty three years and Strange Interlude twenty five years. Whatever the compulsions behind O'Neill's expansiveness, there was also a conscious artistic purpose. In all these plays, length was necessary to shew in detail the erosions of time on human nature. It also gave a historical perspective that contributed to the play's "sense of fate".

---

1. C. Leech, p. 7.

2. Ibid., p. 8.

3. C. Bowen, p. 154.

Almost all O'Neill's plays contain violently sensational incidents such as the scene in Strange Interlude where Gordon Evans strikes Darrell not knowing that he is his real father, the mad-eyed Ella's pursuit of her husband with a carving knife in All God's Chillun Got Wings, Abbie's murder of her baby in Desire Under the Elms and Reuben's sacrifice of Ada to his generator god in Dynamo. Robert Benchley has pointed out that Mourning Becomes Electra is "less Greek tragedy" than "good, old-fashioned, spine-curling melodrama".<sup>1</sup> John Hutchens tabulates "the great effective moments of Mourning Becomes Electra" which he describes as "those of melodramatic situation carefully prepared and caught at the crest of their suspense":<sup>2</sup>

...the sinister plotting of Ezra Mannon's murder in the shadows of his study; the murder itself, and Mannon gasping out an accusation as his daughter breaks into the room; the scene in which Lavinia, in the presence of her

---

1. A & B. Gelb, p. 753.

2. J. Hutchens, "Mourning Becomes Electra," a review of the play, O. Cargill, p. 192.



brother, places the poison on the corpse of her father and admits their mother into the room of wavering candlelight to test her weakening nerves; the scene on the boat, with Brant and Christine in a cross-section of his cabin giving away their secret while Lavinia and Orin stand concealed on the deck above them; the wracking half minute while Brant is returning to his certain death at the hands of Orin; the suicide of Christine.<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill uses melodrama as an effective way of expressing emotional intensities. To add an understatement of emotional scenes to his structural devices of length, symbolic arrangement of scenes and deliberate verbal and situational repetitions could be disastrously tedious. There is a place for vital and even lurid situation in his plays, and O'Neill succeeds in assimilating his melodramatic situations into his structures by sheer imaginative force. The proof of his success is the impact a performance of his plays has on us. Mourning Becomes Electra is the most melodramatic of O'Neill's plays, yet the reviews of its first performance were "extraordinarily enthusiastic".<sup>2</sup> Brooks Atkinson called it "a universal tragedy of tremendous stature...heroically thought out and magnificently wrought in style and structure...".<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. J. Hutchens, "Mourning Becomes Electra," a review of the play, O. Cargill, p. 192.
  2. A & B. Gelb, p. 751.
  3. Ibid., p. 752.

John Mason Brown spoke of its "fourteen acts" which "are possessed of a strength and majesty which are equal to its scale",<sup>1</sup> and Gilbert Gabriel admitted that "no play in years has won so stirring an ovation at its close".<sup>2</sup> Benchley, with some amusement, recognizes the melodrama of Mourning Becomes Electra as O'Neill's "precious inheritance from his trouper-father...who counted 'One,' 'Two,' 'Three' as he destroyed his respective victims, one at the curtain to each act"<sup>3</sup> in The Count of Monte Cristo. Nevertheless, he goes on to acknowledge that O'Neill "does thrill the bejeezus out of us, just as his father used to, and that is what we go to the theatre for...".<sup>4</sup>

---

1. A & B. Gelb, p. 752.

2. Ibid., p. 753.

3. Ibid., p. 753.

4. Ibid., p. 753.

CHAPTER 9IRONY

O'Neill's philosophical irony is directed at the contradictions of the human condition in American society and in the stupidity of human nature. He believes that both are past hope. He said of American society:

This American dream stuff gives me a pain. Telling the world about our American Dream! I don't know what they mean. If it exists, as we tell the whole world, why don't we make it work in one small hamlet in the United States?<sup>1</sup>

---

1. C. Bowen, p. 315.

At the first performance of The Iceman Cometh (1939) he remarked, "To America everything has been given, more than to any other nation in history, but we threw away our soul when we tried to possess something outside it",<sup>1</sup> and in 1946 he said, "I'm going on the theory that the United States, instead of being the most successful country in the world, is the greatest failure".<sup>2</sup> He expressed his poor opinion of humanity in similar terms. In a letter to Barrett Clark, he said:

For, noting the way the world wags, I am sure that Man has definitely decided to destroy himself, and this seems to me the only truly wise decision he has ever made.<sup>3</sup>

On another occasion, he said:

If the human race is so damned stupid that in two thousand years it hasn't had brains enough to appreciate that the secret of happiness is contained in one simple sentence...then it's time we dumped it down the nearest drain and let the ants take over.<sup>4</sup>

Karl

- 
1. Martin Lamm, Modern Drama, trans. Karin Elliott, Oxford, 1952, p. 332.
  2. D. Alexander, "Eugene O'Neill as Social Critic," O. Cargill, p. 390.
  3. A & B. Gelb, p. 824..
  4. Ibid., p. 871.



What the secret is O'Neill does not say. Nor does it seem that O'Neill, during his sixty five years, or his characters through their feverish searches ever discovered it. They share a common despair which Dion Antony indicates in "Why the devil was I born at all" and which O'Neill expresses in an ironical catalogue of hopeless complaints. Irony is his response to society and he uses it as a central dramatic device.

O'Neill uses irony to attack aspects of the theory and practice of American capitalist democracy. In The Hairy Ape (1921) he refers to the Constitution of the United States which proclaims the freedom and equality of men, the happiness which "the Founding Fathers have guaranteed to each one..." and the "Brotherhood of Man" which, in America, is "a religion absorbed with one's mother's milk".<sup>1</sup> The play then provides instances in which the consequences of capitalist practice are ironically set against its precepts. Capitalist society is neither free nor equal. The

---

1. H.A., VI, p. 243.

stokers, representing the working class, are "in the bowels of a ship, imprisoned by white steel".<sup>1</sup> Mildred Douglas and the marionettes, representing the capitalists, are imprisoned by their own insensitivity expressed in Mildred's patronising desire to work in the slums and in the marionettes' obsession to possess worthless material things. Neither class concedes equality to the other. Everyone is desperately unhappy. The furious and baffled stokers express their frustration in a "confused, inchoate uproar", Mildred is "fretful, nervous and discontented, bored by her own anemia"<sup>2</sup> and ordinary people escape from life into a "detached, mechanical unawareness". The loving kindness of American society is ironically illustrated in the scene where "a whole platoon of policemen" rush on Yank and club him ferociously with the bystanders not even noticing the disturbance.

In Marco Millions (1925) O'Neill draws a bitterly ironical picture of the ultimate philistine that

---

1. H.A., I, p. 207.

2. Ibid., II, pp. 217-218.

American capitalism will produce. Although Marco has been under the influence of Chinese culture for fifteen years, "he has memorized everything and learned nothing....lusted for everything and loved nothing" and has become "only a shrewd and crafty greed".<sup>1</sup> He is entirely unaware of his spiritual blindness and believes that he is "a man made by Almighty God in His Own Image for His greater glory!"<sup>2</sup> The play also uses irony to tabulate some of capitalism's benefits to society when Marco announces his reformative measures as Mayor of Yang-Chan. These are his fiscal scheme which abolishes high taxes on excess profits, replacing them with taxes that fall on every necessity of life; his blanket statute enforcing happiness, based on the premise that if a citizen is not happy, "it's a sure sign he's no good to himself or anyone else and he's better be put where he can't do harm",<sup>3</sup> and his

- 
1. M.M., II. i, p. 387.
  2. Ibid., I. vi, p. 379.
  3. Ibid., II. i, p. 392.

five hundred committees formed to carry on his work so that "everything will go on automatically and brains are no longer needed".<sup>1</sup> This is O'Neill's irony at its best. There is no sentimentality or self-pity, the irony is concentrated on well-defined targets, he is detached and appears to be enjoying the game.

O'Neill also uses irony to attack the fundamental assumptions of society and its conventional recipes for happiness. He distorts the ideal of happy married life in Welded (1923) by portraying two people whose main motive for marrying is to devour the other's personality. He makes a bitter ironical stab at the Christian ethic of humility in All God's Chillun Got Wings (1923) by shewing how Jim Harris can attain happiness only through a self-induced imbecilic childishness, reminding us savagely that "except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter the

---

1. M.M., II. i, p. 393.



kingdom of heaven". He inverts the conventional idea of making good in The Great God Brown (1925) by revealing Billy Brown, a successful architect, as "an uncreative creature of superficial preordained social grooves".<sup>1</sup> Billy's obsession is to possess the soul that his materialistic nature denies him. He thinks he can steal Antony's, but because of his spiritual blindness he mistakes Dion's mask for his soul. There is an additional irony when we see the personal dynamism that has brought Billy material success become a senseless greed that destroys him. O'Neill sometimes gives point to his thematic ironies by adding sharp, derisory twists at the end of a play. One example is the Epilogue of Marco Millions where the character who has been satirized is seen to be one of the audience. A second is the incident at the end of The Great God Brown where the policeman, having been told that the name of the person he has shot is "Man", asks, "How d'yuh spell it?". A third is the last line of Desire Under the Elms (1924)

---

1. B.H. Clark, p. 161.

where, after Abbie and Eben have been seen to attain happiness only by renouncing cupidity, the Sheriff looks enviously round the farm and says to his companion, "It's a jim-dandy farm, no denyin'. Wished I owned it!"<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill is a great experimenter and not least in those devices that create an ironical tone. Before 1921 his use of dramatic irony is irregular and unpredictable. In the Glencairn plays and those plays which delineate obsessed personalities, he scarcely enters into an ironical covenant with his audience at all. He uses dramatic irony obviously and conventionally in Beyond the Horizon (1918) where the audience is brought into the secret of the Mayo's love for Ruth Atkins before all the characters themselves are aware of it. He is more subtle in Anna Christie (1920). The audience is quickly made aware of Anna's past as a prostitute by her dress, her manner and her initial talk with Marthy Owen, but the gradual realization of her past by her father and her lover is the essential poignancy of the

---

1. D.U.E., III. iv, p. 269.

play. After 1921 O'Neill uses dramatic irony more powerfully. In All God's Chillun Got Wings (1923) the audience knows - as Jim Harris does not know - that Ella is conspiring with his racial inferiority to thwart his aspirations. In Strange Interlude (1927) only the audience knows of the illicit relationship between Nina Leeds and Darrell which is the source of so much of the play's tension. There are two powerful examples of dramatic irony in Mourning Becomes Electra (1931). In The Homecoming, the audience is already aware of the plot between Brant and Christine to kill her husband and there is consequently an intense irony first as Christine assures Ezra of her fidelity and then as she lowers his defences before killing him. In The Hunted the irony is even more concentrated when Christine and Brant hold their last apprehensive conversation unaware that Orin and Lavinia are at the skylight listening to their plan to escape. But perhaps the finest example of dramatic irony in his work is in Desire Under the Elms (1924) where, in one scene, we are shewn the interiors of adjacent bedrooms. Cabot and his young wife, Abbie, are in one and Eben,

his son, is in the other. There follows a scene of extraordinary irony as Cabot, concerned only with talking about his loneliness, is oblivious to his wife's intent listening to Eben's every movement in the next room and to the pantomime the two young people carry on which indicates their growing passion.

O'Neill is not much at home with delicate verbal ironies. He obtains pungent effects by deliberate and crude inversion of the beatitudes as in "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit graves! Blessed are the poor in spirit for they are blind!",<sup>1</sup> he deflates pomposity by use of bathos when Billy Brown describes his "art" as "a fat-bellied finality, as dignified as the suspenders of an assemblyman!"<sup>2</sup> and as Frederick Carpenter has pointed out, he uses incongruous metaphors in The Great God Brown to indicate "the confusion of the modern world--which, of course, the title of the play also suggests".<sup>3</sup> O'Neill lacks a strong sense of humour and his main method of raising

---

1. G.G.B., I. i, p. 273.

2. Ibid., IV. i, p. 313.

3. F.I. Carpenter, p. 112.



a laugh is to use disparaging, bawdy or ribald comment. There is an example of the first in Anna Christie (1920) when Marthy Owen in her initial encounter with Anna says, "I got your number the minute you stepped in the door" to which Anna replies, "Ain't you smart! Well, I got yours, too, without no trouble. You're me forty years from now. That's you."<sup>1</sup> He is bawdy in Marco Millions when, as the Prostitute enters, Maffeo says, "So here you are again. You're like a bad coin--always turning up" to which she replies, "Shut up. You can bet it isn't old fools like you that turn me".<sup>2</sup> There is ribaldry in The Hairy Ape when Paddy recounts the meeting between Mildred and Yank in the stokehold:

'Twas love at first sight, divil a doubt of it! If you'd seen the endearin' look on her pale mug when she shriveled away with her hands over her eyes to shut out the sight of him!...And the loving way Yank heaved his shovel at the skull of her, only she was out the door! 'Twas touching, I'm telling you! It put the touch of home, swate home in the stokehole.<sup>3</sup>

This irony is comical and typically Irish, but the situation in which the passage occurs gets its force not so much from Paddy's remarks as from the spectacle of

- 
1. A.C., I, p. 15.
  2. M.M., I. iii, p. 367.
  3. H.A., IV, pp. 229-230.

the weak Irishman baiting the powerful Yank.

O'Neill does much better when he develops an ironical atmosphere through a use of auditory and visual symbols. In his early plays he makes effective use of the mournful background singing of negroes that keens for Smitty's sad love affair in The Moon of the Caribbees (1917), the foghorn that ironically suggests mankind's vague groping through life to death in Bound East for Cardiff (1914), Mrs. Keeney's jangling organ playing that indicates her husband's future chaos of mind and the insistent tom-tom beat that stresses Jones's inescapable primeval nature and the futility of his self-deceptions in The Emperor Jones (1920). There is too in The Emperor Jones a skilful use of ironical visual symbols: the gaudy scarlet throne which represents the hollowness of Jones's power, the background jungle which represents the irresistible power of his subconscious mind and the silver bullet which symbolizes the fallacy of his immunity from death. By 1922 O'Neill was using such devices confidently and there are two plays where his use of ironical symbols are outstanding. In

All God's Chillun Got Wings there is a Congo mask which not only has a two-fold ironical purpose as a symbol of negro culture to one woman and a symbol of negro contamination to another, but which also goads Ella, the wife of a negro, to reveal herself as a racist. The church building where Jim and Ella are married is another powerful ironical symbol. We would expect a church to be a place where racial reconciliation should take place, but O'Neill makes it a symbol of rejection whose doors, shut them out to face the hatred of hostile racial groups.

In Mourning Becomes Electra O'Neill uses colours to convey ironical psychological conceptions. The image of white which has traditional Christian associations of purity and happiness he uses to symbolize evil. The Mannon house, home of the living dead, has a Grecian temple portico "like an incongruous white mask fixed on the house" and the colour is skilfully identified with images of death,

---

1. Homecoming, I, M.B.E., p. 5.

paganism and hatred when Christine says:

Each time I come back after being away  
it appears more like a sepulchre! The  
"whited" one of the Bible--pagan temple  
front stuck like a mask on Puritan gray  
ugliness! It was just like old Abe  
Mannon to build such a monstrosity--as a  
temple for his hatred.<sup>1</sup>

The white symbol is taken up on another occasion by  
Ezra when he too identifies it with death:

They (the Mannons) went to the white  
meeting-house on Sabbaths and meditated  
on death....That white meeting-house.  
It stuck in my mind--clean-scrubbed and  
whitewashed--a temple of death!<sup>2</sup>

By this reiteration, the association of white with  
death sticks in our minds and irony arises from the  
shock of readjustment that we are compelled to make.  
The second colour symbol which O'Neill uses with  
strong ironical effect in Mourning Becomes Electra is  
the auburn hair of his female characters. I have  
explained previously how O'Neill uses this hair colour  
to shew a psychic affinity among the Mannon women.

1. Homecoming, I, M.B.E., p. 17.

2. Ibid., III, p. 54.



It is also an ironical symbol. It is a fatal allure, drawing all the Mannon men to their deaths. We are told that David Mannon's love for Marie Brantome led him to drink and suicide, and during the course of the play, Ezra is murdered by Christine, Adam Brant shot as a result of Lavinia's conspiracy against him, and Orin goaded to suicide by his tortured memories of his mother and by Lavinia. It intensifies the sense of inevitability. All the Mannon menfolk are lured to their deaths against their reason. David Mannon knew well enough the consequences of marrying Marie Brantome. Ezra Mannon had been warned of his wife's infidelity. Adam Brant knew that his association with Christine would ruin him. The allure is too strong. It overcomes common-sense and deep-seated family taboos, and drives Orin to make incestuous approaches to his mother and his sister. We become aware of subterranean powers of evil and the ironical futility of our defences against them.

O'Neill's vision of the individual as doomed to defeat and punishment is essentially ironical. He sees the human being as having lost an earlier harmony with nature "which he used to have as an animal and has

not yet acquired in a spiritual way. Thus, not being able to find it on earth nor in heaven, he's in the middle, trying to make peace, taking the 'woist punches from bot' of 'em".<sup>1</sup> His punishment is so severe that he develops "a dread of life". This distrust is reflected early in O'Neill's work. It is present in Anna Christie where, O'Neill tells us, "the sea outside--life--waits".<sup>2</sup> Chris Christopherson says, "Ay don't know--it's dat funny vay ole davil sea do her vorst dirty tricks, yes"<sup>3</sup> and "Fog, fog, fog, all bloody time. You can't see vhere you vas going, no. Only dat ole davil, sea--she knows!"<sup>4</sup> The irony of life is that the individual must wear a mask to protect himself against it. In The Hairy Ape Yank wears a mask of bravado. In The Emperor Jones, Jones assumes a swaggering scepticism

---

1. B.H. Clark, p. 127.

2. Ibid., p. 112.

3. A.C., IV, p. 78.

4. Ibid., IV, p. 78.

to face his tribal superstitions. In the plays of the middle period O'Neill uses physical masks to indicate this human defensiveness. In The Great God Brown Dion Antony wears a "mocking, reckless, defiant, gayly scoffing" mask to disguise his fear of other men and women. In Lazarus Laughed the supernumeraries wear masks because of their fear of death. O'Neill derives an added irony from his use of masks by shewing that the world comes to value the mask more than the real person under it. In his later plays, O'Neill sees the individual's fate in a more sophisticated way. He discards the idea that life is a straight contest between the individual and God. In Desire Under the Elms he shews human beings as the unwitting pawns of conflicting forces. In Mourning Becomes Electra he shews the sins of the fathers visited upon the children. In Strange Interlude he concludes that there is neither sense nor reason in life and it is better to pass through it in a state of anesthesia. This petulant gloominess is the weakness of his irony and his complaints are riddled with self-pity. Again and again, in remarks made by his characters and in some of the situations he contrives for them in his

plays, we feel that he is doing little more than express his own sense of being badly used. This self-pity is most evident in the number of occasions he depicts personal betrayal. Reuben Light claims that he is betrayed by his father, his mother and his girl friend, Nina Leeds by her father and by life and John Loving by his God. O'Neill seems to regard these betrayals as a major cause of human maladjustment, particularly his own. The autobiographical Dion Antony tells an anguished tale of the way he lost faith in life:

One day when I was four years old, a boy sneaked up behind when I was drawing a picture in the sand he couldn't draw and hit me on the head with a stick and kicked out my picture and laughed when I cried....I had loved and trusted him and suddenly the good God was disproved in his person and the evil and injustice of Man was born!<sup>1</sup>

As a result, when he becomes a man, he refuses to work, neglects his family and spends his time with a prostitute while his wife goes out to beg a job for him.

---

1. G.G.B., II. iii, p. 295.



All this is presented less than convincingly as society's fault. O'Neill asks us to believe that when Dion's ironical mask falls off at his death, it will reveal "a Christian martyr's face". This inability to see beyond the boundaries of his petty resentments and to take a detached and thoroughly self-critical view of life limits the effectiveness of O'Neill's irony, depriving it of coolness, restraint, balance and charity.

## CHAPTER 10

### MASKS

I have already shewn that O'Neill's shifting attitudes to religion were behind the themes of many of his plays. He assumed that his own interest in religion occupied most people's minds, that there was a public "growing yearly more numerous and more hungry in its spiritual need to participate in imaginative interpretations of life"<sup>1</sup> and that the twentieth century therefore needed a theatre that would be a place "where the religion of a poetical

- 
1. Eugene O'Neill, "A Dramatist's Notebook," O. Cargill, p. 121.
  2. Eugene O'Neill, "Memoranda on Masks," O. Cargill, p. 116.
  3. Chambers Encyclopedia. Vol. 12, Oxford, 1966, p. 114.

interpretation and a symbolical celebration of life is communicated to human beings".<sup>1</sup> This theatre would use masks to express "those profound hidden conflicts of the mind which the probings of psychology continue to disclose to us".<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I shall comment on the religious implications of masks, their use in some early drama and the suggestions of Macgowan and Craig that they could be reintroduced to the stage to create a new religious atmosphere in the modern theatre. I shall then discuss O'Neill's varied and developing use of masks.

Masks have been ceremonial and religious objects in primitive communities all over the world because the mask is "a two-fold aid, contributing to the organization of man's relations to the world round him and to his own mental balance".<sup>3</sup> In America, stone and leather masks were "a fundamental object

- 
1. Eugene O'Neill, "A Dramatist's Notebook," O. Cargill, pp. 121-122.
  2. Eugene O'Neill, "Memoranda on Masks," O. Cargill, p. 116.
  3. Chambers Encyclopedia, Vol. IX, Oxford, 1966, p. 134.

in the religious life of many aboriginal tribes" and "distinguished the personalities of the gods".<sup>1</sup> In Africa, carved wooden masks were connected with the medicine man and were principally religious in function. In those parts of Asia where the influence of Buddha was strong, masks were widely used in ritual. Even today, in Eastern Europe, Slav peasants wear masks at ancient pagan festivals which take place at the solstices. Ritual has theatrical elements and the drama of almost every race has its beginnings in religion. The birth of Western drama in Greek religious ceremonies and its rebirth in Christian ritual is well-known, but similar developments occurred elsewhere. In Tibet, for example, a form of mystery play in which actors wore ferocious masks to portray gods and demons who influence human affairs grew out of a sacred drama that illustrated the several births of Buddha. In Japan, the famous Nō drama developed from propitiatory play-dances devised by Buddhist priests of the Zen sect "to stop the progress of

---

1. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. XV, 1957, p. 13.



fissures which suddenly opened in the earth".<sup>1</sup>

In the nineteen-twenties, producers, critics and playwrights began to look back at old theatrical practices to see whether they might discover elements that could revitalize modern drama. They mainly had in mind this connection between religion and drama and Kenneth Macgowan, the American critic and producer, suggested that the modern theatre might replace the church as a "temple of religion". He felt that the use of masks would help to create a religious atmosphere because they would be a visible symbol of the individual's tendency to conceal his soul from the outside world and would be accepted by audiences as a traditional vehicle for expressing religious truth. There was also another reason for bringing the mask back to the theatre. Some producers, such as Gordon Craig, felt that the human face with its changing and unpredictable expressions was too unreliable an agency to convey the precise religious intention of the playwright. But the mask's set

---

1. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. XV, 1957, p. 12.

features could symbolize religious ideas. The mask was, therefore, an excellent device "to facilitate a journey into the world of the imagination" and a way of allowing "the effacement of immediate reality for the benefit of a vaster reality".<sup>1</sup>

When Macgowan was expressing his ideas on masks in The Theatre of Tomorrow (1923) he was also working as a producer in close collaboration with O'Neill. Whether he actually introduced the idea of using masks in the theatre to O'Neill is hard to say. He probably did not because O'Neill uses the metaphor of the mask quite early in his career. In Servitude (1914), one of the characters remarks of her husband, "I don't think he wore a mask just for my benefit; but you never can tell".<sup>2</sup> Indeed, O'Neill seemed to see life in terms of masks and he once wrote:

One's outer life passes in a solitude haunted by the masks of others; one's inner life passes in a solitude hounded by the masks of oneself.<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. Allardyce Nicoll, The World of Harlequin, Cambridge, 1963, p. 41.
  2. Servitude, I, Ten "Lost" Plays, p. 236.
  3. Eugene O'Neill, "Memoranda on Masks," O. Cargill, p. 117.

He was very close to Macgowan in the way he looked forward to a theatre "returned to its highest and sole significant function as a Temple" which would be a "legitimate descendant of the first theatre that sprang, by virtue of man's imaginative interpretation of life, out of his worship of Dionysus"<sup>1</sup> and which would make a great use of masks. He did not, however, expect to find a use for masks in all plays; for example, "obviously not for plays conceived in purely realistic terms",<sup>2</sup> but he would use them in "the new modern play". He wrote:

A comprehensive expression is demanded here, a chance for eloquent presentation, a new form of drama projected from a fresh insight into the inner forces motivating the actions and reactions of men and women... a drama of souls, and the adventures of "Free wills," with the masks that govern them and constitute their fates.<sup>3</sup>

He also agreed with Craig that theatrically the mask is a "proven weapon of attack" and "at its best...more

- 
1. Eugene O'Neill, "A Dramatist's Notebook," O. Cargill, p. 121.
  2. Eugene O'Neill, "Memoranda on Masks," O. Cargill, p. 116.
  3. Ibid., p. 116.

subtly, imaginatively, suggestively dramatic than any actor's face can ever be".<sup>1</sup> He argued:

Let anyone who doubts this study the Japanese Noh masks, or Chinese theatre masks, or African primitive masks--or right herein America the faces of the big marionettes Robert Edmond Jones made for the production of Stravinsky's Oedipus.<sup>2</sup>

But O'Neill only gradually comes to use masks on the stage. He begins by using marionette-like figures which are meant to suggest subconscious influences at work on his characters. In The Emperor Jones (1920), Brutus is tormented by three hallucinations that remind him of his past: Jeff's ghost which represents his personal guilt, the chain gang which indicates his social depravity and the slave auction scene which symbolizes his racial degradation. All the figures that appear in these visions resemble "automatons,--rigid, slow, and mechanical".<sup>3</sup> None of them is masked, but presumably their jerky physical movements would encourage the players to wear set, doll-like expressions. In The Hairy Ape (1921), he again uses marionette figures this time to give point to his ironical social comment and he portrays

---

1. Eugene O'Neill, "Memoranda on Masks," O.Cargill, p.117.

2. Ibid., p. 117.

3. E.J., IV, p. 194.



the respectable figures of society as a "procession of gaudy marionettes, yet with something of the relentless horror of the Frankensteins in their detached, mechanical unawareness".<sup>1</sup> But the idea of masking seems to have been subconsciously in his mind as he wrote The Hairy Ape, because it is plain that Yank, from the moment he is rejected by society, enters a masked world. It is inhabited by stokers whose voices have a "brazen, metallic quality as if their throats were phonograph horns",<sup>2</sup> churchgoers who hold their heads "stiffly up, looking neither to right nor left, talking in toneless, simpering voices"<sup>3</sup> and disembodied underworld voices who speak from dark cells and interlard their remarks with "hisses, catcalls, boos, and hard laughter".<sup>4</sup> In 1933, he is explicit about masking in these plays when, in "Second Thoughts", he says of The Emperor Jones:

All the figures in Jones's flight through the forest should be masked. Masks would dramatically stress their phantasmal quality, as contrasted with the unmasked Jones, intensify the supernatural menace of the tom tom, give the play a more complete and vivid expression.<sup>5</sup>

- 
1. H.A., V, p. 236.
  2. Ibid., IV, p. 227.
  3. Ibid., V, p. 236.
  4. Ibid., VI, p. 243.
  5. Eugene O'Neill, "Second Thoughts," O. Cargill, p. 119.

O'Neill seems to have been fascinated by facial expression and it is noticeable that he frequently uses facial imagery when he describes scenic effects. Buildings have "a stern forbidding look", windows look like "staring brutal eyes" or reflect the sun's rays "in a resentful glare". In The Hairy Ape, he focuses attention on characters' facial expression when he describes them. He stresses Mildred's "pale, pretty face marred by a self-conscious expression of disdainful superiority"<sup>1</sup> and the coal dust on the stokers' faces which "sticks like black make-up, giving them a queer, sinister expression".<sup>2</sup> He sets one face against another in his description of the stokehold scene where Yank sees Mildred for the first time:

He whirls defensively with a snarling,  
murderous growl, crouching to spring, his

---

1. H.A., II, p. 217.

2. Ibid., IV, p. 226.

lips drawn back over his teeth, his small eyes gleaming ferociously.... He glares into her eyes, turned to stone....As she looks at his gorilla face, as his eyes bore into hers, she utters a low, choking cry and shrinks away from him, putting both hands up before her eyes to shut out the sight of his face, to protect her own.<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill uses an actual mask on the stage in The Fountain (1922) where one of the figures appearing in Juan's vision wears a "mask of age", but it is not until All God's Chillun Got Wings (1923) that he brings the mask to the forefront as a dramatic device. This "negro primitive mask from the Congo" is interesting because it is a symbolic protagonist. Although it is no more than a decorative ornament in the Harris home, it exercises powerful influences on two of the characters. To Harriet, the negress, it is "beautifully done, conceived in a true religious spirit".<sup>2</sup> She sees it as "a work of Art" comparable to the sculpture of Michael Angelo. To Ella, however, it is diabolical. It is her implacable enemy whom she attacks and symbolically kills when, towards the end of the play, she drives a knife through it.

---

1. H.A., III, p. 225-226.

2. A.G.C.G.W., II. i, p. 322.

In The Great God Brown (1925) O'Neill uses the mask to illustrate an aspect of his character's personality, visibly overshadowing his real self and contributing to his psychological problems. This was the first play in which masks had been used "to dramatize changes and conflicts in character" and as a "means of dramatizing a transfer of personality from one man to another".<sup>1</sup>

The Great God Brown has four major characters all of whom at one time or another wear a mask. Dion Antony, as his name implies, is divided between "Dionysus and St. Antony--the creative pagan acceptance of life, fighting eternal war with the masochistic, life-denying spirit of Christianity as represented by St. Antony--".<sup>2</sup> His real nature is "dark, spiritual, poetic, passionately supersensitive, helplessly unprotected in its childlike, religious faith in life", but his mask is that of a "mocking, reckless, defiant, gayly scoffing and sensual young Pan".<sup>3</sup> Margaret, Dion's wife, at first wears a mask exactly like her face and this shews her naivety

---

1. B.H. Clark, p. 159.

2. Ibid., p. 160.

3. G.G.B., Prologue, p. 260.



and absence of mental conflict. Cybel is "an incarnation of Cybele, the Earth Mother doomed to segregation as a pariah in a world of unnatural laws".<sup>1</sup> She has a "complexion fresh and healthy" and "large eyes dreamy with the reflected stirring of profound instincts",<sup>2</sup> but to face the world she wears a mask of a prostitute's painted face. Billy Brown, the anti-hero, is "the visionless demi-god of our new materialistic myth--a Success--building his life of exterior things, inwardly empty and resourceless".<sup>3</sup> He has no mask until he steals Dion Antony's.

The play illustrates the ironical human pursuit of unattainable ends. Dion Antony tortures himself because a philistine world will not recognize him as an artist. Margaret, his wife, is unappreciative of his true nature and loves the mask and not the man. Brown, the most pathetic character of all, searches for a soul that his own nature denies him. The erosive effect of frustration

---

1. B.H. Clark, p. 160.

2. G.G.B., I, iii, p. 278.

3. B.H. Clark, p. 161.

on the characters is shewn by the changes that take place in their masks and real faces. Dion's face becomes "more self-less and ascetic" until, when he dies, it has become a "Christian Martyr's face at the point of death".<sup>1</sup> His mask acquires a "terrible deathlike intensity" and a "mocking irony" which becomes "so cruelly malignant as to give him the appearance of a real demon".<sup>2</sup> Margaret's transparent mask changes to that of a "pretty young matron, still hardly a woman, who cultivates a naively innocent and bravely hopeful attitude toward things and acknowledges no wound to the world".<sup>3</sup> At the end of the play, the mask acquires the expression of the "proud and indulgent Mother" and reflects "the sad but contented feeling of one who knows her life purpose well accomplished but is at the same time a bit empty and comfortless with the finality of it".<sup>4</sup> When Brown wears Dion's mask, his features, which were at first "congenial" and "engaging", become "sick,

---

1. G.G.B., II. iii, p. 299.

2. Ibid., II. iii, p. 294.

3. Ibid., I. ii, p. 274.

4. Ibid., Epilogue, p. 324.

ghastly, tortured, hollow-cheeked and feverish-eyed".<sup>1</sup> He is driven back into himself until "his eyes, his arms, his whole body strain upward" and "his muscles writhe with his lips as they pray silently in their agonized supplication<sup>2</sup> to God for mercy.

Once again, O'Neill's use of masks is not successful. This was evident enough when the play was performed in 1926 at the Greenwich Village Theatre. Oscar Cargill says that the audience went away "puzzled by the constant clapping on and snatching off of masks."<sup>3</sup> Barrett Clark thought that this exchanging of masks put "a burden upon the director and the actor that neither has successfully borne".<sup>4</sup> Gilbert Gabriel found the masks an "embarrassing trickery" which, in spite of his attempts to accept them, remained "always a thorn in your imagination".<sup>5</sup>

- 
1. G.G.B., IV. i, p. 314.
  2. Ibid., IV. ii, p. 319.
  3. O. Cargill, "Fusion-Point of Jung and Nietzsche," O. Cargill, p. 410.
  4. B.H. Clark, p. 164.
  5. G.W. Gabriel, "The Great God Brown," a review of the play, O. Cargill, p. 177.

Even O'Neill was disquieted. He wrote a letter<sup>1</sup> to the Press explaining the play's theme and the reasons for the masks. Later, he admitted to Macgowan that the device had been a failure not because the masks were too obviously a device but because they were too realistic. He felt, for example, that they should have been twice as big as they were in the first production. He had wanted "those masks to get across the abstract drama of the forces behind the people" whereas all they had achieved was "the bromidic, hypocritical and defensive double personality of people in their personal relationships--a thing I never would have needed masks to convey".<sup>2</sup> It is astonishing that O'Neill should not see that the physical handling of masks would reduce the dramatic illusion. A player on stage needs his limbs to fulfil his acting function. He should not be expected to carry clumsy properties too. But with masks of face size at least the actors would

---

1. See B.H. Clark, pp. 159-162.

2. A & B. Gelb, p. 594.



be able to move them about with one hand. What would have happened if the masks had been twice as big with the actors having to use both hands to lift them on and off can well be imagined. Yet in spite of its clumsy devices, its vagueness of theme and its need for "a prompt book--an interlinear one (filled out from Jung)" in order that the audience "may understand the play",<sup>1</sup> The Great God Brown ran in New York for nearly nine months and was regarded as a popular success.

O'Neill persevered with masks in Lazarus Laughed (1928) where he adopted the commedia dell 'arte convention of using full and half masks. This time he used the masks to symbolize the state of his characters' souls. Lazarus, the principal character, is not masked because he is a fully integrated personality uninhibited by the fear of death. The secondary characters, Caligula, Pompeia and Tiberius, wear masks over the upper half of their faces and this device indicates their duality of mind and mental conflict.

---

1. O. Cargill, "Fusion-Point of Jung and Nietzsche," O. Cargill, p. 410.

Caligula's mask accentuates his sensual and domineering nature, but "his large troubled eyes... glare out with a shifty feverish suspicion at everyone"<sup>1</sup> and above the mask his "hair is the curly blond hair of a child of six or seven. His mouth also is childish, the red lips soft and feminine in outline".<sup>2</sup> Pompeia's mask is "olive-colored with the red of blood smoldering through, with great, dark, cruel eyes--a dissipated mask of intense evil beauty, of lust and perverted passion", but "beneath the mask, her own complexion is pale, her gentle, girlish mouth is set in an expression of agonized self-loathing and weariness of spirit".<sup>3</sup> Tiberius's mask is "pallid purple blotched with darker color, as if the imperial blood in his veins had been sickened by age and debauchery".<sup>4</sup> Its expression is louring and grim, but beneath it the face is that of "an able soldier" and a "statesman of rigid probity". The characters who wear half-masks are redeemable. Pompeia and Tiberius escape the imprisonment of their masks by voluntarily embracing

- 
1. L.L., II. i, p. 299.
  2. Ibid., II. i, p. 299.
  3. Ibid., III. ii, pp. 336-337.
  4. Ibid., III. ii, p. 337.

death and even Caligula reaches the verge of conversion as he repeats Lazarus's creed and raises his arms heavenwards "a tender, childish laughter of love on his lips".<sup>1</sup> Miriam, Lazarus's wife, is also half-masked, but her duality consists of being half symbol and half human. She is a symbol of womanhood and her mask conveys "her eternal acceptance of the compulsion of motherhood, the inevitable cycle of love into pain into joy and new love into separation and pain again and the loneliness of age".<sup>2</sup> She is also a human being "sensitive and sad, tender with an eager, understanding smile of self-forgetful love, the lips still fresh and young".<sup>3</sup> She is a foil to Lazarus. Lazarus grows progressively younger as he reiterates that there is no death, but Miriam ages rapidly as she focuses her thoughts on dying. But she, too, can be redeemed. When she is offered a poisoned apple by Pompeia, she asks "(meekly but longingly) May I accept, Lazarus? Is it time at last?"<sup>4</sup>

---

1. L.L., IV. ii, p. 371.

2. Ibid., I. i, p. 274.

3. Ibid., I. i, p. 274.

4. Ibid., III. ii, p. 345.

She eats the apple and thereby attains salvation. Lazarus's parents, sisters and other supernumeraries wear full masks which symbolize the hopelessness of their condition. Their masks have destroyed their souls and these characters cannot find redemption.

Here again, O'Neill is not successful with his masks. In Lazarus Laughed, he tries to make them symbolize too much and they muddle rather than clarify the play's intention. His lack of success plagues him. He seems to be most uneasy when he fails to make effective use of masks or when he decides to manage without them. In his Working Notes, for example, he fights a drawn out battle with himself to decide whether he ought to introduce masks to Mourning Becomes Electra (1931). In March, 1930, he decided to write a second draft of the play using half-masks as a "visual symbol" of "the separateness, the fated isolation of this family, the mark of their fate which makes them dramatically distinct from the rest of the world".<sup>1</sup> In September, 1930, he changed his mind because he felt that the masks

---

1. Eugene O'Neill, "Working Notes," European Theories of the Drama, p. 535.



"obtrude themselves too much into the foreground",<sup>1</sup> introducing a "duality-of-character" symbolism that he had not intended. Finally, he decided to "keep (the) mask conception--but as Mannon background not foreground!"<sup>2</sup> He would do this by instructing the actors to use a heavy mask-like make up so that "in repose" the faces of the Mannons would seem to be "life-like death masks" which would suggest the "death-in-life" motive he wanted to convey.

O'Neill finds additional uses in Mourning Becomes Electra for masking by make up. He uses it to suggest psychical masking by which a character conceals his true nature from others, to convey through facial likenesses a sense of "family fate" and to stimulate dramatic intensity in some scenes by sudden contrasts of his characters' impassive and distorted facial expressions. The psychical masking and family likenesses are most evident when the face is expressionless and O'Neill repeatedly draws our attention to them in his stage directions. He reiterates the word "repose" and

- 
1. Eugene O'Neill, "Working Notes," European Theories of the Drama, p. 534.
  2. Ibid., p. 535.

describes the masking of different characters in almost the same phrasing. Christine Mannon's face gives the impression "in repose of being not living flesh but a wonderfully lifelike pale mask".<sup>1</sup>

Lavinia resembles her mother and "one is struck by the same strange, lifelike mask impression her face gives in repose".<sup>2</sup> When Adam Brant appears "one is struck at a glance by the peculiar quality his face in repose has of being a lifelike mask rather than living flesh".<sup>3</sup> When General Mannon arrives home,

"one is immediately struck by the mask-like look of his face in repose, more pronounced in him than in the others".<sup>4</sup> When Orin, Ezra's son, returns from the war, "one is at once struck by his startling family resemblance to Ezra Mannon and Adam Brant (whose likeness to each other we have seen in 'Homecoming').

There is the same lifelike mask quality of his face in repose".<sup>5</sup> This repose is contrasted with convulsed facial expressions at moments of dramatic intensity.

---

1. Homecoming, I, M.B.E., p. 9

2. Ibid., I, p. 10.

3. Ibid., I, pp. 20-21.

4. Ibid., III, p. 46.

5. The Hunted, I, M.B.E., p. 73.

O'Neill says in his Notes:

I can visualize the death-mask-like expression of (the) characters' faces in repose suddenly being torn open by<sup>1</sup> passion as extraordinarily effective.

This change occurs several times in the play. After a quarrel with Lavinia, Christine decides to kill Ezra and she stares at his portrait "with hatred". When she realises that Lavinia has contrived Brant's murder, she stands "glaring at her daughter with a terrible look in which a savage hatred fights with horror and fear".<sup>2</sup> Ezra sees that his wife has given him poison and "his eyes are fixed on her in a terrible accusing glare".<sup>3</sup> When Orin overhears the lovemaking between his mother and Brant, "his face, in the light from the skylight, becomes distorted with jealous fury".<sup>4</sup>

In order to intensify the effect of the psychical masking, O'Neill includes the imagery of faces and masks in his dialogue and thereby conveys a sense of foreboding. There is a suggestion of evil in Minnie's remark about Christine, "There's somethin' queer lookin'

1. Eugene O'Neill, "Working Notes," European Theories of the Drama, p. 535.
2. The Hunted, V, M.B.E., p. 122.
3. Homecoming, IV, M.B.E., p. 62.
4. The Hunted, IV, M.B.E., p. 109.

about her face" and Ames's reply, "Secret lookin'-- 's if it was a mask she'd put on".<sup>1</sup> There is an implied nemesis in Orin's description of the mask-like faces he saw when he killed Confederate soldiers:

It was like murdering the same man twice. I had a queer feeling that war meant murdering the same man over and over, and that in the end I would discover the man was myself! Their faces kept coming back....<sup>2</sup>

The image is recalled when Orin, after he has killed Brant, says:

Do you remember me telling you how the faces of the men I killed came back and changed to Father's face and finally became my own? He looks like me, too! Maybe I've committed suicide!<sup>3</sup>

Orin does, of course, commit suicide later in the play and this earlier reference to his own death and its close connection in this passage with the Mannon killings and facial resemblances strongly suggests an inescapable family destiny. This family destiny is even more firmly stressed where O'Neill gives facial embodiment to Lavinia's furies. He relates them to

1. Homecoming, I, M.B.E., p. 9.
2. The Hunted, III, M.B.E., p. 95.
3. Ibid., IV, p. 115.



the Mannon family portraits which "have the same mask quality of those of the living characters in the play".<sup>1</sup> Their lowering expressions reflect the growing enormity of Lavinia's crimes. After she has brought about Brant's murder and Christine's suicide, "the eyes of the Mannon portraits stare with a grim forbiddingness".<sup>2</sup> When she goads her brother to commit suicide, the eyes of the portraits fix "accusingly on her". The contrast of impassive and contorted facial expression, the verbal references to faces and masks and the visual imagery of the Mannon portraits make an insidious but irresistible impact on us, compelling us to acknowledge and accept the "sense of fate" that pervades the play. I am certain that, because of their subtlety and flexibility, these devices are far more effective than conventional masks could ever be.

O'Neill felt, however, that the play would have been more effective if he had used masks. He wrote:

...I should like to see Mourning Becomes Electra done entirely with masks, now that I can view it solely as a psychological play,

---

1. The Hunted, II, M.B.E., p. 79.
2. The Haunted, I. ii, M.B.E., p. 139.

quite removed from the confusing preoccupations the Classical derivation of its plot once caused me. Masks would emphasize the drama of the life and death impulses that drive the characters on to their fates and put more in its proper secondary place, as a frame, the story of the New England family.<sup>1</sup>

He chose the Oresteia as a model in order to "achieve a modern psychological approximation of the Greek sense of fate"<sup>2</sup> and he hoped that the "Electra story, with its complex human inter-relationships and its chain of fated crime and retribution" would be suitable "in its scope and in its implications to this purpose".<sup>3</sup> The link is very prominent: both plays are trilogies, are similar in outline of plot and contain the idea "that there is something in the dead that we cannot placate falsely".<sup>4</sup> O'Neill encouraged comparisons by incorporating the word, "Electra", in his title, by using the names of the Greek play's characters to explain his plot in his "Working Notes" and by challenging as unethical the "weakness"

- 
1. Eugene O'Neill, "Second Thoughts" O. Cargill, p. 120.
  2. Arthur H. Quinn, A History of the American Drama, Vol. II, 1937, p. 254.
  3. Ibid., Vol. II, p. 255.
  4. Stark Young, "Eugene O'Neill's New Play," J. Gassner, p. 84.

of the Greeks in allowing Electra to escape the furies. The sense of connection between the two plays has been heightened by the recent practice in America and England of playing the Oresteia and Mourning Becomes Electra as consecutive productions. As a result, the relationship between the plays has seemed to become more important to audiences than the psychological conceptions O'Neill was trying to convey. He chose to write about a New England family because "it gave him the opportunity to draw...the hardness and repression of one kind of New England character"<sup>1</sup> that would best illustrate the destructive effects of puritanism on the individual. But the violent incidents of the family tragedy have so occupied the attention of audiences, that the under-surface subtleties have often been overlooked. Even experienced critics have judged the play on its surface incidents. John Mason Brown called it "an experiment in sheer, shuddering, straightforward story-telling" and John Hutchens described it as a "horrific murder story".

---

1. A.H. Quinn, p. 255.

It was natural that O'Neill should turn to masks as a way of overcoming the unwelcome prominence of these secondary elements, because he never lost the conviction that they convey most effectively the "fate that is in each one of us" and the duality of personality that life forces us to adopt. His weakness is that he invariably overdoes the device and we recall the clumsy use of masks in The Great God Brown where they are "a thorn" in our imagination and their proliferation in Lazarus Laughed where they almost overwhelm the play. He might well have overdone the use of the device in Mourning Becomes Electra because he had already conveyed the idea of psychical masking through heavy make up, facial imagery in the dialogue and the facial embodiment of the furies in the Mannon portraits. There is a risk too that with the introduction of masks his characters might have lost authenticity. He has provided this authenticity in the way he has revealed the opposed qualities and mixed motives of his characters. Lavinia has strength of purpose and nerves of steel, but she is weak when she allows herself to fall in love with her mother's lover and when she tries to marry Peter Miles to escape



her furies. We see too that her hatred for Christine is only as intense as her repressed love for her. Christine is ruthless in destroying her husband, but she is irresolute in dealing with Lavinia. She hates Ezra, but she loves a man who looks like him. Ezra Mannon is a proud and sensitive man whose rigorous religious upbringing has denied him natural expression of his sincere affection for his wife and who appeals to our sympathy as an undeserving victim of evil. Such characters have distinctive personalities which defy the use of masks or at least the kind of masks we find in O'Neill which would make them less credible and remote. Remoteness is not necessarily the effect of masking as we can see in Greek drama and in the Noh plays where we do respond to the masked characters as living human beings. But O'Neill's masked characters become either depersonalized abstractions like the Choruses of Lazarus Laughed or puppets like the stokers and churchgoers of The Hairy Ape or psychological caricatures like Dion Antony and Billy Brown of The Great God Brown and Loving of Days Without End. It is true to say that, as we

reflect on Mourning Becomes Electra, the Greek connotations and the sensational events of the plot recede in our minds, leaving us with a consciousness of powerful forces that dominate human beings. It seems, therefore, that O'Neill effectively conveys the "drama of life and death impulses" by an admirable artistic stealth. It would be clumsy to labour it by the introduction of masks.

## CHAPTER 11

### A POET OF THE THEATRE

O'Neill once said, "...where I feel myself most neglected is just where I set most store by myself--as a bit of a poet, who has labored with the spoken word to evolve original rhythms of beauty where beauty apparently isn't".<sup>1</sup> When he wrote this, he was replying to those critics who felt that his dialogue spoilt his plays. They had not spared him. The producer, Eric Bentley, said, "His sense of theatrical form is frustrated by an eloquence that decays into mere repetitious

---

1. A.H. Quinn, p. 199.

garrulousness";<sup>1</sup> the actor, Paul Crabtree, remarked that, in The Iceman Cometh, O'Neill "made the same point eighteen times";<sup>2</sup> the critic, Edmund Wilson, complained that the characters of the plays "say the same things to one another over and over again and never succeed in saying them any more effectively than the first time";<sup>3</sup> and his biographer, Croswell Bowen, said that "often the rehearsals of an O'Neill play would degenerate into a series of running battles between the playwright and the producer, the director and the actors"<sup>4</sup> mainly because of the verboseness of the dialogue.

There were, of course, some critics on O'Neill's side and these claimed that he was a poet. Richard Dana Skinner called him "The Poet of the Individual" and the canon of his plays "A Poet's Quest";<sup>5</sup> Gilbert Gabriel said, "O'Neill is a poet and wants a poet's

- 
1. E. Bentley, "Trying to Like O'Neill," O. Cargill, p. 337.
  2. C. Bowen, p. 308.
  3. E. Wilson, "Eugene O'Neill as a Prose Writer," O. Cargill, p. 464.
  4. C. Bowen, p. 309.
  5. R.D. Skinner, p. 1.



neat satisfaction from his plays";<sup>1</sup> Andrew Malone claimed that O'Neill's "speeches are fully flavored as a nut or an apple, and they have the poetry of human endeavor and human suffering"<sup>2</sup> and Robert Brustein said, "In the lilting speech of predominantly Irish-Catholic characters, O'Neill finally discovers a language congenial to him, and he even begins to create a music very much like Synge's".<sup>3</sup> Not all O'Neill's supporters are talking about language, however. Malone and Brustein certainly are, but Skinner is referring to O'Neill's insight "of the individual soul, torn and warped"<sup>4</sup> and Gabriel is speaking of O'Neill's liking for structural symmetry. It was Cocteau who suggested that the "poetic" in drama could be independent of verse and that the term could describe a synthesis of all the elements of theatre. This synthesis he would call "poetry of theatre" as opposed to "poetry in the theatre" which

- 
1. G.W. Gabriel, "The Great God Brown," a review of the play, O. Cargill, p. 176.
  2. A.E. Malone, "Eugene O'Neill's Limitations," O. Cargill, p. 264.
  3. R. Brustein, p. 358.
  4. R.D. Skinner, p. 9.

might be applied exclusively to verse drama.

From this it would follow that we might meet in the theatre at least two kinds of poet: the one who comes, as Eliot did, as a writer of poetic drama and the other who, in his deployment of theatrical media, creates plays whose total impression has an unmistakeable poetic quality.

There is no doubt that O'Neill would have liked to be a writer of poetic drama, but he was not helped by current attitudes towards poetic personality. He became popular "when America was just beginning to relinquish its philistinism in order to genuflect before the shrine of Culture",<sup>1</sup> a dangerous moment, because at that time the attention of America's cultured society was directed "towards the outsides of the literature, which is to say towards the personality of the artist rather than the content of his art".<sup>2</sup> O'Neill was a handsome man and, with his "tall, spare figure", "mustache and...wry, sardonic smile crossing

---

1. R. Brustein, p. 321.

2. Ibid., pp. 321-322.

his lean, lantern-jawed, ascetic features",<sup>1</sup> conformed to the popular idea of what a poet should look like. He had a strong personality and seemed to overawe those who met him. Croswell Bowen describes the "hush" that "descended over the entire group" when O'Neill entered a room and says, "I felt that his glowing eyes took in the entire hallway and everyone in it....Again I felt the strange, almost religious mood which enveloped O'Neill and those around him".<sup>2</sup> He was also rather unlucky in being the first major figure in American drama, eagerly proclaimed by "a large body of hungry critics and cultural consumers" who saw him as "a homegrown dramatic champion to be enlisted not only against Ibsen, Strindberg, and Shaw, but against Aeschylus, Euripides, and Shakespeare as well".<sup>3</sup> Obviously, he *i/* would have to be strong-minded to resist these pressures.

O'Neill was unfortunately his own most ardent admirer. Doris Alexander says that "he could rarely

- 
1. C. Bowen, Preface, p. vii.
  2. Ibid., p. vii.
  3. R. Brustein, p. 322.

resist watching his darkly handsome young face in the mirror",<sup>1</sup> an observation confirmed by Agnes Boulton, his second wife, who recalls that, once having left him alone in a room, she returned to find him "laughing and gazing at himself in the mirror over the mantel".<sup>2</sup> O'Neill's vanity was injurious because it made him draw attention to himself by stagy pretences. Sometimes, when with his friends, "he would suddenly burst into poetry, the 'Ballad of Reading Gaol', for instance, intoning with all the intensity of personal experience, 'Yet each man kills the thing he loves', or Byron's Childe Harold, 'I have not loved the world, nor the world me'".<sup>3</sup> Once, at a party, feeling himself slighted, he jumped on a chair which he had pulled under a clock on the wall and "chanted to the hushed crowd, 'Turn back the universe, / And give me yesterday'",<sup>4</sup> and then he turned back the fingers of the clock. These performances were greeted with deferential

---

1. D. Alexander, p. 122.

2. C. Leech, p. 5.

3. D. Alexander, p. 89.

4. Ibid., p. 253.

approval by his friends whom John Weaver has described as "sycophants, his Village yes men", whose "frightful adulation" was more than any "human could withstand".<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps not surprizing that he could not bear an adverse criticism of his work. One of his most loyal friends, George John Nathan, tells us that, when he made unfavourable remarks about Welded, O'Neill walked away and did not speak to him again for two months. The same thing happened when Nathan said that he did not care for Lazarus Laughed, except that this time O'Neill's displeasure lasted for three months. When Dynamo was universally condemned, O'Neill concluded that "all the critics were dolts". Clearly, he was at a disadvantage, and his best hope lay in what ought to have been a chastening reading of other poets' works.

O'Neill's taste in poetry appears to have been mainly for nineteenth century Romantics. Although "he had great parts of the Rubáiyát by heart, and often quoted from it"<sup>2</sup> and although the poem is cited in Ah, Wilderness!

---

1. C. Bowen, p. 161.

2. D. Alexander, pp. 89-90.



(1932) as being "the best of all", O'Neill was most powerfully influenced by Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven" which he read with "a tremendous shock of recognition" and whose final lines gave "ecstatic voice to Eugene's own deepest perception of the wild years of revolt".<sup>1</sup> The stage instructions for Act One of the autobiographical Long Day's Journey Into Night (1941) call for a bookcase "containing...poetry by Swinburne, Rossetti, Wilde, Ernest Dowson, Kipling, etc."<sup>2</sup> and, in the course of the play, Edmund (O'Neill himself) and Jamie (O'Neill's brother, James) quote lines from Symons' translation of Baudelaire's "Epilogue";<sup>3</sup> Ernest Dowson's "Cynara";<sup>4</sup> Wilde's "The Harlot's House";<sup>5</sup> Kipling's "Sestina of the Tramp-Royal",<sup>6</sup> and Swinburne's "A Leave-taking".<sup>7</sup> O'Neill's courtship of Agnes Boulton was sprinkled with many poetry recitals, and he often made "love to her with the words of Ernest Dowson,

- 
1. D. Alexander, p. 176.
  2. L.D.J.I.N., I, p. 11.
  3. Ibid., IV, pp. 133-134.
  4. Ibid., IV, p. 134.
  5. Ibid., IV, p. 159.
  6. Ibid., IV, p. 161.
  7. Ibid., IV, p. 173.

Byron and Shelley".<sup>1</sup>

It appears that O'Neill was introduced to these writers by his elder brother, James, who saw in their works a rationale for his own decadent behaviour, but there are affinities between some of these poets and O'Neill himself. A hostility to authoritative religion, a dislike of puritanism, and a leaning towards pantheism to be seen in Swinburne are present in The Fountain, Mourning Becomes Electra and Lazarus Laughed. A pride, self-pity and bitterness like that of Wilde recur throughout his work. Like Shelley and Byron, he resented his childhood miseries, like Swinburne and Kipling, he loved the sea, but above all, he saw in Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray a delineation of his own duality of mind and resultant suffering. Dr. Alexander tells us that "reading the book alone in his rooms, Eugene saw his whole youthful torment rendered meaningful. The hunger for experience, the debauchery, the sick guilt and longing for lost purity,

---

1. C. Bowen, p. 96.

and yet, triumphant over all, the further riotous search for sensation".<sup>1</sup> Some of these writers attempted drama, but none was successful as a poet in the theatre. The dialogue of Swinburne's plays is excessively lyrical; Wilde's The Duchess of Padua (1891) and Salome (1893) are deficient both poetically and dramatically, and even Byron's plays are written in poetry more suitable for the salon than the theatre. There is no evidence that O'Neill read any of these writers' plays. His interest in them seemed to be their attitude to life which he thought resembled his own and their poetry which he admired. Whatever their value to him in these directions, it is unlikely that they would help him to become a good poetic dramatist of the twentieth century. They would be more likely to confirm the vitiating influences he was already under.

It is a pity that these influences made O'Neill so impenetrable, because he badly needed guidance. There seems to be no doubt that he did not understand

---

1. D. Alexander, p. 103.

the problems of becoming a poet in the theatre. He seemed, for example, to sense that blank verse might not do in twentieth century drama, but his solution in The Fountain (1922) was to use it and "to disguise the metre by having the manuscript typed in prose form".<sup>1</sup> We can perhaps forgive O'Neill for believing that, to write poetic drama, he must fall back on Shakespeare's form of verse. Several before him, including Dryden, Browning and Tennyson, had made the same mistake, and David Jones has said that, in this respect, "Shakespeare is the worst thing that has happened to English drama".<sup>2</sup> The fascination continued into the twentieth century, and Yeats saw that, "if our modern poetical drama has failed, it is mainly because, always dominated by the example of Shakespeare, it would restore an irrevocable past".<sup>3</sup> T.S. Eliot felt that we "must find a new form of verse which shall be as satisfactory a vehicle for us as blank verse was for

1. A & B. Gelb, p. 468.
2. David E. Jones, The Plays of T.S. Eliot, 1961, p. 24.
3. W.B. Yeats, "Notes" on "At the Hawk's Well," The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats, ed. Russell K. Alspach, 1966, p. 417.

the Elizabethans",<sup>1</sup> and went on to suggest that the modern poetic dramatist would have to learn to write dialogue with rhythms close to those of everyday speech. Martin Browne has told us how Eliot managed to do this in his own plays.

Eliot has broken this "blank verse" tradition of syllables by going at once back and forward. He has gone back to the basis established by the mediaeval poets, of a fixed number of stresses in the line without any fixed number of syllables. He has gone forward to meet the development of prose-rhythms by the inclusion of a very long, sweepingly rhythmic line having six or eight stresses, but still a part of the verse-structure.<sup>2</sup>

In this way, Eliot wrote a verse form "capable of including every kind of contemporary speech, from the banal conversation of a drawing-room at tea-time to the revelations of the heart's depth and the terror of eternal things".<sup>3</sup> It was, too, a dialogue that imposed its discipline "naturally on a sensitive actor", being "both eminently speakable and also the instrument of complete precision in the expression of feeling".<sup>4</sup>

- 
1. T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays, 1953, p. 57.
  2. E. Martin Browne, "The Dramatic Verse of T.S. Eliot," T.S. Eliot, 1948, ed. Richard Marsh and Tambimuttu, p. 198.
  3. Ibid., p. 203.
  4. Raymond Williams, Drama from Ibsen to Eliot, 1952, p. 240.



Of course, Eliot was so successful in reproducing everyday rhythms of speech in his dialogue that many people did not recognize it as poetry at all. This, too, was part of his intention. He "systematically eliminated everything in his style that might remind the audience that they..." were "...listening to poetry" as a "special organization of language in order that they might respond to it as a special mode of awareness".<sup>1</sup> This was in contrast to O'Neill who felt that to be aware of poetic language would help an audience to accept a profound theme. There is not much to suggest that O'Neill thought long and hard about this matter. In fact, his approach to most of his dramatic work was intuitive. He once said to Kenneth Macgowan, "I always let the subject matter mould itself into its own particular form and I find it does this without my ever wasting thought upon it.... I usually feel instinctively a sort of rhythm of acts or scenes and obey it hit or miss".<sup>2</sup>

---

1. D.E. Jones, p. 126.

2. A & B. Gelb, p. 469.

This reliance on his instinct was his downfall in those plays where he used lyrical dialogue. The worst example is to be found in The Fountain. As he is writing about the nobility of fifteenth century Spain, O'Neill felt that he ought to write a stately and flowery dialogue "to gain a naturalistic effect of the quality of the people and speech of those times..."<sup>1</sup>. He may have been influenced here by the commercial theatre of his father where it was conventional (and often disastrous) for characters in historical plays to use a style removed from the everyday. Shaw, Drinkwater, Eliot, Arden and Osborne have all combined historical material and everyday speech without loss of authenticity, and the use of modern English makes historical characters more and not less acceptable to present-day audiences.

In The Fountain, O'Neill's dialogue draws an undesirable attention to itself in spite of his typist's efforts. In the first place, it is unreal and hinders our acceptance of the characters. It does not sufficiently

---

1. A & B. Gelb, p. 470.

distinguish the characters. There is, in Scene One, a series of exchanges between Juan Ponce de Leon, who "gives the impression of disciplined ability, of a confident self mastery--",<sup>1</sup> and Maria de Cordova, a woman of about forty on whose face "discontent and sorrow have marked her age".<sup>2</sup> These are sharply contrasted personalities, yet throughout their dialogue, we hear one voice instead of two. The scene is too long to quote in full but, even at the crisis of the argument, the tone and phrasing of Juan's language are almost indistinguishable from those of Maria.

Juan says:

What you call loves--they were merely moods--dreams of a night or two--lustful adventures--gestures of vanity, perhaps--but I have never loved. Spain is the mistress to whom I give my heart, Spain,<sup>3</sup> and my own ambitions, which are Spain's<sup>3</sup>

Maria replies:

I have loved you, Juan, for years. But it was only in the last year when my heart, feeling youth die, grew desperate that I dared let you see. And now, farewell, until God's will be done in death. We must not meet again.<sup>4</sup>

---

1. The F., I, p. 377.

2. Ibid., I, p. 379.

3. Ibid., I, p. 381.

4. Ibid., I, p. 381.

The two passages have the same sentimentality, romantic posturing and vapid vocabulary. The woman who feels "youth die"; the stale images such as "Spain is the mistress to whom I give my heart", and wordy euphemisms such as "until God's will be done in death" are the hack usage of the melodramatic stage. They are not the language of a man of disciplined ability or a married woman of forty who has suffered discontent and sorrow. Dialogue like this at a moment of tension in the play is embarrassing and prevents us from accepting the characters as real people. O'Neill makes a similar mistake when he feels that the occasion calls for grandeur. Columbus speaks passionately of himself as God's agent:

Is it for myself I desire wealth?  
 No! But as a chosen instrument of God,  
 Who led me to His Indies, I need the power  
 that wealth can give....I have a dream....  
 From my earliest youth I have hated the  
 infidel. I fought on the ships of Genoa  
 against their corsairs and as I saw my  
 city's commerce with the East cut off by  
 their ruthlessness I prayed for one  
 glorious last Crusade....<sup>1</sup>

But his speech has little to differentiate it from Juan's

---

1. The F., II, p. 394.

when he subdues a rebellious mob:

Will you rebel against the Governor  
of your King? Then you are traitors to  
Spain! And, by God's blood, I will hang  
one of you on every tree!...I am Spain's  
soldier, not the Inquisition's! Soldiers  
and sailors! I tell you it is in Spain's  
service this Indian's life is spared.<sup>1</sup>

These passages have a similar pattern of rhetorical question, reply and ringing affirmative statements. Each has unrestrained vehemence; trite imagery such as "infidel", "wealth", "chosen instrument", "Spain's soldier", "glorious...Crusade", "spared", "earliest youth", and pedestrian prose wrenched out of its normal word order to give the effect of poetry. These men are not of the same breeding, generation, temperament or even nationality, but the emotions and expression are similarly, but unintentionally, shallow and false.

These are not, however, the play's worst blemishes. The dialogue has too many commonplace phrases that enervate the reader, such as "dreams of a night", "gestures of vanity", "that pure love of God", "the dreams drop from them like a worn-out robe", "a plea for justice" and so on. There are long laboured

---

1. The F., VI, pp. 424-425.



sentences such as "Now they revere him no longer as a daring general who will lead them to glory but despise him for a dissembler, delaying because he has lost the courage for action!"<sup>1</sup> and "Blessed be Allah who exalteth and debaseth the kings of the earth, according to his divine will in whose fulfillment consists eternal justice"<sup>2</sup> which say too much and lose their unity. The play is riddled with stock clichés of nineteenth century stage dialogue such as "The devil take all women!",<sup>3</sup> "The devil seize your flower!",<sup>4</sup> "The devil seize him!",<sup>5</sup> and "These dogs will not pay their taxes",<sup>6</sup> "Dog! Go and keep guard above",<sup>7</sup> and "Answer me, dog!".<sup>8</sup> There are turgid phrases such as "Promise me one boon",<sup>9</sup> "a low-born braggart!",<sup>10</sup> "oh, so brave a tale!"<sup>11</sup> and "Bah! Life is nobler than

- 
1. The F., IV, p. 411.
  2. Ibid., I, p. 378.
  3. Ibid., I, p. 382.
  4. Ibid., I, p. 384.
  5. Ibid., II, p. 393.
  6. Ibid., III, p. 399.
  7. Ibid., V, p. 414.
  8. Ibid., V, p. 415.
  9. Ibid., VI, p. 419.
  10. Ibid., II, p. 391.
  11. Ibid., XI, p. 447.

the weak lies of poets...".<sup>1</sup> There are passages of rhodomontade as, for example, when Juan, facing a mob of soldiers says;

I will kill the man who touches this Indian! (He walks up and down before them, his sword ready to thrust, looking from eye to eye--scathingly) Scoundrels! Where is your valor now? Prick up your courage! (Mockingly) Come! Who wishes to die?<sup>2</sup>

It is clear that what O'Neill thought was poetic drama was, in fact, romantic melodrama of the nineteenth century stage, and poetic dialogue the rhetoric of plays like The Count of Monte Cristo. O'Neill's other lyrical plays, Marco Millions (1925) and Lazarus Laughed (1926), avoid some of The Fountain's excesses partly because, in these plays, the romantic element is not so prominent, but even they contain long stretches of turgidity and bombast. Eventually, O'Neill himself recognized that he was not a lyrical poet. In Long Day's Journey Into Night (1941), he says of himself in Edmund Tyrone's words;

The makings of a poet. No, I'm afraid I'm like the guy who is always panhandling for a smoke. He hasn't even got the makings. He's got only the habit....That's the best I'll ever do.<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. The F., I, p. 379.
  2. Ibid., VI, p. 424.
  3. Long Day's Journey Into Night, IV, Cape, 1966, p. 135.

But it was not the best he would ever do. O'Neill had a talent for language, but it was not the kind he tried to write in his lyrical plays. The language of the theatre "differs in kind from the poetry of the literary salon, the quarterlies, and the proverbial slender volumes",<sup>1</sup> and the main difference is that, in the theatre, language is not an end in itself. Its function is subordinate and it works indirectly, conveying the writer's meaning through his characters. If for some reason it draws an unwarranted attention to itself, the play suffers. This is what happens in O'Neill's lyrical plays. He is more concerned with being a poet than a dramatist and, because he "hasn't got the makings", the language gets in the way. But when he writes about people who truly interest him, unsophisticated characters trapped by their own passions, he becomes absorbed in them and the language takes care of itself. He has, too, an aptitude for mimicry and effectively reproduces American slang and dialects. He can use vernacular

---

1. A.S. Downer, "Eugene O'Neill as Poet of the Theatre," O. Cargill, pp. 468-469.

with great skill to reveal a character's temperament, his inner motivations and the influences playing on him. The dialogue of Desire Under the Elms (1924), for example, contrasts the individuality of the two main characters, Abbie Putnam and Ephraim Cabot and the warring elements they represent. Abbie, the agent of maternity, in her dialogue makes frequent use of nature images such as "the earth", "nature", "a tree" and "them elums" and, in one passage, unselfconsciously combines them with an intense though indirect reference to the sexual act:

Hain't the sun strong an' hot? Ye  
kin feel it burnin' into the earth--Nature--  
makin' thin's grow--bigger 'n' bigger--  
burnin' inside ye--makin' ye want t' grow--  
into somethin' else--till ye're jined with  
it--an' it's your'n--but it owns ye, too--  
an' makes ye grow bigger--like a tree--  
like them elums--<sup>1</sup>

By using the simplest words, she calls up an intense seductiveness with pictorial description as in "Look at yer eyes! They's lust fur me in 'em, burnin' 'em up! Look at yer lips now! They're tremblin' an'

---

1. D.U.E., II. i, p. 229.

longin' t' kiss me, an' yer teeth t' bite!"<sup>1</sup> and reminders of bodily contact as in "an' yew was goin' away--far off whar I'd never see ye agen, never kiss ye, never feel ye pressed agin me agen--".<sup>2</sup> These images stamp her as the embodiment of fecundity. Ephraim, on the other hand, personifies an arid paternity, and the inhibited quality of his mind is illustrated when he says, "They's no peace in houses, they's no rest livin' with folks. Somethin's always livin' with ye".<sup>3</sup> There is a telling poignancy, too, in this almost casual remark which reveals, in his rejection of "folks", the extent of Ephraim's depravity. O'Neill knows that most of us, even if we have set religion aside, retain a built-in dislike of blasphemy, and he ironically provokes our distaste for Ephraim by phrasing his viciousness in biblical metaphor. Ephraim describes his selfish possessiveness as being "bitter 'n' wormwood", his loneliness as "the voice o' God cryin'

---

1. D.U.E., II. ii, p. 240.

2. Ibid., III. iii, p. 261.

3. Ibid., III. i, p. 253.



in my wilderness"<sup>1</sup> and his lechery as a "ridin' out t' learn God's message".<sup>2</sup> He leaves his farm "singin' a hymn" to find a whore. O'Neill achieves an even greater irony when he borrows words from the Song of Solomon for Ephraim to express his lust for Abbie. There is a scornful contempt for religion in the way he scarcely bothers to disguise the borrowings and "yer lips air like scarlet" is plainly derived from "Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet";<sup>3</sup> "yer two breasts air like two fawns" from "Thy two breasts are like two young roes";<sup>4</sup> "yer navel be like a round goblet" from "Thy navel is like a round goblet"<sup>5</sup> and "yer belly be like a heap o' wheat" from "thy belly is like a heap of wheat".<sup>6</sup> This language is entirely suitable to Ephraim, and suggests simultaneously his strict religious upbringing

---

1. D.U.E., II. ii, p. 238.

2. Ibid., I. ii, p. 210.

3. Song of Solomon, IV. 13.

4. Ibid., IV. 5.

5. Ibid., VII. 2.

6. Ibid., VII. 2.

and the satyr-like lust that O'Neill believed was close to the surface in a puritan.

O'Neill also draws effectively on religious imagery when, in The Emperor Jones (1920), he blends it with negro colloquialisms to express Jones's abjectness:

Lawd Jesus, heah my prayer! I'se  
a po' sinner, a po' sinner! I knows  
I done wrong, I knows it! When I  
cotches Jeff cheatin' wid loaded dice  
my anger overcomes me and I kills him  
dead! Lawd, I done wrong! When dat  
guard hits me wid de whip, my anger  
overcomes me, and I kills him dead.  
Lawd, I done wrong!<sup>1</sup>

Here, again, we have an example of O'Neill's ability to create a character's image in depth. The language has the superficial speaking habits of the American negro such as "Lawd", "po' sinner" and "cotches" and the uneducated negro's habit of pronouncing "th" as "d" in "dat", "de" and "wid". There is, too, a discernable jazz rhythm in the twice repeated "my anger overcomes me and I kills him dead". There is, in addition, an underlying confirmation of Jones's race

---

1. E.J., V, p. 196.

in his tendency to fall back hastily on the elements of his religious teaching when he is frightened and in the way he stands outside himself to condemn his own sin in "I done wrong", in his shuddering confession "I'se a po' sinner!" and in his abject appeal to a divine rescuer in "Lawd Jesus, heah my prayer". This complete submission to a fear of the supernatural seems to be more prominent in negroes than in any other racial group, and O'Neill here insinuates through the individual the atavistic dilemma of the whole race.

There is an even better example of O'Neill's skill in suggesting a character's formative influences in All God's Chillun Got Wings (1923) where, in one passage, he interweaves legal phrases, biblical imagery and a series of topsyturvy ideas to illustrate a negro's mental chaos and despair. When Jim Harris is asked by his white wife whether or not he has passed his law examinations, he replies:

Pass? Me? Jim Crow Harris?  
Nigger Jim Harris--become a full-fledged  
Member of the Bar! Why the mere notion  
of it is enough to kill you with laughing!  
It'd be against all natural laws, all  
human right and justice. It'd be

miraculous, there'd be earthquakes and catastrophes, the seven Plagues'd come again and locusts'd devour all the money in the banks, the second Flood'd come roaring and Noah'd fall overboard, the sun'd drop out of the sky like a ripe fig, and the Devil'd perform miracles, and God'd be tipped head first right out of the Judgment seat!<sup>1</sup>

The use of "Member of the Bar", "laws", "human right" and "justice" reflect Jim's legal training, but the references to miracles, "catastrophes", "the seven Plagues", "the second Flood" and Noah are a typical negro reversion to the imagery and terms of his childhood lore to express his extremity. There is an added authenticity in the pictorial quality of "the second Flood'd come roaring", "the sun'd drop out of the sky like a ripe fig", "God'd be tipped head first right out of the Judgment seat"; in the hint of black magic in "the Devil'd perform miracles" and in the subconscious acknowledgement of inferiority in "Nigger Jim Harris--become a full-fledged Member of the Bar! Why the mere notion of it is enough to kill you with laughing".

---

1. A.G.C.G.W., II. iii, pp. 339-340.

O'Neill, however, seems to be at his most effective when he expresses the thoughts and emotions of characters who use words as clumsy tools and there are some interesting examples of this in The Hairy Ape (1921). Allardyce Nicoll has said of the language of this play that it "is nothing but a series of staccato phrases and sentences freely bespattered with exclamation marks" and that "we certainly gain nothing from listening to such dialogue twice".<sup>1</sup> It has to be remembered, however, that Yank is a specimen of "Neanderthal Man". He is primitive; his experience of life is narrow; his language is elementary and, therefore, his resources of imagery and vocabulary are limited. O'Neill is not defeated by these conditions: he exploits them. He shews that when Yank meets people and problems outside his previous experience, not only is he baffled but also his linguistic inadequacy is an added frustration. We see this as he struggles to express his problems in

---

1. A. Nicoll, World Drama, 1951, p. 886.



the crude slang of the stokehold:

Dis ting's in your inside, but  
it ain't your belly. Feedin' your  
face--sinkers and coffee--dat don't  
touch it. It's way down--at de  
bottom. Yuh can't grab it, and yuh  
can't stop it. It moves, and  
everything moves. It stops and de  
whole woild stops. Dat's me now--  
I don't tick, see?--I'm a busted  
Ingersoll, dat's what.<sup>1</sup>

Because they are inadequate, the phrases fail as O'Neill intended them to fail. In this way, they contribute to our picture of Yank as a man isolated and lost, and his vague, groping sentences such as "I can't see--it's all dark, get me?"<sup>2</sup> with its anxious hope that he is understood, stirs our pity. O'Neill is also clever in using Yank's remarks to shew us his unfavourable background. When a drunk begins to sing of "home", Yank turns on him with "What d'yuh want wit home?" and "Home was lickin's for me".<sup>3</sup> This is recalled later in the play when Yank describes the eventful Saturday nights of his boyhood when his parents would return home to fight "a bout oughter been

- 
1. H.A., VII, p. 250.
  2. Ibid., VII, p. 250.
  3. Ibid., I, p. 211.

staged at de Garden". Sometimes, when they were tired of fighting each other, they would beat him, and O'Neill adds a masterly touch as Yank, with a curious pride, says, "Dat was where I loined to take punishment".<sup>1</sup>

There is an added authenticity when O'Neill shews that when Yank is expressing familiar emotions he is perfectly articulate. He can express his derision of evangelism in an effective compression of images in "Git a soapbox. Hire a hall! Come and be saved, huh? Jerk us to Jesus, huh?".<sup>2</sup> He can convey his natural exuberance and sense of physical power in "I'm de ting in noise dat makes yuh hear it; I'm smoke and express trains and steamers and factory whistles"<sup>3</sup> where he finds familiar symbols of mechanical power to express his own energy. There are times, too, when his words rush out in a torrent of foul blasphemy. At these times, there is no doubt that the language is pungent and vivid. O'Neill has mastered the technique

---

1. H.A., V, p. 234.

2. Ibid., I, p. 212.

3. Ibid., I, p. 216.

of the expletive in "Come outa dere, yuh yellow, brass-buttoned, Belfast bum, yuh!"; "Yuh lousy, stinkin', yellow mut of a Catholic-moiderin' bastard!" and "I'll cut yer guts out for a nickel, yuh lousy boob, yuh dirty, crummy, muck~~e~~atin' son of a --".<sup>1</sup>

No one would claim that the language is elegant, but it is arresting. It is not likely that, during this roar of wrath, the audience's attention would be anywhere but on the stage. Still, we are a long way from lyrical poetry and some distance from beautiful language of any sort. O'Neill, of course, did not intend, in some of his plays, to write dialogue that we would call beautiful. He once said, "I don't love life because it is pretty. Prettiness is only clothes-deep.... There is beauty to me even in its ugliness".<sup>2</sup> This is in the same vein as his remark about creating "original rhythms of beauty where beauty apparently isn't". It could be argued, however, that, in some of the examples quoted, O'Neill has given his images such force that they acquire a kind of poetic power.

---

1. H.A., III, p. 225.

2. A & B. Gelb, p. 3.

O'Neill certainly can use language effectively in his plays. He can write dialogue that is appropriate to his characters, that illustrates their fears, problems and the shadowy forces that work about them. He can also use language in other ways. Through dialogue, he indirectly draws attention to the symbolic function of characters. In The Great God Brown, Margaret unconsciously repeats Dion's mother's references to the moon, the symbol of maternity; speaks of her future husband as "my own Dion--my little boy--my baby",<sup>1</sup> and holds rapt communion with the moon and moonlight, thereby stressing her function as "the Eternal Mother". In Desire Under the Elms, the rustic conversation of Simeon and Peter Cabot, interlarded with remarks on "cows", "calves", "hosses", and "chickens"; their description of their father's "old snake's eyes" and "mule's grin" and their wish to be liked by the farm livestock, points to their animal affinities. O'Neill also uses language to remind us of a play's tragic overtones. In Mourning Becomes Electra, we

---

1. G.G.B., Prologue, p. 264.

hear through side remarks that the Mannons were taught that "Life was a dying. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born";<sup>1</sup> that each "Sabbath" the family would meet at the "white sepulchre" to think about death, and that Ezra Mannon was "like a statue of an eminent dead man".<sup>2</sup> Through these images, we gradually become aware that the Mannons are struggling against a destiny that is death itself. Sometimes, too, O'Neill uses repetitive patterns of dialogue to stress themes as in Lazarus Laughed where Lazarus and the Choruses chant "There is no Death" throughout the play, and in Mourning Becomes Electra, where "the same scene...even in its exact words, but between different characters"<sup>3</sup> is repeated in order to convey the idea that the sins of the fathers are visited on their children. This is using language itself as a symbolic device and, when we add his other techniques such as his settings in All God's Chillun Got Wings and Welded; his masks in Lazarus Laughed and The Great God Brown; the action on more than one plane in Desire Under the Elms, and the use of myth in Mourning Becomes Electra

---

1. Homecoming, III, M.B.E., p. 54.

2. The Hunted, III, M.B.E., p. 94.

3. Eugene O'Neill, "Working Notes," European Theories of the Drama, p. 535.



and Marco Millions, we see that O'Neill is achieving "an effect of poetic language in the older drama".<sup>1</sup> We would seem, therefore, to have strong reason for believing that, whatever O'Neill's failings as a writer of poetry, he was undoubtedly, in the broader sense of the term, a poet of the theatre.

---

1. A.S. Downer, "Eugene O'Neill as Poet of the Theatre, " O. Cargill, p. 470.

#### Section Four

#### Conclusion

It is the purpose of this report to present a summary of the findings of the investigation conducted by the author during the period of the early planning to 1944 when the conflict is expressed in words of "The War and the Jungle". The period from 1941 to 1944 is the period which he denies the existence of

1. R.A. 2124 p. 271.

CHAPTER 12THE PERIOD 1932-1953: a concluding sketch.

It is especially difficult to divide O'Neill's work into "periods" because he uses diverse themes and techniques not only in successive plays but also in those he happens to be writing simultaneously. Critics have arranged his work into phases but as we might expect, have disagreed about the definition and evaluation of the stages. Edward Engel claims that O'Neill's "abiding theme" is a "struggle between life and death"<sup>1</sup> that has four stages: the period of the early plays up to 1921 where the conflict is expressed in terms of "The Sea and the Jungle", the period from 1921 to 1926 during which he denies the existence of

---

1. E.A. Engel, p. 297.

death, the period from 1926 to 1930 when the reality of death becomes depressingly evident to him, and the period from 1931 to 1939 when he tries to escape the "struggle" in a "Remembrance of Things Past". Richard Dana Skinner sees each of O'Neill's plays as "a chapter in the interior romance of a poet's imagination"<sup>1</sup> in which we can see "the exact measure of his interior or spiritual progress as a poet".<sup>2</sup> He distinguishes three major phases: "Turmoil" which includes the plays written up to 1923, "Regression" which spans 1923 to 1931 and "Emergence" which covers the remaining years of O'Neill's life.

I have based my divisions on the autobiographical elements that seem to dominate his work. O'Neill constantly draws self-portraits, describes members of his family and relates thinly disguised incidents from his own and his family's life. Sometimes he consciously reveals his ambivalent attitude to his parents and his brother; sometimes he subconsciously betrays it and sometimes he writes about his relationships with one or another of the

- 
1. R.D. Skinner, p. xi.
  2. Ibid., p. xiii.

women he loved. Curiously enough, he never writes about his own children and this omission increases the impression that he never outgrew an adolescent self-centredness. In his childhood, his parents and their Catholic faith had been his major formative influences, contributing powerfully to his sense of security and well-being, but when his parents sent him away to school, he experienced a great shock which became the source of his creative activity, though it also impaired his judgement, causing him to dramatize theatrically unsuitable themes and to employ clumsy techniques and devices. O'Neill was aware of his deficiencies, though not always of their causes and throughout his work we can see his efforts to solve his personal problems and overcome his weakness of technique. Looked at this way, his life has four phases. There is the period of his boyhood, adolescence and early manhood up to 1912 during which time he suffered the distressing experiences he wrote about later; his apprentice period from 1913 to 1920; the period of thematic and technical experiments from 1921 to 1931; and the period after 1931 when he overcame many of his old inhibitions and passed



to a new maturity. None of these periods can be considered in isolation and the last stage is important in a final evaluation of O'Neill's personal and artistic development. I should therefore like to conclude my study with a brief survey of the years from 1931 to 1953.

I want to look at O'Neill's themes as he continued them after 1931 to shew how they reflect his gradual acceptance of life, and to describe the effect that his changing attitude had on his technique. When Lavinia in Mourning Becomes Electra said, "I've got to punish myself!...I'll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out....",<sup>1</sup> she was unwittingly describing what O'Neill himself had been doing for the past twenty years as he tortured himself with alternating feelings of bitterness and guilt towards his parents. At the end of it, he had reached only "a bog...of life-sickness" and despair of which Mourning Becomes Electra is an expression. Yet in Mourning Becomes Electra, Lavinia says, "What

---

1. The Haunted, IV, M.B.E., p. 178.

we need most is to get back to simple normal things and begin a new life",<sup>1</sup> and this is an indication that "the curse is" to be "paid out" and that we can look to better things. The beginning of a "new life" is to be found in Days Without End (1933), though it is easy to mistake the nature of the change. Richard Dana Skinner tells us that during the time O'Neill was writing this play, Carlotta, his wife, was trying "very hard to bring about his definite return to the Catholic Church",<sup>2</sup> because she felt this would be his "one salvation". If Carlotta really thought that the Catholic Church alone was O'Neill's salvation, she was as wrong as those who believe that Days Without End represents no more than an apostate's return to the Catholic faith. It seems very unlikely that O'Neill was or ever could have been a convinced Catholic. I believe he was a Catholic because his parents were Catholic, that his rejection of Catholicism was simultaneous with his rejection of his father and that John Loving's submission to the Cross, in the last scene of Days Without End, is not so much a return to Catholicism

---

1. The Haunted, I. ii, M.B.E., p.140.

2. C. Bowen, p. 232.

as an act of filial reconciliation.

O'Neill has (unintentionally, I feel) obscured the real motive of the play by his remark that he got the idea for it from Goethe's Faust. He asked, "...is not the whole of Goethe's truth for our time just that Mephistopheles and Faust are one and the same--are Faust?"<sup>1</sup> and S.K. Winther, taking his cue from this remark, has called the play "a modern psychological interpretation of the medieval Catholic, a Faustian theme of a man with a damned soul, which he has given to the devil as he cursed and denied his God".<sup>2</sup> No doubt O'Neill's interpretation of Goethe's "truth" was behind his device of using two separate characters to indicate the duality of John Loving's mind, but I think that Winther carries the comparison too far. Faust's action of selling his soul is a positive one, arising from his aspiration to find happiness first through worldly pleasure, then through a vision of ideal loveliness and then through poetry. He eventually finds fulfilment through self-renunciation and thought for

- 
1. Eugene O'Neill, "Memoranda on Masks," O. Cargill, p.118.
  2. S.K. Winther, p. 286.

others. John Loving's action is negative. It involves no exchange: it is a gift of his soul to the devil made to spite a God he felt had betrayed him. He obtains fulfilment through personal reconciliation and a self-centred assurance of being loved. "Thou hast heard me at last! Thou hast not forsaken me! Thou hast always loved me! I am forgiven! I can forgive myself--".<sup>1</sup>

The theme of Days Without End is idolatry and O'Neill shews that the most pernicious form of idolatry can arise from the love that human beings feel for one another. O'Neill's love of his parents had been an idolatry and he describes it in John Loving's eulogy of filial devotion:

His father was a fine man. The boy adored him. And he adored his mother even more. She was a wonderful woman, a perfect type of our old beautiful ideal of wife and mother.<sup>2</sup>

John Loving identifies his parents with a God "of Infinite Love...a very human, lovable God Who became man for love of men and gave His life that they might be saved from themselves"<sup>3</sup> and he describes his boyhood

---

1. D.W.E., IV. ii, p. 565.

2. Ibid., I, p. 509.

3. Ibid., I, p. 510.

home as a heaven whose "atmosphere was one of love".<sup>1</sup> When his parents die, he is desolate. He continues his error by looking for other idols in rational philosophies and oriental religions, but they are too impersonal and do not comfort him in his "horror of death". He marries and his love for his wife becomes a second idolatry. When he realizes that his wife could die, leaving him desolate again, he becomes afraid and tries to destroy his love. Eventually he comes to the realization that "beyond the love for each other should be the love of God...".<sup>2</sup> This is the love that can "triumph over death". It is also the love that can put other loves in proper perspective. Most of all O'Neill needed to put in perspective the love he felt for his father. The fact that his father was at the forefront of his mind is shewn in the character of Father Baird, a powerful father-figure, guardian and confessor whose "physical characteristics, his relationship with John Loving, and his manner of speech persistently evoke James O'Neill".<sup>3</sup> O'Neill seems to

---

1. D.W.E., I, p. 510.

2. Ibid., I, p. 508.

3. A & B. Gelb, p. 764.



have come to see that even if his father had wronged him, he had exacted too heavy a revenge. This acceptance of reality leads to a fresh outlook and in Days Without End he introduces the new element of forgiveness. Lucy Hillman forgives her husband's infidelities and John forgives the death of his parents. Elsa, by recovering from her self-induced illness, forgives John and John receives forgiveness from the Cross. The play indicates other changes of attitude. Scepticism is seen to die with Loving, the desire to escape the harshness of life in "the warm dark womb of nothingness" is exposed as the teaching of the devil, and the pursuit of rational enquiry is shewn to be "absolutely meaningless".

There are accompanying changes in technique. The mask is used again, but this time it does not indicate an assumed persona protecting the animus from the outside world. It represents an older and baser self. In the earlier plays, the masks have eventually destroyed the souls they protected, but here it is the mask that dies. During the play, John relates the plot of a novel he is writing. What he is really describing are the causes of the events going on before our eyes and this commentary

gives depth to the action, the characters and their words. O'Neill was not happy about the ending of the play. His wife, Carlotta, said that he felt that "he had ruined the play and that he was a traitor to himself as a writer....the last act was a phony and he never forgave himself for it".<sup>1</sup> He intended to "rewrite the last scene of the play for the definitive edition of his works",<sup>2</sup> but never did. His main objection to the last scene was its implication that he re-embraced Catholicism. Perhaps, too, he saw that the scene gave an unintended weight to an unimportant aspect of his personal problem and obscured the real thesis.

Although O'Neill did not return to Catholicism, he did enjoy a temporary period of optimism. He said to George Jean Nathan;

Life has certainly changed for me and for the first time in God knows how long I feel as if it had something to give me as a living being quite outside of the life in my work...I feel as if I'd tapped a new life and could rush up all the reserves of energy in the world to back up my work.<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. A & B. Gelb, p. 764.
  2. Ibid., p. 764.
  3. E.A. Engel, p. 264.

This was an untypical cheerfulness, but it might have been caused by an apparent improvement in his domestic affairs. His divorce from Agnes Boulton had become absolute in 1928 and the early days of his marriage to Carlotta Monterey gave him new encouragement. He said of this marriage, "I've everything to back me up now--love of the kind I've always wanted, security and peace".<sup>1</sup> He also had a "financial security that accrued to him from the success of Strange Interlude".<sup>2</sup> Days Without End was not, however, proving an easy play to write, but we are told that, after setting aside a third and unsatisfactory version of it, he awoke early one morning "having dreamed a full-length play with every scene vividly etched in his mind",<sup>3</sup> and then,

He sat down at his desk at seven in the morning and worked steadily until late afternoon, by which time he had written a detailed scenario of Ah, Wilderness! Within six weeks he had completed the play in its final version.<sup>4</sup>

Why "...this play...unlike any other play O'Neill ever wrote..." should "well up so suddenly and so clearly

- 
1. A & B. Gelb, p. 701.
  2. E. A. Engel, p. 264.
  3. A & B. Gelb, p. 761.
  4. Ibid., pp. 761-762.

in his unconscious",<sup>1</sup> we can only guess. O'Neill said that it was "a sort of wishing out loud. That's the way I would have liked my boyhood to have been".<sup>2</sup> There is more to the play than that. O'Neill saw Ah, Wilderness! (1932), along with Days Without End, as "the paying of an old debt on my part --a gesture toward more comprehensive, unembittered understanding and inner freedom--".<sup>3</sup> The "debt" was reconciliation with the memory of his father, an "unembittered understanding" of his father's actions and point of view and an acknowledgement that he had indulged his personal misery too long.

In Ah, Wilderness! O'Neill portrayed his father as "another individual, respected and apart, loved and admired"<sup>4</sup> and this changed approach had a remarkable effect. The play has all the old character types of the earlier plays but their nature and function are strikingly changed. The fathers of the earlier plays had often been distorted projections of James O'Neill

- 
1. C. Bowen, p. 234.
  2. C. Leech, pp. 94-95.
  3. A & B. Gelb, p. 777.
  4. R.D. Skinner, p. 232.

coloured by jealous and antagonistic comments. In The Great God Brown he had suggested, without justification, that his father returned his dislike: "What aliens we were to each other!...we grew hostile with concealed shame".<sup>1</sup> In The Straw he drew his father in the uncomplimentary portrait of Bill Carmody, an unpleasant miser who begrudges his daughter the seven dollars a week for her fee at a tuberculosis sanatorium. In Strange Interlude Professor Leeds's selfish meddling was the cause of his daughter's perverseness. In Desire Under the Elms Ephraim Cabot was the embodiment of harsh paternity. In Mourning Becomes Electra Ezra Mannon was "brusque and authoritative" and drained of paternal affection. But in Ah, Wilderness! there is no antagonism. The nearest that father and son get to a mutual embarrassment is a misunderstanding about Richard's relationships with his fiancée, Muriel, and that is very quickly cleared up. Nat Miller, the father, is "a good scout" and a wise

---

1. G.G.B., I. iii, p. 282.



and tolerant man. He defends his son not only against the accusations of a neighbour, but also against the disapproval of Mrs. Miller when she complains about the books that Richard reads. The mother-figure is also changed. Mrs. Miller "has big brown eyes, soft and maternal--a bustling, mother-of-a-family manner".<sup>1</sup> She contrasts sharply with the symbolical mother figures of past plays such as Dion Antony's "perpetually nervous and distraught" mother, or the rebellious Mrs. Light who conceals her stubbornness behind an air of pious resignation, or the bovine, idol-like Mrs. Fife with her "blank and dreamy eyes" and her "sentimental and wondering" voice.

Richard Miller is another of O'Neill's divided heroes. There is "a restless, apprehensive, defiant, shy, dreamy, self-conscious intelligence about him".<sup>2</sup> He daringly reads the "pagan poetry" of Wilde, Swinburne and Omar Khayyám. His future father-in-law regards him as "dissolute and blasphemous" and claims that he is

---

1. A.W., I, p. 187.

2. Ibid., I, p. 193.

trying to "corrupt the morals" of his daughter. He rebels against the establishment in a dark tirade against the Fourth of July celebrations which he calls "silly" and "a stupid farce". He even cuts loose and goes to a prostitute, but she loses patience with him when he advises her to reform. But this is all adolescent froth:

...Richard's only a fool kid who's just at the stage when he's out to rebel against all authority, and so he grabs at everything radical to read and wants to pass it on to his elders and his girl and boy friends to show off what a young hellion he is!<sup>1</sup>

Unlike Dion Antony and John Loving, Richard, having had his fling, will be "all right" and "a good boy". We are assured that we shall never "have to worry about his being safe--from himself--again".<sup>2</sup>

O'Neill called Ah Wilderness! a "Comedy of Recollection", and said, "I have a deep personal affection for that play".<sup>3</sup> He had intended to "write a play true to the spirit of the American large small-town at the turn of the century" and he claimed that its

- 
1. A.W., I, p. 202.
  2. Ibid., IV. iii, p. 297.
  3. A & B. Gelb, p. 774.

"quality depended upon atmosphere, sentiment, an exact evocation of the mood of a dead past".<sup>1</sup> It is, however, not an "exact evocation" of a dead past so much as a sentimental picture of what might have been - an O'Neill family with its roots deep in small-town life and its members secure in familiar domestic and social grooves. In such an atmosphere, O'Neill and his father could perhaps have been good comrades and the thought brings mellowness to him. In Days Without End John Loving's energies are directed entirely towards satisfying his own need for affection. He has no sympathy for others and complains about their "stupid cowardice" which makes them into slaves. In Ah, Wilderness!, freed from the feud with his father, O'Neill can find time to look with tolerance and understanding on other people. He is able to bring compassion to his work and he is in a suitable frame of mind in the most humane of his plays, The Iceman Cometh (1939).

Dudley Nichols, who was very friendly with O'Neill when he was writing this play, says "The iceman of the title is, of course, death".<sup>2</sup> This is the key to the

---

1. A & B. Gelb, p. 762.

2. Ibid., p. 831.

play. O'Neill now accepts the inevitability of death and composes himself to face it. His thesis in The Iceman Cometh seems to be that to escape life we wear masks, but to face death we must remove our masks and face reality. In our hopelessness, we must somehow find tranquility. At first, all the characters of The Iceman Cometh are wearing masks. This time, the mask is the "pipe-dream" which is O'Neill's name for the carefully cultivated self-illusion behind which human beings hide. He shews the various forms that the pipe-dream might take, but, as the "iceman" approaches, he exposes each illusion. Joe Mott, the negro, whose face "is only mildly negroid in type" displays a truculent pride of race in his "But I don't stand for 'nigger' from nobody. Never did. In de old days, people calls me 'nigger' wakes up in de hospital. I was de leader ob de Dirty Half-Dozen Gang. All six of us colored boys, we was tough and I was de toughest".<sup>1</sup> Under the mask, however, he rejects his race in servile imitation of the white man. "Yes, suh, white folks always said I was white. In de days when I was flush,

---

1. I.C., I, p. 599.

Joe Mott's de only colored man dey allows in de white gamblin' houses. 'You're all right, Joe, you're white,' dey says".<sup>1</sup> The British officer, who prides himself on being a gentleman and talks confidently of the day he will return to England, can never go back home, because he "lost all his money gambling when he vas tronk. But they found out it vas regiment money, too, he lost--".<sup>2</sup> Wetjoen, the Boer soldier, who "led a commando in the War" and who boasts that he shot ten "Limey officers...clean in the mittle of forehead at Spion Kopje",<sup>3</sup> is exposed as a coward whose advice to his commanding officer at Poardeberg "was prompted by a desire to make his personal escape".<sup>4</sup> Hugo Kalmar, the "one-time Syndicalist-Anarchist" is in reality contemptuous of the "monkey-face" proletariat and he dreams of the day when he will drink champagne under the willow, insisting with "aristocratic fastidiousness" that "the slaves must ice it properly!"<sup>5</sup>

---

1. I.C., I, p. 600.

2. Ibid., III, p. 677.

3. Ibid., I, p. 599.

4. Ibid., III, p. 677.

5. Ibid., III, p. 691.



O'Neill also unmasks what we call love. He begins with human love, shewing that it can conceal viciousness and evil. Parritt's unrequited love for his mother causes him to betray her for her own good. Ed Mosher's platitudes of brotherly affection hide a corroding hatred of his sister which, off guard, he reveals in "Dear Bessie wasn't a bitch. She was a God-damned bitch!"<sup>1</sup> Harry Hope's prolonged grief for his wife's death which destroyed all ambition in him is a pretence because "she was always on your neck, making you have ambition and go out and do things, when all you wanted was to get drunk in peace".<sup>2</sup> He also unmasks spiritual love. The greatest of all pipe-dreams is the "love that passeth all understanding". Evelyn's loyalty to Hickey is an unconquerable spiritual love that is too great for a human being to bear. Nothing that Hickey did wrong could shake her faith in him. He would see "disgust having a battle in her eyes with love. Love always won."<sup>3</sup> "Her face" with its "sweetness and love and pity and forgiveness" haunted him so that

---

1. I.C., II, p. 651.

2. Ibid., III, p. 688.

3. Ibid., IV, p. 713.

he dare not even look at her photograph. Her love began to destroy his self-respect. He says, "There's a limit to the guilt you can feel and the forgiveness and the pity you can take!",<sup>1</sup> but there seems no escape. She is "his own, punishing conscience",<sup>2</sup> the same "Hound of Heaven" which O'Neill had "fled...down the labyrinthine ways" of his mind. He could not leave her, because "she'd have died of grief and humiliation".<sup>3</sup> He could not kill himself because "she'd have died of a broken heart".<sup>4</sup> The only thing left to do was to kill her. When Hickey kills his wife, O'Neill is destroying his faith in "the Way--the Truth--the Resurrection and the Life...", the Love that "shall never die"<sup>5</sup> of which he speaks in Days Without End. Faith, whether in parents, family, wife or God, is an illusion we cultivate in our weakness. Larry Slade, the only one strong enough to relinquish his illusions, recognizes this, but at the same time realizes "Be God, there's no hope".<sup>6</sup> We have to accept hopelessness as an essential condition if we would become converts to death. This is a dark logic, but it seems to give O'Neill

- 
1. I.C., IV, p. 715.
  2. A & B. Gelb, p. 832.
  3. I.C., IV, p. 706.
  4. Ibid., IV, p. 705.
  5. D.W.E., IV. ii, p. 566.
  6. I.C., IV, p. 726.

gentleness and understanding as nothing before had done.

There is quite a lot in The Iceman Cometh to remind us of O'Neill's earlier plays. The saloon is the same as that of Anna Christie, peopled by the typical good-hearted prostitutes, the comradely drunks, the divided self-analytical characters. There are familiar ingredients such as the unmasking of frightened souls and the ambivalent attitudes to love. But O'Neill's technical treatment is mature and skilful. There is an almost orchestral quality about the play. Although Larry Slade is perhaps more dominant than any of the others, there is no principal character. Each individual comes to the fore to play his part as a soloist and also, through skilfully interwoven harmonies and discords, to play a secondary accompaniment to the solos of other characters. The idea of the pipe-dream is "developed in turn by each of the characters playing in groups of threes and fours".<sup>1</sup> The idea of orchestration is strengthened by the nature of the dialogue. Through it O'Neill introduces, develops and modulates ideas and directs them to their resolution in conversations which

---

1. R. Gilder, "Each in His Own Way," a review of The Iceman Cometh, O. Cargill, p. 206.

have a surface aimlessness. He often juxtaposes the unrelated remarks of different characters who remain involved with their own thoughts. When at the climax of his confession, Hickey says "I killed her", the shocked silence that follows is broken by Parritt's seemingly irrelevant remark, "I may as well confess, Larry. There's no use lying any more.... It was because I hated her".<sup>1</sup> Hickey is talking about the murder of his wife and Parritt about the betrayal of his mother. The events have no surface connection and neither man is conscious of hearing the other. Yet the underlying connections are hatred and guilt, and the one confession subconsciously sets off the other. This is the way human ideas and conversations work and O'Neill's technique here gives a convincing authenticity. The skilful assembling of interdependent feelings, ideas and remarks, particularly in Act Four, where the characters are unwillingly but irresistibly drawn to the uncovering of Hickey's crime, contribute a cumulative and musical effect. We can return to

---

1. I.C., IV, p. 716.

The Iceman Cometh as we can to a symphony, feeling that the more we know it the more we shall notice nuances that earlier we had overlooked. The Iceman Cometh is a remarkable achievement and probably O'Neill's best play.

Many of O'Neill's autobiographical heroes, Dion Antony, John Loving, Reuben Light and Billy Brown, seek absolution through a process of confession like that in The Iceman Cometh. O'Neill was still haunted by his quarrel with his family long after they had died. He felt he had to obtain absolution by facing his "dead at last"; that is, to write about them with "pity and understanding and forgiveness".<sup>1</sup> He did this in Long Day's Journey Into Night (1941). Carlotta Monterey has described the compulsiveness that was upon him when he wrote the play.

He came in and talked to me all night which he frequently did when he couldn't sleep. He was thinking about this play, you see.... He had to write it because it was a thing that haunted him and he had to forgive whatever caused this in them (his mother and father and brother) and in himself.<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. L.D.J.I.N., Inscription, p. 7.
  2. C. Bowen, p. 271.



She said, "At times I thought he'd go mad. It was terrifying to watch his suffering".<sup>1</sup> Unlike many of O'Neill's plays, which have extended time schemes and scene locations in widely separated places, Long Day's Journey Into Night concentrates its action in the "living room of the Tyrones' summer home" from 8.30 a.m. to about midnight of the same day. As in The Iceman Cometh there is hardly any incident of plot and the attention of the audience is focussed on the relationships of the members of the Tyrone family. The play consists of the characters' expression of their pipe-dreams, their confessions and their final despair. In their pipe-dreams, the Tyrones blame anything or anyone but themselves for their own failings. James Tyrone blames his miserliness on his grandfather's desertion of the family shortly after they came to America. It had led to great hardships and as a result, James sacrificed a career as a Shakesperian actor to the "promise of an easy fortune". Mary, his wife, blames him for giving her a home where "everything was done in

---

1. A & B. Gelb, p. 836.

the cheapest way" and where she would have been ashamed to have her friends "step in the door", and blames her marriage because it prevented her from becoming a nun and a concert pianist. Jamie, her son, blames his mother for his alcoholism, claiming that, if she could have overcome her addiction, he would have overcome his. The unmaskings take place through confession. Tyrone admits that "his good bad luck" is not really the cause of his artistic failure, but that "the fault, dear Brutus, is...in ourselves that we are underlings".<sup>1</sup> He explains that his wife's hopes of becoming a concert pianist and a nun were empty dreams to be taken with "a pinch of salt". The idea of her becoming a pianist had been put "in her head by the nuns flattering her"<sup>2</sup> and, as for becoming a nun, "she was never made to renounce the world. She was bursting with health and high spirits and the love of loving".<sup>3</sup> When he is drunk, Jamie confesses that his jealousy of Edmund is behind his calculated irresponsibilities. "Never wanted you

---

1. L.D.J.I.N., IV, p. 152.

2. Ibid., IV, p. 138.

3. Ibid., IV, p. 138.

succeed....Wanted you to fail. Always jealous of you. Mama's baby, Papa's pet!"<sup>1</sup> Although he loves his brother more than he hates him, he will do his utmost to make him fail. "Can't help it," he says, "I hate myself. Got to take revenge".<sup>2</sup> Mary too removes her mask as, under the influence of drugs, she re-lives her memories; the death of her second child, her marriage, her days at the convent and her childhood.

In this play, O'Neill makes no use of expressionistic devices. There is no sign of the self-pity or unintentional sentimentality that often marred his earlier work. There is no melodrama and the only sensational incident occurs when Edmund slaps his brother's face. Nevertheless, it is a play of tremendous dramatic power. In the characters' alternating bitterness and remorse, their unending recriminations and unrelieved gloom, the play is a terrible illustration of the unhappiness that human perverseness can bring. O'Neill tones down Edmund, the portrait of himself, and this has the effect of enlarging the other characters in our minds.

---

1. L.D.J.I.N., IV, p. 165.

2. Ibid., IV, p. 166.

Edmund is made a rather passive character and when we see how he is wounded but patiently continues to find understanding, he emerges as a very sympathetic centre to the play. O'Neill succeeds in making us identify ourselves with Edmund and through his eyes we see the family moving through a long day of self-inflicted torture "Into Night".

O'Neill did not, any more than anyone else, regain the happiness of his boyhood, but he did in his later years experience a kind of tranquility. Whether this was a relaxed happiness, hopelessness or exhaustion it is hard to say. He died quietly after being in a coma for thirty six hours. For a man whose plays had been full of violence, murder and suicide, this was not perhaps the most theatrical of exits. Still, with his liking for circular irony, he might in other circumstances have appreciated his own last recorded remarks. In his fever, he clenched his fists, raised himself from his bed and was heard to say, "Born in a hotel room--and God damn it--died in a hotel room!"<sup>1</sup>

---

1. A & B. Gelb, p. 939.

A LIST OF O'NEILL'S PLAYS IN PRODUCTION.

<u>Year written</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Date of first production</u>
1913-1914	<u>Thirst</u>	1916
	<u>Fog</u>	1916
	<u>Abortion</u>	1959
1914	<u>Bound East for Cardiff</u>	1916
	<u>The Movie Man</u>	1959
1914-15	<u>The Sniper</u>	1917
1916	<u>Before Breakfast</u>	1916
1917	<u>In the Zone</u>	1917
	<u>Ile</u>	1917
	<u>The Long Voyage Home</u>	1917
	<u>Moon of the Caribbees</u>	1918
1918	<u>The Rope</u>	1918
1920	<u>Beyond the Horizon</u>	1920
1925-1926	<u>The Dreamy Kid</u>	1919
	<u>Where the Cross is Made</u>	1918



1918-1919	<u>The Straw</u>	1921
1919	<u>Chris Christopherson</u>	1920
	<u>Exorcism</u>	1920
1920	<u>Gold</u>	1921
	<u>Anna Christie</u>	1921
	<u>The Emperor Jones</u>	1920
	<u>Diff'rent</u>	1920
1921	<u>The First Man</u>	1922
	<u>The Hairy Ape</u>	1922
1921-1922	<u>The Fountain</u>	1925
1922-1923	<u>Welded</u>	1924
1923	<u>All God's Chillun Got Wings</u>	1924
	<u>The Ancient Mariner</u>	1924
1924	<u>Desire Under the Elms</u>	1924
1923-1925	<u>Marco Millions</u>	1928
1925	<u>The Great God Brown</u>	1926
1925-1926	<u>Lazarus Laughed</u>	1928

1926-1927	<u>Strange Interlude</u>	1928
1928	<u>Dynamo</u>	1929
1929-1931	<u>Mourning Becomes Electra</u>	1931
1932	<u>Ah, Wilderness!</u>	1933
1932-1933	<u>Days Without End</u>	1934
1939	<u>The Iceman Cometh</u>	1946
1936-1940	<u>A Touch of the Poet</u>	1957
1935-1941	<u>More Stately Mansions</u>	1962
1940-1941	<u>Long Day's Journey Into Night</u>	1956
1941	<u>Hughie</u>	1958
1941-1943	<u>A Moon for the Misbegotten</u>	1947

## Bibliography

The bibliography is classified under the following headings:

### I Primary Sources

#### A Plays by Eugene O'Neill

- (i) Published plays
- (ii) Plays in copyright but not yet published.
- (iii) Unpublished plays

#### B Other work by Eugene O'Neill

- (i) Poems
- (ii) Short Stories
- (iii) Some Letters
- (iv) Some Articles

### II Secondary Sources

#### Biography and Criticism

- (i) Books consulted
- (ii) Articles consulted

The Primary Sources are arranged in chronological sequence; the Secondary Sources are arranged alphabetically.

# I      Primary Sources

The quotations made in this work from Thirst, The Web, Warnings, Fog, The Sniper, and Servitude are from Ten "Lost" Plays, Cape, 1965. The quotations from Long Day's Journey Into Night (except the quotation on page 328 which is from the Cape, 1966, edition of the play) are from the Yale University Press edition, 1956. The two quotations from A Moon for the Misbegotten are from the Cape, 1953, edition. All other quotations from O'Neill's plays are taken from The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Volumes I, II, and III, Random House, New York, 1955.

## A      Plays by Eugene O'Neill

### (i) Published Plays (with dates of first publication)

<u>Thirst</u>	1914
<u>The Web</u>	1914
<u>Warnings</u>	1914
<u>Fog</u>	1914
<u>Recklessness</u>	1914
<u>Bound East for Cardiff</u>	1916
<u>Before Breakfast</u>	1916
<u>The Long Voyage Home</u>	1917

<u>Ile</u>	1918
<u>The Moon of the Caribbees</u>	1918
<u>In the Zone</u>	1918
<u>Where the Cross is Made</u>	1918
<u>The Rope</u>	1918
<u>The Dreamy Kid</u>	1920
<u>Beyond the Horizon</u>	1920
<u>The Emperor Jones</u>	1921
<u>Diff'rent</u>	1921
<u>The Straw</u>	1921
<u>Gold</u>	1921
<u>The Hairy Ape</u>	1922
<u>Anna Christie</u>	1922
<u>The First Man</u>	1922
<u>All God's Chillun Got Wings</u>	1924
<u>Welded</u>	1924
<u>Desire Under the Elms</u>	1924
<u>The Great God Brown</u>	1926
<u>The Fountain</u>	1926
<u>Marco Millions</u>	1927
<u>Lazarus Laughed</u>	1927
<u>Strange Interlude</u>	1928



<u>Dynamo</u>	1929
<u>Mourning Becomes Electra</u>	1931
<u>Ah, Wilderness!</u>	1933
<u>Days Without End</u>	1934
<u>The Iceman Cometh</u>	1946
<u>Abortion</u>	1950
<u>The Movie Man</u>	1950
<u>The Sniper</u>	1950
<u>Servitude</u>	1950
<u>A Wife for a Life</u>	1950
<u>A Moon for the Misbegotten</u>	1952
<u>Long Day's Journey Into Night</u>	1956
<u>A Touch of the Poet</u>	1957
<u>Hughie</u>	1959
<u>The Ancient Mariner</u>	1960
<u>More Stately Mansions</u>	1964

(ii) Plays in copyright but not yet published

The date given is that when the typescript was registered at the Library of Congress.

<u>Bread and Butter</u>	1914
<u>Children of the Sea</u>	1914
<u>Now I Ask You</u>	1917
<u>Shell Shock</u>	1918

<u>Chris Christophersen</u>	1919
<u>Exorcism</u>	1920
<u>The Oldest Man</u>	1921
<u>The Ole Devil</u>	1921

(iii) Unpublished plays (in order of composition)

<u>The Dear Doctor</u>	1914
<u>Belshazzar</u>	1915
<u>Atrocity</u>	1916
<u>The G.A.N.</u>	1916-1917
<u>Honor Among the Bradleys</u>	1919

B Other work by Eugene O'Neill - a select list

(i) Poems

There are twenty eight poems written by O'Neill to be found in "Collected Poems by Eugene O'Neill". (Ralph Sanborn and Barrett H. Clark, A Bibliography of the Works of Eugene O'Neill, Part III, Random House, New York, 1931, pp. 109-161)

(ii) Short Stories

A short story called "Tomorrow" was published in The Seven Arts, June, 1917, pp. 147-170. O'Neill asked that the story should never be re-published because of "its very personal nature." (Sanborn and Clark, p. 15).

O'Neill also said that he had written "a short story (never published) about stokers containing germ idea of 'The Hairy Ape'". (R.D. Skinner, Eugene O'Neill: A Poet's Quest, New York, 1964, p. viii.)

(iii) Some Letters

- \* Indicates that the letter is cited in this thesis
- \* To The New York Times, April 11, 1920, explaining the sources of Beyond the Horizon.
- To The New York Times, December 18, 1921, about Anna Christie's "happy ending".
- \* To the main New York newspapers, printed by them February 13 and 14, 1926, explaining the theme of The Great God Brown.
- \* To George Jean Nathan, June 20, 1920, discussing the merit of some of his early plays.
- To the Kamerny Theatre, June 19, 1932, thanking the Kamerny for their productions of Desire Under the Elms and All God's Chillun Got Wings.
- \* To Richard Dana Skinner, giving the dates of composition of his plays up to 1933.
- \* To Arthur Hobson Quinn, complaining that he is neglected as a poet.
- To George Pierce Baker, May 9, 1919, asking for an opinion on some of his one-act plays.

- \* To Barrett H. Clark, 1919, explaining that he wishes to write about "the impelling, inscrutable forces behind life".

(iv) Some Articles

- \* Indicates that the article is cited in this thesis.
- \* "Eugene O'Neill's Credo and His Reasons for His Faith," New York Tribune, February 13, 1921.
- \* "Are the Actors to Blame?," Provincetown Playbill No. 1 (November, 1925).

A Statement explaining the theme of The Fountain, Greenwich Village Theatre Programme No. 3, Season 1925-1926.

Foreword in Benjamin DeCasseres, Anathema! Litanies of Negation, New York, 1928, pp. vii-xi.

- \* "Memoranda on Masks," American Spectator, November, 1932.
- \* "Second Thoughts," American Spectator, December, 1932.
- \* "A Dramatist's Notebook," American Spectator, January, 1933.
- \* "Professor George Pierce Baker," The New York Times, January 13, 1935.

## II Secondary Sources

### Biography and Criticism

#### (i) Books consulted

The place of publication is London unless otherwise indicated.

\* Indicates that the work is cited in the thesis.

\* Alexander, Doris. The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill, New York, 1962.

\* Alspach, Russell K. The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats, 1966.

\* Bolt, Robert. A Man for All Seasons, 1964.

Boulton, Agnes. Part of a Long Story: Eugene O'Neill as a Young Man in Love, New York, 1958.

\* Bowen, Croswell, with the assistance of Shane O'Neill. The Curse of the Misbegotten, 1960.

\* Brustein, Robert. The Theatre of Revolt, 1965.

\* Cargill, Oscar, N. Bryllion Fagin, and William J. Fisher (edd). Eugene O'Neill and His Plays, 1962.

\* Carpenter, Frederic I. Eugene O'Neill, New York, 1964.

\* Clark, Barrett H. Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays, New York, 1929.



- \* Clark, Barrett H.(ed.). European Theories of the Drama with a Supplement on the American Drama, New York, 1957.

Durant, Will. The Story of Philosophy, 1955.

- \* Eliot, T.S. Murder in the Cathedral, 1945.

- \* \_\_\_\_\_ . Poetry and Drama, 1951.

- \* \_\_\_\_\_ . Selected Essays, 1953.

- \* Engel, Edwin A. The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953.

Falk, Doris V. Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1958.

- \* Gassner, John (ed.). O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1964.

- \* Gelb, Arthur and Barbara. O'Neill, 1962.

Goldberg, Isaac. The Drama of Transition, Cincinnati, 1922.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Theatre of George Jean Nathan, New York, 1926.

- \* Haigh, A.E. The Attic Theatre, Oxford, 1907.

- \* Jones, David E. The Plays of T.S. Eliot, 1961.

- \* Krutch, Joseph W. Nine Plays, New York, 1932.

- \* Lamm, Martin. Modern Drama, trans. Karin Elliott, Oxford, 1952.

- \* Leech, Clifford. O'Neill, 1963.

- \* Macgowan, Kenneth. The Theatre of Tomorrow, 1923.

- \* March, Richard and Tambimuttu (edd.). T.S.Eliot: A Symposium, 1948.

Mickle, Alan D. Six Plays of Eugene O'Neill,  
New York, 1929.

Nathan, George Jean. The Intimate Notebooks of  
George Jean Nathan., New York, 1932.

\* Nicoll, Allardyce. The World of Harlequin,  
Cambridge, 1963.

\* World Drama: From  
Aeschylus to Anouilh, 1951.

\* Nietzsche, Friedrich. Thus Spoke Zarathustra,  
Trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Penguin, Harmondsworth),  
1966.

\* Quinn, Arthur H. A History of the American  
Drama: From the Civil War to the Present Day,  
2 vols., 1937.

Raleigh, John H. The Plays of Eugene O'Neill,  
(Southern Illinois University Press), 1965.

\* Sanborn, Ralph and Barrett H. Clark. A  
Bibliography of the Works of Eugene O'Neill,  
New York, 1931.

\* Santayana, George. The Winds of Doctrine, 1940.

\* Sievers, W. David. Freud on Broadway, New York,  
1955.

\* Skinner, Richard D. Eugene O'Neill: A Poet's  
Quest, New York, 1964.

Strindberg, August. Eight Famous Plays, trans.  
Edwin Bjorkman and N. Erichsen, 1950.

\* Williams, Raymond. Drama from Ibsen to Eliot,  
1952.

\* Winther, Sophus K. Eugene O'Neill: A Critical  
Study, New York, 1961.

(ii) Articles consulted.

The following articles have been cited in the the thesis. They can be found in either O. Cargill, Eugene O'Neill and His Plays, 1962, or J. Gassner, O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays, New Jersey, 1964.

Alexander, Doris. "Eugene O'Neill as Social Critic," American Quarterly, 6 (Winter 1954), pp. 349-363. Also Cargill pp. 390-407.

Bentley, Eric. "Trying to Like O'Neill," Kenyon Review, 14 (Summer 1952), pp. 476-492. Also Cargill, pp. 331-345, and Gassner pp. 89-98.

De Voto, Bernard. "Minority Report," Saturday Review of Literature, 15 (November 1936), pp. 3-4. Also Cargill, pp. 301-306.

Downer, Alan S. "Eugene O'Neill as Poet of the Theatre," Theatre Arts, 35 (February 1951), pp. 22-23. Also Cargill, pp. 468-471.

Gilder, Rosamond. "Each in His Own Way.... The Iceman Cometh," Theatre Arts, 30 (December 1946), 684-690. Also Cargill, pp. 684-690.

Trilling, Lionel. "Eugene O'Neill," New Republic, 88 (September 1936) Also Cargill pp. 292-300.