Myth is essentially a religious term: it is something said, as distinct from ritual, something done. Regardless of its appearance in modern idiom, no proper myth is meaningless, ridiculous, or obscene. It is metaphysic in its primary and purest form, the closet verbal approach to an immediate intuition of reality. It is antecedent to theology, as the terms and statements of a myth are prior to their exegesis.

As a product of the poetic faculty, myth is a thing in itself, single, whole, complete, and without ulterior purpose. The use to which it may be put is secondary. Although much can be learned by studying the applications and occasional distortions of myth to practical ends (whether ethical, to sanction tribal custom, or political, to endorse the doctrines of the state), the essential fact is that, as the evidence of every great religion shows, to the believer, myth is actually identical with truth.

Myth have usually been differentiated from other tales on account of their subject matter rather than because of any stylistic quality. They have to do with superior beings and with origins. This definition is adequate for the great historical mythologies such as the Greek, the Norse, the Irish, or the Egyptian.

Most persons have enjoyed myths with very little thought of such theoretical questions. The great historical mythologies have been read for sheer pleasure. They have formed a weighty part of the training of our poets, who, particularly in the Renaissance, loaded their lines with allusions to obscure tales from Greek mythology. Recently
there has been a deliberate avoidance of such allusions, though occasional references are made not only to the gods and heroes of Greece, but to those of Ireland, Iceland, India, and less familiar parts of the world.

Myths have fascinated man's mind from times immemorial as a central issue in his efforts to define the deepest meaning of religion, culture and history by providing new life to art and literature, and have remained as the motivating force behind his artistic explorations. The myths afford the artist both the necessary artistic control to explore his subject and means of generalization. Though differing at points, these myths contribute to a unified vision, testify to the facts and experience of life, and serve as a viable framework dramatizing modern dilemmas and conflicts implicit in contemporary situations.

Writers have used myths evolved through the human experience. Like the western dramatist e.g. Luigi Pirandello, Jean Giraudoux, Jean Anouilh and Jean Paul Sartre among others, modern American dramatists led by Eugene O'Neill sought to appease their dramatic quest with the perennial meanings as found in myths and interwove them extensively in the themes of their plays.

The plays of O'Neill were cardiograms of the impatient heart in which he charted the thwarted dreams and elusive hopes of his characters, the defeated lives and tormented loves whom Fate rendered unrealised. Writing plays of personal psychology and bitter domestic tragedy he unveiled the secrets of the human heart by portraying his perplexed characters as social derelicts who are quivering on the edge of society—the sailors, alcoholics, fugitives, spiritual dwarfs and men and women trapped in obsessional relationships—whom the world
callously passed by. His chief concern in his drama was to depict the tragic predicament of man wrestling against self and society for some reaching out to his fellow beings to finding for himself a niche in a hostile and mysterious universe.

He opened up the American stage to a range of lives and occupations outside the familiar middle class quotidian experience. He was highly influenced by the classical drama not only in his choice of powerful and universal themes but also in his sense of drama as a religious ritual, something that remained beyond the pale of representational realism.

He, further, used classical, Biblical and contemporary myths in the structure of his plays. He created the myth of the Harfords in The Cycle Plays; and forged his own myth in Long Day's Journey Into Night. This is achieved by the sweep of sympathy, overbrimming compassion and richness and intensity of the themes of his plays through a fusion of myth.

However, the use of myths, archetypal patterns, in the themes of O'Neill's plays has not been given an unbiased, balanced and comprehensive assessment, though there have been a few fragmented attempts to study myths in his plays. By and large the entire corpus of his plays has not been subjected to such a magnified treatment. His plays echo with mythical patterns and allusions, for he saw in myths an indispensible means of conveying deeper meaning. Though he did not subscribe to the norms of the French Literary Movement which saw life in terms of myths; nevertheless, he imbued his plays with myths. Like the romantics he used archetypal symbols, ritual patterns of myths to express the elemental appetites, passions and such
forces as affect man's behaviour in given circumstances.

The present endeavour is directed to the study of myths in the plays of O'Neill. We hope that it would contribute to a better understanding of the intricacies of his dramatic art in explaining the vital motives that govern human action. The myths in the plays are seen as shorn of their traditional and conceptual connotations, and are studied in the larger perspective of the universal import conveying specific human experience. Ostensibly, the stress is on the study of myths from earlier times- the ancient, classical, Christian- the Biblical and archetypal patterns, and the contemporary American myths and legends which had a greater bearing upon O'Neill's plays. It is an attempt to explore his mythopoetic ability in his plays which gave him a pre-eminent position as the most significant contemporary American playwright of international renown to emerge between the Wars. It is our endeavour to establish his supremacy as a dramatic artist who gave new dimensions to modern tragedy with his adroit use of myths and thus, served as a link between the ancient classical and the modern tragedy by providing continuity, vitality and perspicacity which the twentieth century tragic drama lamentably lacked.