

CHAPTER-I

INTRODUCTION

Eugene O'Neill was born on October 16, 1888 in a Broadway hotel room in New York. His father James O'Neill was one of America's most successful actors. He was a very successful touring actor and his most famous role was a stage adaptation of the Alexander Dumas's novel, *The count of Monte Cristo*. O'Neill's mother was Ella Quinlan, a strikingly beautiful lady who lived a quiet life. Both James and Ella came from Irish Catholic families that had immigrated to America. James was from a poor family and he receives no formal schooling. He fought his way up from poverty to a successful touring actor in the last quarter of the 19th century. Ella whereas, was from a middle class Irish family and she receive a reasonable amount of culture and a higher education. Even though both came from Irish catholic families, but temperamentally they were poles apart. Their differing temperaments resulted in a destructive marital incompatibility which formed the theme of O'Neill's several important plays, including **All God's Chillun Got Wings, Welded** and **Long Day's Journey Into Night**.

O'Neill never stopped writing of his mother and father. He always portrayed them as lovers communicating in Code, neither ever able to find the other's key. Always alive to the intangible gap between his parents, he stated over and over in his plays the theme of man's tragic inability to reach his fellow man.¹

In the year 1895 when Eugene entered the Mount St. Vincent – on – Hudson boarding school, Riverdale, New York, he felt lost and bewildered in the midst of the strange children. He was deeply hurt and felt betrayed, cheated and rejected by those he had trusted most. This sense of exile and loneliness bred in him a fear and distrust of love, which became one of the central problems of his life and one of the central themes in his plays. In 1900, he entered a Catholic school operated by the Christian Brothers in Manhattan. He, like a good Catholic boy, fervently prayed for the recovery of his mother and brother from their illnesses, but when nothing came out of it, he knew that he was through with catholic schools and Catholicism. His rejection of Catholicism hounded him for the rest of his life and his parents could not induce him to accept any further religious training. The anguish of this rejection of faith is clearly revealed in *Days Without End*.

Eugene gets a thorough grounding in the classics in the Betts Academy, a non-sectarian Connecticut boarding school. He acquired a good knowledge of Latin and French and also did well in Greek and Roman history. From Greek history he developed a taste for Greek drama which became for him the mark of the highest achievement in drama. As a result he modelled several of his plays on the pattern of Greek Tragedy. Jamie, his elder brother had been a formative and destructive influence on Eugene, whom he both loved and resented. His letters to

¹ Arthur & Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill*, (New York: Harper & Row Publisher, 1962) 10

Eugene were tinged with sneering comments about life and religion that had a lasting effect on Eugene.

Jamie also taught Eugene how to reject his father's values by turning to a forbidden world of drink and whores. The impact of these experiences on sensitive Eugene was shattering. For him, sex became a symbol of the revolt from love – the pure love he had felt for his mother – and of a spiritual violation.

O'Neill had a great love for reading and at a very young age he had read authors like Kipling, Anatole France, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Oscar Wilde, Conrad, Jack London, Victor Hugo, Alexander Dumas, Walter Scott, Byron and Emerson. But his greatest excitement came when he discovered Shaw's *Quintessence of Ibsenism*. The book came as a revelation to him. He now understood exactly what was wrong with the romantic plays he had grown up on vistas of social and intellectual revolt opened before him. After leaving Princeton University without completing first year, he was convinced that he could learn more out of college than in His first step in self-education was into Benjamin R. Tucker's 'The Unique Book Shop', on New York's Sixth Avenue. He spent several hours at this bookshop, absorbing Tuckers ideas, reading his books, and learning of the other anarchists of the day. Tucker also told O'Neill about Max Stirner, whose philosophy of egoism, which disdained all social and ethical standards, impressed him. But Tucker's most significant contribution to Eugene's education was in introducing him to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Eugene was enthralled by Nietzsche, and remained so all his life.

O'Neill was no doubt one of the most talented dramatists of the 20th century. He made new experiments in the writing of drama and he was one of the forces, which gave rise to the concept, and the movement of modernism. During his dramatic

career, extending from his early one-act plays to his late masterpieces, he experimented with a variety of dramatic forms and modes. O'Neill was distinctively an American playwright writing about his own life and times. He uses drama as a medium of expression for the various views of life that he had experienced, based on his life at sea and among outcast and oppressed people in many places. In his plays he tries to express the life long torment of mind in conflict. In his plays, he also attempts to explain human suffering. He also tries to give a justification somehow. O'Neill stated the objective to which he held consistently all his life in a letter written in 1925 to Arthur Hobson Quinn:

. . . I'm always, always trying to interpret life in terms of lives, never just lives in terms of character. 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 in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. And my proud conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about and that it is possible – or can be – to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values and symbols in the theatre which may to some degree bring home to members of the modern audience their ennobling identity with the tragic figures on the stage.²

There is hardly any dramatic form or device which he did not assay (tested) in his attempts to shadow forth the sickness of modern man in his plays. The wide variety of techniques employed by O'Neill reflects the playwright's deep-seated spiritual restlessness. His plays embodied the ideas and conflicts of the first half of the twentieth century, assimilated its advances in dramatic art and theatrical technique, and expressed its uneasy aspirations towards tragic insights and

² Doris V. Falk, *Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958) 25-26

dramatic vision. His impressiveness as a dramatist is ultimately, in fact, the result of his determined effort to trace a thread of meaning in the universe virtually implied of meaning by a century of scientific and sociological thought. O'Neill points out various factors or sources of tragedy in his plays. From his early one-act plays to *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1930), O'Neill deals with romantic illusions that destroy the possibility of happiness. Man is incapable of accepting the reality of the world as it is, and in that fact lies the germ of his inevitable tragedy. From Yank (Bound East for Cardiff) who cursed the life of the sea and dreamed of how nice it would be to have a farm with a house of your own with cows and pigs and chickens. O'Neill's men and women follow the gleam of unreal ideals to their destruction.

Puritanism is another source of tragedy. Like romantic illusion, it also implies a denial of the facts of life. Puritanism inhibits, forbids, denies, and inhibition and denial lead to fear, prejudice and narrow hatred. Puritanism has infected the modern world, fastening itself like a deadly parasite upon the skin of civilization. It has made man afraid of himself. It has made him believe that there is virtue in denying himself the real pleasure and beauty that might be possible in rare moments during his struggle with an unfriendly universe. In desire under the Elms puritanic ideal is in conflict with the life force or the desire for life and this leads to dire tragedy. Thus wrong ideals – the romantic ideal, the puritan ideal – are the cause of human suffering. They result in tragedy, death and destruction in his plays. The way to happiness lies in a rejection of these ideals, and a positive, vigorous acceptance of life along with all its sufferings as well as joys.

Loss of religious faith is also a cause of tragedy in O'Neill's universe. In his plays, the cause of suffering is neither the hostility of fate, as in the character of the chief protagonist. Man has lost faith in some supernal power of traditional

religions due to science and materialism. Hence he suffers from inner emptiness on account of his lack of some sustaining faith. He suffers from inner emptiness on account of his lack of some sustaining faith. He suffers from a feeling of 'insecurity', a feeling of 'not belonging' and is confused and bewildered. The protagonists of the plays like – *The Hairy Ape*, *Beyond the Horizon*, *The Straw*, *Anna Christie* and *Chris Christopherson* are seeking their proper place in the scheme of things, seeking 'to belong', but their belongingness is not to be found in any mystic force outside themselves.

It is to be found only in the Vast and foggy realms of their own unconscious, where they seek a self which they can visualize only as a self-image, an abstract identity which will give their lives a direction in which to move.³

One of the chief barriers in understanding the unconscious for these characters is that which is set up by a conscious ego which perceives its own limitations but cannot see beyond them to set up an ideal image. This barrier can be overcome for the heroes of *Beyond the Horizon* and *The Straw* by self-sacrifice and only by death for the hero of *The Hairy Ape*. But Christ the old rationalizer of *Anna Christie* cannot even perceive that the barrier is himself, but thinks it is 'dat ole devil, sea'. Hence he cannot overcome the barrier at all. The theme of *The Hairy Ape* which O'Neill developed was drawn from an experience at Jimmy the Priest's, a dilapidated flop house – saloon on the New York waterfront during his younger age as a seaman. This same experience has provided background for at least three of the later plays namely – *Anna Christie*, *The Iceman Cometh* and *A Touch of the Poet*. O'Neill describes the genesis of the play in his note to *The Hairy Ape* in the Wilderness Edition:

³ Doris V. Falk, *Ibid.*, 28

It was at Jimmy the Priests that I knew Driscoll, a Liverpool Irishman who was a stoker on a transatlantic liner. Shortly afterwards I learned that he had committed suicide by jumping overboard in mid-ocean, why? The search for an explanation of why Driscoll, proud of his animal superiority and incomplete harmony with his limited conception of the universe, should kill himself provided the germ of the idea for *The Hairy Ape*.⁴

The Hairy Ape was his attempt to account for the unexplained suicide. He did so by bringing the theme of the play as the inevitable outcome of a hopeless search for self.

O'Neill is regarded as a pessimist and one who offers no hope of salvation to a suffering and wretched humanity. Most of his plays are tragedies and that most of his characters are cynical degenerates. Life is a disgusting thing for him and he has no zest for life. His characters are ineffectual egotists, whining for opportunities they are incapable of using. The most virile of them, the sailors and stokers in the early sea – plays, are mindless creatures, clawing and clutching like dying dinosaurs. Francis Fergusson puts his finger on the relationship of O'Neill's self-hatred to the plays:

O'Neill's plays are crosses. Follow the road he travels and you will often hear the sound of flagellation. Look and you will see that the whip is brought down by a tormented soul on his own back. But flowers grow on this desert track, and the mountains and the sunset lay Beyond the Horizon. The very imperfection which connects the author with his audience... He offers us the act of seeking, but no disinterested contemplation; himself, therefore, rather than his work. Only the dead cease to change; but by complete and independent of the suffering individual. O'Neill's

⁴ Doris V. Falk, *Ibid.*, 28-29

failings may be ascribed to the fact that he has never found any such discipline.⁵

O'Neill lives in a Godless world, where the new forces of science and materialism have failed to comfort man's fear of death and to satisfy his need to find the meaning of life. This is the root of the sickness of today. Science and technology have, no doubt, helped in bringing material prosperity and comfort to men. But they have singularly failed to give him any spiritual comfort or to improve his moral fibre.

O'Neill's plays are, indeed, a continuous record of his spiritual quest. Each play is a new attempt to come to grip with the same old problem, to 'dig at the roots of the sickness of today'. The search led him into many and varied manners of speech: realism, expressionism, naturalism, symbolism, fantasy, poetry, alone and in various combinations, as well as experiments with devices from older dramatic traditions. But behind the apparent diversity was a single impulse: to find an idiom in which to express the human tragedy. And whatever other characteristics O'Neill may have possessed or lacked, he had a firm grasp of one essential element of tragedy – the eternal conflict between man's aspirations and some intransigent, ineluctable quality in life which circumscribes of those dreams which seem to make life worth living. *Beyond the Horizon* is a realistic drama of fate and frustration. There is an alternate indoor and outdoor scene in the play. O'Neill explains the deliberate structural design of the play in a magazine interview:

In *Beyond the Horizon* there are three acts of two scenes each. One scene is out of doors, showing the horizon,

⁵ Doris V. Falk, *Ibid.*, 119

suggesting the man's desire and dream. The other is indoors, the horizon gone, suggesting what has come between him and his dream. In that way I tried to get rhythm, the alternation of longing and of loss.⁶

The straw is in the same realistic tradition as *Beyond the Horizon* but its symbols are much less overt. The sanatorium, in which most of the action takes place, with its suggestions of hopelessness and decay, is analogous to the world enclosed by the hills. In *Anna Christie*, the sea, with the sinister shroud of fog in which it hides its malignant purposes, suggests all the awful and mysterious forces of nature which thwart man and his hopes. Throughout the play Chris Christopher son, Anna's father, blames the sea for all that has gone wrong in his life.

Death for O'Neill is not an end but a beginning. *The Strange Interlude* ends on a note of hope when Nina, (the protagonist) after having strange experiences, comes back to her lover, Marsden, who has been waiting for her in quiet hope for years.

At the end of *Desire Under the Elms*, When Abbie is arrested for murdering her child, Eben declares that he had a hand in that murder and boldly offers himself for arrest. The behaviour of Abbie and Eben at that moment, when soon they will be sentenced to death, is one of dignity, and a brave facing of the most difficult ordeal. Death can only bring happiness to Robert (*Beyond the Horizon*). Death provides an enlightenment of life. Death or suffering does have meaning, not because there is hope of relieving it but the suffering itself frees us from pride.

The black rim of hills can disappear of Robert only when the grayness of death has finally crept over them. At that

⁶ Doris V. Falk, *Ibid.*, 37-38

moment the imprisoning hills of material reality – of the finite imitations of the self fade before a truer revelation for Robert of the secret beyond the horizon.⁷

Suffering can only bring happiness, lost of self and it gives birth to sacrifice just as in the beginning of the play Robert's early pain gave birth to his dream of the beauty and happiness beyond the horizon. When Robert comes to accept death, he regains his self-respect. He found out once again his own ideal, poetic, selfless self that has so long been lost. He says to Andrew, his brother:

Because I'm dying is no reason you should treat me as an imbecile or a coward. Now that I'm sure what's happening I can say kismet to it with al my heart. It was only the uncertainty that hurt.⁸ [Sc-I, Act-III]

Death provides an enlightenment of life in *Bound East for Cardiff* too. In the play, Yank is lost and he knows it, but there is something more than pathos in the way he looks back over an aimless life, trying to find some kind of sense to it. Yank is not exceptionally brave or humble or frightened – he is a little of all three, a 'little' man, broken by life and cast aside, without knowing where he is or why. But at the end of the play, when the fog clears, there is also the suggestion that with death came an answer which gave meaning to existence.

In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Ezra Mannon, the father does not know to love at the beginning of the play. Not until he has known the comradeship of other men on the battlefield and has seen death, he becomes aware of the importance of love and life:

⁷ Doris V. Falk, *Op. cit.*, 39

⁸ Eugene O'Neill, *Beyond the Horizon: Complete Plays 1913-1920*, (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc. 1988) 645.

Death made me think of life. Before that life had only made me think of death! That's always been the Mannons' way of thinking. They went to the white meeting house on Sabbaths and meditated on death. Life was a dying. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born.⁹

O'Neill uses various devices like expressionism, naturalism, symbolism and mysticism etc to express the human tragedy. In *The Emperor Jones*, O'Neill switches over to expressionism. This is an experimental play and O'Neill's explorations of expressionistic technique permitted him to explore inner conflicts with greater flexibility and clarity. The 'visions' in *The Emperor Jones* which are neither hallucinations nor projections of Jones's thoughts, reveal the inner springs of his nature as they come in conflict with his assumed, outward character. The play is in essence, the story of 'the failure of science and materialism'. There are in the play several dramatic devices, almost inanimate actors, which are external to Jones and which do not pertain directly to his nature. There is the brooding, mysterious Great Forest in which Jones loses himself – to find himself. It is not just a place where something happens to Jones; it is part of what happens to him, a primeval, elemental force, which literally and figuratively strips him of the superficialities of civilization.

The Hairy Ape too, is an expressionistic play. In an interview which was published as 'The extraordinary story of Eugene O'Neill' in the November 1922 issue of the American Magazine, O'Neill once told Mary B. Mullett giving an instance of the fo'c'sle scenes in *The Hairy Ape* saying that people think that he was giving an exact picture of the reality. They don't understand that the whole play is expressionistic. He says:

⁹ Eugene O'Neill, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, (London: Cox & Wyman Ltd, 1973) 92.

Yank is really yourself, and myself. He is every human being. But, apparently, very few people seem to get this. They have written, picking out one thing or another in the play and saying 'how true' it is. But no one has said: 'I am Yank! Yank is my own self!'

Yet that was what I meant him to be. His struggle to 'belong', to find the thread that will make him a part of the fabric of life – we are all struggling to do just that. One idea I had in writing the play was to show that the missing thread, literally 'the tie that binds', understanding o one another.

In the scene where the bell rings for the stokers to go on duty, you remember that they all stand up, come to attention, then go out in a lockstep file. Some people think even that is an actual custom aboard ship! But it is only symbolic of the regimentation of men who are the slaves of machinery. In a larger sense, it applies to all of us, because we all are more or less the slaves of convention, or of discipline, or of a rigid formula of some sort.¹⁰

In the *Emperor Jones* there is a mixing of expressionism and realism to tell the story of a black fugitive who became a jungle 'emperor' but now faces the collapse of his 'kingdom'. He fleets into the jungle to survive but encounters his past. He at last meets a witch doctor and he realizes he must sacrifice himself to a primitive god.

The Fountain (1921) is also an expressionist tale about Spanish conquistadors in search of the fountain of youth. A materialistic man searches for the fountain because of love, but his vision of the fountain is tested during his travels through the jungle. Just as he is about to die, he sees that his own love is reborn in his nephew who loves the daughter of the conquistador's mistress.

¹⁰ Richard Levin, *Tragedy: Plays, Theory, and Criticism*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1960) 129-130.

Strange Interlude (1926) is a long expressionist play about a woman who tries to hold captive her father, her husband and her lover by various means to compensate for a dead aviator that she loved. She turns to her mothering instinct, which is repeatedly frustrated, first when she attempts to take care of her father, and secondly when she can't have a child with her husband because his family is tainted by insanity. She finally has a child with her lover. This play is known for its 5-hour length and use of expressionist techniques like masks, asides and a chorus which delivers the internal thoughts of each character.

Mysticism is also a technique used by O'Neill in his dramatic experimentation. *Lazarus Laughed* is a play which asserts the ultimate unity of man with nature and the triumph of life over death.

Believe in the healthy God called Man in You! . . . What if you are a man and men are despicable? Man are also unimportant! 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!¹¹ [Act-IV, Sc-I]

In *The Fountain*, there is an element of fantasy in the visions of the fountain, and that symbol lies at the heart of the play. Ponce de Leon wanders in a futile world where wealth and military reputation and power become tawdry and empty, but where the absence of other values leaves him cynical and disillusioned. A desperate hope that love will give life meaning sends him off looking for the fountain of youth. Lying half dead at the edge of a small pool in Florida, he 'finds' it in a vision, and in the song of the fountain lies the essence of his 'discovery'. In

¹¹ Eugene O'Neill, *Lazarus Laugh: Complete Plays 1920-1931*, (New York: Literary Classics of the United States Inc. 1988) 617-618.

this vision of life and death, growth and decay, aspiration and failure as integral parts of the eternal cycles of nature, where all things must pass away to give place to and nourish the new, Pone de Leon finds his 'belonging'. In *The Great God Brown*, the masks represent a much more drastic experimental device for suggesting a similar internal conflict, although in this case it is not a question of one impulse triumphing over others, but of two antithetical impulses distorting and perverting each other, and destroying the individual in the process.

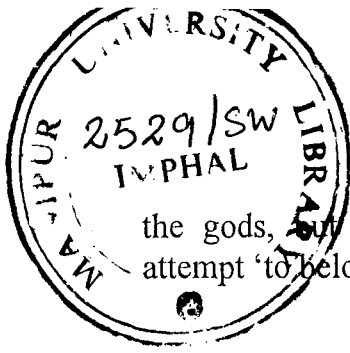
O'Neill lays hand in the technique of naturalism and poetry too. His early plays reveal a natural synthesis of both the naturalistic and the poetic strivings of the modern theatre. He combined realism of characterization with a sensitive regard for the romantic longings of characters, a naturalist's concern for environmental detail with a metaphysical flight from the particular to the general, and plodding realistic prose with a poetic flair for imagery, atmosphere, and scenic imagination, it could be said of him that he was one of the most poetic of modern dramatists. In these early plays the conflict between human aspirations, whether 'immoral longings' or romantic self-delusion, and the forces which prevent their realization is suggested as much by the settings as by the action itself. In *Bound East for Cardiff* it is the fog which surrounds the dying Yank, in *Moon of the Caribbees* is the distance between Smitty and his surroundings, and in *Beyond the Horizon* it is symbolized by the dark ring of hills which hems in the world of the farm, and the petty demands, and frustrations that shape the life of Robert Mayo, and shut out the beauty and wonder of the sunset and the sea and freedom which lie beyond.

O'Neill's tragic heroes are neither kings nor princes, Aristotle had laid down that the tragic hero must be an exceptional individual so that his fall from

his former greatness may arouse the tragic emotions of pity and fear. But O'Neill's tragic personages are all drawn from the humblest ranks of society. They are all ordinary men and women, suffering and downtrodden. Yank, the (protagonist, *The Hairy Ape*) is a stoker, Brutus Jones (protagonist, *The Emperor Jones*) is a poor Negro, and the people who frequented Harry Hope's bar are pimps, prostitutes, bankrupts and bartenders, etc. In an anonymous interview with O'Neill which appeared in the New York Herald Tribune on November 16, 1924, he reveals as follows:

Many of the characters in my plays were suggested to me by people in real life, especially the sea characters. In special pleading I do not believe Gorki's *A Night's Lodging*, the great proletarian revolutionary play, is really more wonderful propaganda for the submerged than any other play ever written, simply because it contains no propaganda, but simply shows humanity as it is – truth in terms of human life. As soon as an author slip's propaganda into a play everyone feels it and the play becomes simply an argument.

The Hairy Ape was propaganda in the sense that it was 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. 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? This idea was expressed in Yank's speech. The public saw just the stoker, not the symbol, and the symbol makes the play either important or just another play. Yank can't go forward, and so he tries to go back. This is what his shaking hands with the gorilla meant. But he can't go back to 'belonging' either. The gorilla kills him. The subject here is the same ancient one that always was and always will be the one subject for drama, and that is man and his struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with



In Desire Under the Elms the characters are all rustics living on a remote New England farm and leading a primitive animal-like existence. His characters are ineffectual egotists, whining for opportunities they are incapable of using. O'Neill's tragedy is truly and apotheosis of the human spirit. His characters crippled emotionally, if not physically, suffer and the very intensity of their suffering ennobles and exalts them. Both Brutus Jones, Yank, Eben and Abbie are exalted by the very intensity of their respective obsessions and suffering. We feel that there is nothing mean and petty about them; their grandeur and heroism is truly tragic. It terrifies, but it also soothes and strengthens. He shows man as he really is in all his nakedness, selfish and mean and yet, such is his art, he gives to this sordid human material and exalted, beautiful shape.

One of the most visible aspects of O'Neill's dramatic art is his preoccupation with the thought content, his concern, with the problems of birth, life and death, with fate and freewill, with the relationship between man and God, with masks and illusions, with mysticism and humanism, and with science and materialism. Almost all his plays reflect one or more of these concerns of the playwright.

In his drama there is a sense of existential despair or we may call "tragic sense of life". His protagonists suffer from a feeling of cosmic loneliness of belonging nowhere, of being shut out from the beauty and wonder of life whether it is Robert of *Beyond the Horizon* or Yank of *Bound East for Cardiff*. Jim of *All*

¹² Richard Levin, *Op.cit.*, 130

God's Chillun Got Wings, Ephraim Cabot of *Desire Under the Elms* or Edmund of *Long Days Journey into Night* – all of them are haunted by a sense of loneliness and inevitable doom. They seek beauty in the world and communication with their fellowmen, but a sinister shadow falls across their dreams, and they find themselves imprisoned in a lonely cell – the cell of their own damned and doomed 'self'.

All his plays are contemptuous of people and denunciatory of human existence. O'Neill's views of life is of something which unaccountably frustrates the individual spirit. The fault may lie in life itself, or it may lie in the insufficiency of given individuals. O'Neill as a playwright does not decide which but proceeds to create dumb tortured persons who come in the end to worse than worthless. These views represent the generality of opinion about O'Neill's philosophy of life. But as in the case of his techniques, his thought remains largely misunderstood. But O'Neill can't be regarded as a misanthropist or as one who has no zest for life. In fact O'Neill is deeply in love with life, in spite of all its ugliness and horror, all its loneliness and despair. He portrays life with a sincerity that commands respect of all genuine lovers of literature.

Another significant aspect of O'Neill's philosophy is its deterministic bias. O'Neill is essentially one of those modern thinkers who are aware of the forces like heredity and environment that shape our destiny. To a determinist, "freedom is a myth, because everything has its sufficient reason for being; a man is free to do that which he has to do". From this point of view, O'Neill is a confirmed determinist. We can see that from his earliest one-act plays of the sea to his final masterpieces he has shown his tragic protagonists fighting against the forces over which they have no control. Anna Christie tells her father how she has been

crushed by the forces beyond her control. Brutus Jones in *The Emperor Jones* thinks that freedom awaits him in Martinique where he will spend his life in luxury. But he has reckoned without the racial and biological forces that have determined his fate. He is finally crushed and defeated by his past which he could not have changed or modified.

Ella says in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* that she is free. Jim tells her: 'we are never free except to do what we have to do'. Mary Tyrone sums up O'Neill's entire philosophy when she says: 'none of us can help the things life has done to us'. They're done before you realize it, and one they're done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you'd like to be, and you've lost your true self forever. But this does not mean that his characters are weaklings whose lives are pathetic but not tragic. In fact, it is just the reverse. It is the great character whose life becomes significant when it struggle against the inevitable.

O'Neill believes that man needs both his past and future to make the present endurable. But paradoxically enough he is destroyed by these very forces in which he seeks his nourishment. Thus, it is a tragic paradox that man is both sustained and destroyed by his illusions.

In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, however much Lavinia might try to set herself free from the Mannon past, she finally realizes that she is irrevocably chained to the fate of the Mannon's. O'Neill's philosophy is also based on an awareness of life's insoluble dichotomies, antinomies and ambiguities. This awareness emanates from his multifaceted confrontation with life.

Seth: Oh, Shenandoah, I can't get near you Way –
ay, I'm bound away –

Lavinia : I'm not bound away – not now, Seth. I'm
bound here – to the Mannon dead! (She gives
a dry little cackle of laughter and turns as if to
enter the house.

Seth: Don't go in there, Vinnie!

Lavinia: Don't be afraid. 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 her with the dead is a worse act
of justice than death or prison!¹³ [Act-IV]

✓ O'Neill no doubt is a major dramatist of the 20th century. The spark of his creative genius sets afire everybody's heart and makes him understand in a better way his relationship with himself and with life. All O'Neill's plays are great tragedies but they are not tragedies of the conventional sort in the Aristotelian tradition. They are tragedies with a difference. Their themes and subject matter may be the same but their form is different. O'Neill's vision of life was essentially tragic; the human predicament is the theme of his plays, which are all, with one exception, tragedies. He is a great tragic artist but with a difference. He writes tragedies of modern life which do not follow the traditional Aristotelian form. There are no tragic heroes, exceptional individuals with hamartia, in the Aristotelian sense. His tragic protagonists are all drawn from the humblest ranks of society. His tragedies are so many studies in the destructive possibilities of "The romantic ideal". They demonstrate that any kind of escape from the reality of life is self-destroying; they assert at every step the beauty and joy of life which

¹³ Eugene O'Neill, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, (London: Cox & Wyman LTD. 1973) 287.

must be accepted with all its joys as well with all its limitations. According to O'Neill man has lost faith in the God of old religions and has yet found no new faith. Living in an impersonal, mechanical, urbanized and industrialized social environment, man is constantly on the rack. He suffers from inner emptiness, isolation and a feeling of insecurity. O'Neill made himself the dramatist of ironic fate and of the psychological tensions.

Even though O'Neill has got certain limitations as a dramatist, he remains a great dramatist, one of the greatest figures in the 20th century theatre. His great and central merit is that he is a serious and generally sincere artist. He has always, I think, been faithful to his vision, such as it is; and this is the root of all good writing. In the second place, O'Neill has at his best a fine sense of dramatic values, and a penetrating insight into emotion. Finally, he has always shown a splendid artistic courage. He has dared to try new things, and to do old things in new ways. He has greatly widened the range of our theatre.