

**CHAPTER-VI**

**CONCLUSION**

## I

In the preceding chapters attempt have been made to make an objective study of O'Neill's tragic tension and how O'Neill monitors the multi-pronged channels of discordant experiences, relating to himself, to his time, to his nation and, finally, by implication to mankind itself.

This distinctive tragic vision of O'Neill finds apt revelation in his plays. Both his life and art are directed towards the explorations of the essential tragic mode. The passionate involvement which is the distinctive trait of his personality, and dispassionate detachment, the hallmark of stage art, commingle in the plays of O'Neill. His plays both individually and in their totality register the tragic impact of a rare sort, achieving a better and better cohesion between vision and art.

The first chapter gives the introduction of the playwright. It gives in detail about O'Neill; his birth, about his parents and his elder brother and how they are responsible in making O'Neill a great American playwright of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The incompatible marriage of his parents formed the theme of several important plays of O'Neill. Bearing the influences of various trends in philosophy and art, O'Neill integrates the metaphysical as well as the psychological dimensions in his plays which show modern man's predicament. He also follows the tradition of the Greek tragedians. He links this tradition with the modern realities.

The second chapter illustrates the social, literal and cultural background of Eugene O'Neill. His cultural and familial connection with Ireland and his American-Irish background where he received a confused message about the importance of being Irish is also discussed in this chapter. The varying influences on O'Neill and the changing concept of theatre in the modern times are significant factors. These aspects have also been analyzed thoroughly in this chapter. They reinforce, to a large extent, the inherent symbolic bent of O'Neill's mind. O'Neill was inspired by writers like Yeats, Synge, Lady Gregory when he read their plays while he was in a sanatorium undergoing treatment of tuberculosis.

The third chapter illustrates the theories of tragedy – Greek and classical tragedy, English and Shakespearean tragedy and the American tragedy. More emphasis has been given to the concept and growth of modern American drama with special reference to O'Neill. This chapter also illustrates how symbol is used as a potent mode in O'Neill's plays. It shows how the symbols that spread over the whole spectrum of O'Neill's drama, are meaningfully used to serve multiple dramatic functions.

The chapter concentrates on the analysis of the symbol of 'sea', 'fog' and 'home'. The analysis indicates how complex, rich and ambiguous they are especially in their particular dramatic context. It has been explained at some length how these symbols are integral to structure of the plays and how they project the essence of O'Neill's tragic tension. This chapter also interprets O'Neill's technique of using mask in his plays. Mask is a stage mechanism, a metaphor and a method to reveal the inner consciousness of man. All its aspects are probed. O'Neill's handling of this device in his plays has been investigated deeply in this chapter.

The fourth chapter is the detailed analysis of six major plays of O'Neill written in his early phase of his life from 1919-1924, as tragic works of art. With the concrete evidence of O'Neill's letters and interviews, it has been shown how he formulated his concept of tragedy<sup>and</sup> how he gave it a shape. The dreams of Robert Mayo are frustrated and his life becomes a waste. But never for a moment does he believe that life is only a decaying futility. In the midst of heartbreaking failure he keeps himself together by his faith in his dreams, the dreams that have always called to him from beyond the horizon. Yank is another tragic figure who rebels against a cosmos that doesn't accept him as one of its own. His total failure to 'belong' anywhere – to his home, to the ship where he works, to the world of men or even to the gorilla – does not make him cringe before God in an abject supplication. He challenges the entire cosmic and existential structure to win the meaning of life and gets a spiritual illumination of some sort in the realization of his inner crisis.

The fifth chapter is also the detailed analysis of another six major plays of O'Neill written in his later phase of life from 1925 to 1943, as tragic works of art.

It has been found out that O'Neill's tragic heroes do not violate a social or moral code to disturb the rhythm of a divine order. They, on the contrary, violate the code of life itself by remaining true to the artificial codes of a puritanic ethics or a religious dogmatism. Professor Leeds, and Egra Mannon provide glorious examples of what happens when man suppresses the basic urges of life in preference to a false, inhuman ideal dictated by the supposedly ethical norms of society. Lavinia provides still another illustration of the heroic struggle of man to face the ghosts of his past and of his damned self. Even when she fails in her quest for peace, love and beauty, she doesn't surrender to a cowardly death. She enters the House of Mannons to pay back the loan of life, to pay the price of being a Mannon.

## II

A playwright does not achieve clarity of vision or maturity of technique just in a flash. It involves a long, continuous process of growth and development. In a sense, growth is the necessary condition for acquiring greatness. In the case of O'Neill, too, the graph of development can be traced – showing the coalescence of vision and technique. Certainly, O'Neill possesses an unfailing sense of structure along with the skill of symbol making and management of dialogue and action. The achievement of O'Neill lies in the relevance of his plays to major concerns of our time and his success depends upon his ability to translate profound meaning in effective theatrical language. The form or art pattern of his theatre is not an accidental phenomenon but is the result of a constant pursuit to create a new and relevant mode of contemporary dramatic idiom.

O'Neill is a triumphant artist who has learnt and mastered his art step by step taking every failure as a challenge and every success as a prelude to further

development. All the varied facets of his art – symbols, scenery, lighting, sound, mask, dialogue – show a gradual evolution. Through constant use, they come to acquire an identity of their own, producing gradually more natural but complex and ambiguous results. The myriad symbols and metaphors floating in his early plays are effective no doubt, but gradually they become more and more rooted in the totality of the play. In the early sea plays, the relation of the characters to the sea is direct and their longing for or complaint against it is simple and obvious. Representing the past world of harmony in *The Hairy Ape*, the sea emerges as a purifying agent in *Anna Christie* and as a primordial antithesis against land in *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the sea became the catalyst between man and destiny. Edmund goes through a mystical experience by its side. Finally, the sea symbol becomes powerful enough to grow in the air of the play. It contributes to its tenor and enhances its effect. Similarly, the symbol of fog at first fulfils only a few simple functions; later, it serves several aims at one and the same time and plays a decisive part in the characterization of the figures in the play and in expressing the dramatic theme. On the whole, the symbols grow more and more functional in O'Neill's plays. Symbols in O'Neill's plays seem to register a similar pattern of development.

In the employment of dialogue, too, O'Neill's art reflects a sense of growth and maturity. Soliloquies are spread all over the dramatic canon of O'Neill, yet in the later plays they are as dramatically relevant and rich. Not only in the penetrative power of soliloquy but also in all other aspects of dialogue as well, O'Neill's skill grows gradually profounder and more and more complex.

But O'Neill was not free from being attacked by critics for giving a very bleak picture of existence and for providing unhappy endings to his plays. To defend himself O'Neill said:

Sure, I'll write about happiness if I ever happen to meet up with that luxury, and find it sufficiently dramatic and in harmony with any deep rhythm of life. But happiness is a word. What does it mean? Exaltation; an intensified feeling of the significant worth of man's being and becoming? Well, if it means that – and not a mere smirking contentment with one's lot – I know there is more of it in one real tragedy than in all the happy-ending plays ever written... It's sheer present-day judgment to think of tragedy as unhappy. The Greeks and the Elizabethans knew better. They felt the tremendous lift to it. It roused them spiritually to a deeper understanding of life. Through it they found release from the petty considerations of everyday existence. They saw their lives ennobled by it. A work of art is always happy. All else is unhappy.<sup>1</sup>

Some critics brand O'Neill as an out-and-out pessimist for the preponderance of gloom in his plays. The anonymous critic for the *Times Literary Supplement* expresses his shocked surprise that O'Neil, "whose whole belief about life contradicts his country's"<sup>2</sup> should be applauded as its greatest playwright. Seeing in his plays nothing but an expression of nihilism, cynicism and despair, the same critic observes further:

All his plays are contemptuous of people and denunciatory of human existence; a combination service without a hymn. He has no zest for life: it disgusts him; and he may be described as the last of the Cathari, that singular sect of Christian, who loathed life, refused fertility, in principle if not in practice, and gave their greatest admiration to suicide.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur & Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill*, (New York: Harper & Raw Publisher, 1962) 486

<sup>2</sup> N. Bryllion Fagin, Oscar Cargill, William J. Fisher, *O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism*, (USA: New York University Press, 1963) 389

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Similarly, another critic, Carl Van Doren, makes a restrained expression of this view:

O'Neill's view of life, it now seems clear, 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 naught.<sup>4</sup>

These two views represent the generality of opinion about O'Neill's philosophy of life. Regarding O'Neill as a pessimist by some critic, S.K. Winther, one of the most perceptive critics of O'Neill holds the view that O'Neill's pessimism is a kind of creative pessimism, denoting an acceptance and affirmation of life:

His pessimism is of man in this world in which he must live and justify himself in life is to have a meaning. His pessimism is born of man, not of God or the Universe. It is a pessimism that has in it some gleam of hope, for it holds that man's greatest tragedies are of his own making, and thus it is a fair presumption to hope that man may unmake them. Not that O'Neill says that he will do so; he may recognize the persistence of man's hopeless hope.<sup>5</sup>

Interpreted in this light, O'Neill's philosophy becomes a source of creative inspiration to his readers and audiences. Only a superficial reading of his work would make one think of O'Neill as a defeatist in his outlook on life. Affirming his positive philosophy which denies pessimism, O'Neill wrote in a letter to Mary Clark, his nurse at Gaylord Sanatorium:

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<sup>4</sup> Sophus Keith Winther, *Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study*, (New York : Russell & Russell ,1961) 210-211

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 213



I am far from being a pessimist. I see life as a gorgeously – ironical, beautifully – indifferent, splendidly – suffering bit of chaos, the tragedy of which gives man a tremendous significance, while without his losing fight with fate he would be a tepid, silly animal. I say “losing fight” only symbolically, for the brave individuals always wins. Fate can never conquer his – or her – spirit. So you see I’m no pessimist. On the contrary, in spite of my scars, I’m tickled to death with life.<sup>6</sup>

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 hereditary and environment that shape our destiny. Nevertheless, there are a host of critics who believe in man’s perfect freedom to act. William G. McCollom, for instance, says about the tragic hero that he “is a conscious agent who freely embarks upon a purposive course, makes critical decisions, including, it may be, the decision to decide nothing, and experiences the results of his choices.”<sup>7</sup> But such a view is contrary to O’Neill’s philosophy which is essentially deterministic. 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, which simply means, that he is free to be the product of the forces that made him what he is.<sup>8</sup>

From this point of view, O’Neill is a confirmed determinist. 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:

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<sup>6</sup> Athur & Barbara Gelb, *Op. cit.* 260-61

<sup>7</sup> William G. McCollom, *Tragedy*, (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1957) 5

<sup>8</sup> Sophus Keith Winther, *Op. cit.* 136

I was caged in, I tell you – just like in jail . . . . So I give up finally. What was the use?<sup>9</sup> [Act – III]

Brutus 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. When Ella says in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* that she is free, Jim tells her:

We're never free – except to do what we have to do.<sup>10</sup>  
[Act-I, Sc-III]

Marry Tyrone sums up O'Neill's entire Philosophy when he says:

None of us can help the things life has done to us. They're done before you realize it, and once they're done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you'd like to be, you've lost your true self forever.<sup>11</sup> [Act-II, Sc-I]

Thus O'Neill's Characters:

Move in a world of dark and sinister forces, which govern the destinies of men and women helpless and impotent before the workings of these unpredictable powers. This does not mean that his characters are weaklings whose lives are pathetic but not tragic. Just the reverse is true. It is the great character whose life becomes significant when it struggles against the inevitable.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Eugene O'Neill, *Anna Christie: Complete Plays 1913-1920*, (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988) 1008

<sup>10</sup> Eugene O'Neill, *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, (Bristol: Western Printing Services Ltd, 1968) 208

<sup>11</sup> Eugene O'Neill, *Long Days Journey into Night: Complete Plays 1932-1943*, (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988) 749

<sup>12</sup> Sophus Keith Winther, *Op. cit.*, 178

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. 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 Mannons.

O'Neill lives in a 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 God is not a supernatural being. He is just as human or inhuman as we all are. When Ella in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* asks her husband, 'Will God forgive me, Jim?'; he replied:

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 is going to forgive Himself.<sup>13</sup> [Act-II, Sc-III]

The plays of O'Neill, thus, provide us a vision of life which makes up understand ourselves better. By probing into the very heart of existence they provide a meaningful commentary or human situation. Winther said:

But living in the world of O'Neill is not an easy task . . . .  
It is a world that demands courage, that is intense with experience, and that above all is not supine. It is a world

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<sup>13</sup> Eugene O'Neill, *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, (Bristol: Western Printing Services Ltd., 1961) 234.

in which we are not allowed to 'delude' ourselves with 'some tawdry substitute'. To O'Neill 'Life doesn't end. One experience is but the birth of another.'<sup>14</sup>

O'Neill was also charged by critics that his tragedies lack 'action' which is the backbone of tragedy. While appreciating O'Neill's reaffirmation of the traditional values of tragedy, Frederic I. Carpenter said:

. . . in his rebellion against American materialism and in his scorn for the superficialities of the literature and theatre of his time, he went on to attack all 'materialism' in such a way as to minimize the pragmatic values of man's struggle. And, by his exclusive concern with emotion, he progressively excluded the element of action, upon which tragedy has traditionally depended for its most dramatic effects. His scorn for 'the American dream of material things' led him, by contrast, to dramatize those unrealistic 'pipe dreams' which are wholly divorced from reason and from action.<sup>15</sup>

But O'Neill does not believe that external action has any meaning outside of man. Man is what life has made him and the acceptance of this fact is a positive assertion of his humanity. In an interview published in 1902 O'Neill made an explicit statement of his theory of 'action':

Our emotions are a better guide than our thoughts. Our emotions are instinctive. They are the result not only of our individual experiences, but of the experiences of the whole human race through the ages. They are the deep undercurrent, whereas our thoughts are often only the small individual surface reactions. Truth usually goes deep. So it reaches you through your emotions.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Sophus Keith Winther, *Op. cit.*, 226-227

<sup>15</sup> Frederic I. Carpenter, *Eugene O'Neill*, (New Haven, Conn: College & University Press, 1964) 176-177

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 175

O'Neill's tragic vision transcends time and space because in delineating the sufferings of modern man, he is projecting the picture of man who has eternally suffered not always because of his pride as Miss Falk says about O'Neill. In O'Neill, a common man suffers not because of his pride but he suffers because of his failure to realize his ideal, to fulfill his dream, to live a life as he wants to live or because he is just an outsider, an unbelonging unit in this world of miseries. Falk said:

They have no existence of their own except by virtue of man's existence. He is in actuality therefore, free from all outside authority in the determination of his fate, but he is also the lonely bearer of a terrifying responsibility for himself and the race. He has nothing on which to lean for support but himself, nothing to blame for his failures but himself.<sup>17</sup>

But Miss Falk's views are too narrow to be applied to O'Neill whose tragedies have a universality despite their existential undertones.

In O'Neill's plays suffering is caused by the interaction of the hero's private guilt and the evils or hostile conditions that obtain in the society. O'Neill admired Strindberg, Nietzsche and Jung and was greatly influenced by Strindberg's expressionistic technique and his tragic view of life, but O'Neill's 'tragic vision' in the artistic and aesthetic sense of the term, is exclusively his own.

O'Neill's tragedies present the picture of a flaming whirlpool with a notch symbolizing the serrated state of his being. Thus, a correlation between his plays and the Nietzschean point of view is established. Perhaps no other modern

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<sup>17</sup> Doris V. Falk, *Eugene O'Neill And the Tragic Tension*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958)  
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playwright has literally 'lived' the emotional content of his material so tragically and truthfully as did O'Neill. No wonder he succeeded in creating an exclusive world of tragedy out of his self and his times. His tragedies are so much related to his private life that it is difficult to separate them from him. His plays, however, are not mere records of private agonies and sufferings. Through a process of artistic transmutation, they transcend time and space and become the archetype of man's eternal tragedy.

O'Neill's early plays have been divided into two categories: Land and sea plays. At least twenty of his plays have sea or seashores as their settings. About a dozen of the land plays are set in the Manhattan island. The rest of them take place in New England farms, or small towns whose various 'social and moral struggles' constitute the real core of O'Neill's dramatic conflicts.

The sea in O'Neill's Plays is employed in three ways: First, as an exclusive world in itself, with its own meanings and mysteries; second, as a living character; and third, as a place that provides a general contrast to the land and its way of life.

O'Neill heroically responds to the dynamics of change for his is a consistently developing attitude. He moves from negation to affirmation – from denial of God to acceptance of God, from helplessness to hope. The later O'Neill, as revealed in his last plays, the picture of a resurrected Phoenix rising out of its own ashes. His tragic vision may be said to convey the idea that one can reach the Elysium of light and peace only after passing through Inferno. This is what O'Neill does in his later plays. O'Neill's interpretation of the tragedy of man has a ring of sincerity, an indication of his honest endeavour to find out the idiom that can express the worth of life in spite of its apparent futility and meaninglessness.

In an explanation of the aesthetics of human action that gave tragedy its form and meaning, O'Neill observed:

To me, the tragic alone has that significant beauty which is truth. It is the meaning of life – and the hope. The noblest is eternally the most tragic. People who succeed and do not push on to a greater failure are the spiritual middle classers. Their stopping at success is the proof of their compromising insignificance . . . . Only through the unattainable does man achieve a hope worth living and dying for – and so attain himself. He, with the spiritual guerdon of a hope in hopelessness, is nearest to the stars and the rainbows.<sup>18</sup>

O'Neill's tragic world is peopled with a galaxy of tragically colourful characters – Robert and Andrew Mayo in *Beyond the Horizon*, Brutus Jones in *Emperor Jones*, Yank in *Hairy Ape*, Ephraim Cabot in *Desire Under the Elms*, Nina in *Strange Interlude* and Lavinia in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Hickey and Parritt in *The Iceman Cometh* and Mary and James Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. They all set unattainable ideals before them and meet the inevitable failure and doom. But not before they have understood the meaning and value of the struggle itself.

Thus, a proper evaluation of O'Neill's dramatic art makes it evident that he is a major dramatist of the twentieth 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.

Further investigation can be done in the area related to the significance of stage directions and the cogency of dialogue in O'Neill's plays. Investigations can

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<sup>18</sup> Arthur & Barbara Gelbs, *Op.cit.*, 104

be done how the stage devices of scenery, lighting, sound, and silence enhance the emotional appeal of the play and create a theatre of imagination. Illustrations can also be done to bring out how far O'Neill had succeeded in using slang and quotations in bringing out the deeper levels of the consciousness of his characters. Whether the use of soliloquy and its variants really helps O'Neill to show a living and exciting dialogue of a new kind that rings with purposefulness, intricate connections with the themes of the play, and serves multiple other functions.

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