Chapter 4

Conclusion

In this century O'Neill created a theatre that speaks for America in the sense in which the theatre of Corneille, Racine and Moliere spoke for France of Louis XIV. He created a tradition of drama where there had been none. Great theatrical tradition of the past provided him the necessary background.

What O'Neill did he adapted and developed the things he learnt from European masters. Ibsen and Strindberg exercised tremendous influence upon him. Like Strindberg, he tried to establish an intimate relationship between his writing and personal experience. His plays, it seems, are deliberately set apart from contemporary situation. Strindberg isolates a human problem. His Miss Julia is not an individual but a collection of dream sequences. Immediate effect of the war saw the characters depersonalized and typical.

O'Neill's tragic vision encompasses the life of the acquisitive middle class. Characters belong to the higher strata of society. Individual is at the centre of such plays The Great God Brown, Strange Interlude as. Psychological analysis is again the means of developing individual characterization. But the playwright uses different devices in each particular case. He introduces masks, interior monologue and asides to show the split in protagonist's consciousness. Disintegration sets in the personality of the individual which again is the sum of disjointed attributes taken together. But the individual can never recover the harmonious whole because what produced his disintegration lies outside him. If s root cause is social reality over which individual has no power. Bourgeois society with its acquisitive mentality poisons the
protagonists’ consciousness and makes them thirst for possessions and thus deprive them of the possibility of having human relations. This interpretation of life as the source of tragedy is what brings O'Neill's tragedy close to classical Greek tragedy in such play as Mourning Becomes Electra. Gone are the days of dignified aristocratic tragedies of eighteenth century. O'Neillian tragic characters are not called upon to restore the broken order of an Athenian court or of a code bound society. Lavinia of Mourning Becomes Electra finds in the end of the play her own individual moral order. She will forgo the bliss of married life so that the family curse of the Mannons may not visit upon the life of next generation. She will punish herself for being born a Mannon and closes the door behind her. As opposed to the Aristotelian concept of tragedy O'Neill may be said to write naturalistic tragedies. There is no supernatural destiny presiding over O'Neillian universe. Family past, racial heritage, man's biological past and capitalistic social structure made by man prove catastrophic to man's realizing genuinely human aspirations upon earth.

“In Strindberg”, observes Eric Bentley, “modern tragedy is in the process of dissolution.... in Strindberg's dream play, the characters split, double multiply, vanish.”(1)

Nevertheless, O'Neill's characters are particularized. They claim our attention as people of flesh and blood. O'Neill happens to be the worthy disciple of Strindberg in the sense that he did absorb, and adapt the Scandinavian master in his own way. He adapted Strindberg’s expressionism on the American stage. His art in The Emperor Jones and The Hairy Ape remains an achievement in the domain of expressionistic-realistic theatre.

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Clifford Leech observes, “And Wedekind and Strindberg were writers of a previous generation whose work could be absorbed, not simply copied or transplanted to an American scene. What happened when European expressionism was thus simply Americanized can be seen in Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine (1923) an ingenious but basically facetious play. Jones and the Hairy Ape are new creations, in line with Toller's and Kaiser's work but not merely echoic” (2). Like his master Strindberg, O'Neill literally lived the emotion of his plays tragically and truthfully. He, therefore, could perhaps create an exclusive world of tragedy out of his self and his period. His tragedies are related to his private life. It is difficult to separate them from his being. But his plays are not a mere record of his private agonies and sufferings. Through a process of artistic transmutation, his plays transcend the limitation of time and space.

O'Neill witnessed the rise of a mindless and acquisitive middle class. The society which the exploitative capital builds stifles the morals and thwarts the aspirations of the individual. The individual's struggle against the falsity of life ends in Dion Anthony's self-destruction, Nina Leeds' a pathetic surrender and Lavinia Mannon's triumphant acceptance of her fate. This is the root of the tragedy of modern life. Impulse towards faith, love and ideal is frustrated by greed and hate which the tyrannical society generates. O'Neill tries to objectify in his plays this conflict between the mindless materialism and man's search for meaningful existence on earth. In O'Neill, a common man suffers not because of his extraordinary ambition or pride for he is not Macbeth or King Lear or Julius Caesar.

He suffers because of his failure to realize his ideal, to fulfill his dream or to live a life as he wants. The heroes of romantic sea plays like Bound East for Cardiff or Beyond the Horizon have a
goal of ideal existence beyond the horizon and hence, they suffer tension in mind. This torment or mental anguish is central to O’Neillian vision. Although his life, he makes experiments with dramatic technique to release the tension in man’s soul. Intensely emotional, O’Neillian heroes seek to attain in life something unattainable. They are men of feeling and are filled with self pity and loathing. This provides a unity in O’Neill’s vision of life as well as in his works. In modern tragedy, the tragic element is derived not from Greek destiny but from the individual psyche of modern man. Modern tragic hero is conscious of the war of contradictory forces within his self. In our godless era, tragic vision stems from the fact that human life is hollow and empty of meaning. This view of life is portrayed by O’Neill in his last play Iceman Cometh. Early O’Neill sometimes reflected that human life was essentially unhappy. But he loved life passionately inspite of its ugliness. As a dramatist his primary concern was to reveal and manifest the transforming power of tragedy. In his major plays he portrays modern man’s tragic predicament and makes a “determined effort to trace a thread of meaning in the universe, virtually emptied of meaning by a century of Scientific and Sociological thought.”(3) In 1922, a couple of years before writing his most powerful tragedy Desire Under the Elms, O’Neill made a statement of his awareness of the tragic vision of the ancients, as also of his own attitude towards life.

“Sure, I will write about happiness if I can happen to meet with that luxury, and find it sufficiently dramatic and in harmony with any deep rhythm in life. But happiness is a word. What does it mean? Exaltation; an intensified feeling of the significant worth of man being and becoming? Well, if it means that—and not a mere striking 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 mere
present-day judgment to think of tragedy as unhappy. The Greeks and the Elizabethans knew it better. They felt the tremendous lift to it. It roused them spiritually to a deeper understanding of life. They saw their lives ennobled by it” (4).

In play after play, O'Neill frantically wrestled to project his noble vision of tragedy. His tragic sensibility is so acute that there is little comedy in his work. His conception of tragedy is different from that of the Greeks. He found that ancient myths are useful, as vehicle to express the contemporary suffering of life. Faith in some ultimate God or revelation does not animate O'Neill's personalities. Contemporary human being is faced with contradictions which are terrible and hence, a tragic vision is inevitable. During the twenties this vision of O'Neill was represented by Maxwell Anderson, Elmer Rice and others. Anderson was seized with the problems which are faced by the individual, especially the problem of social injustice. Even in his war play What Price Glory, the Shavian trend in Anderson is manifest debunking the glory of war. O'Neill and Anderson developed tragic visions which have continued to attract attention of the playwrights of the fifties and sixties such as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and MacLeish. O'Neill's questioning of American values was a dominant trend in post-war non-dramatic literature. American complacency was given a rude shock by Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis and others. Robert Frost's challenge was directed and aimed at the fundamentals of American life. In 1922, Sinclair Lewis produced his best novel Babbitt, a novel of originality and satire which perhaps casts a reflection on O'Neill's drama of satire in Marco Millions. While Sinclair Lewis resorted to realistic satire, Scott Fitzgerald exposed the post war reality. O'Neill eventually sought an escape in the nihilistic despair of Iceman Cometh and a dreamy mysticism was the forte of Sherwood Anderson. If O'Neill was distressed by the American situation, he
was happy in the consciousness of new powers within himself. He found potent means of discharging his pent up dissatisfaction with the commonplace middle class world he had known in New London.

Between 1914 and 1941, he wrote more than sixty plays; with the exception of Bernard Shaw, no other modern dramatist has sustained so high a level of creativity. His plays may be conviently divided into two categories, Land and Sea plays. A significant biographical fact of O'Neill's life is that he was a sailor for some time and had first-hand experience of the sea and seaman's life. The romantic artist in him dramatically utilized his sea-faring experience in his early plays, customarily referred to as his sea plays. Characters in these early plays cherish dream beyond their horizon. These plays contain tragic elements because the characters take illusion to be the reality and they pursue a false dream. But the dream of these early plays ceases to have a sustaining reality as O'Neill enters upon the second stage of his maturity.

On the American stage, the nearest date we may think of when a play of tragic vision was presented is 1920. The play was O'Neill's Beyond the Horizon. In this play, an attempt is made to re-create tragedy as a dignified vision of life. Previously, tragedies on the American stage were sheer melodrama, similar to the attempts made by Sheridan, Lytton and Tennyson. The hero pretends in these plays to be other than what he is. The tragic personality experiences an awakening in the end, becomes aware of his struggle with the forces that beset him. In the plays which followed this vision O'Neill worked out various aspects of his hero's commitment. The early tragic personalities like Emperor Jones, Hairy Ape, Abbie and Eben seek to run away after having committed themselves to particular situation. They experience a tragic delusion
and not tragic illumination. But in plays like Mourning Becomes Electra the tragic protagonists face reality and assume the responsibility of their situations to which they are committed. In these plays O'Neill does not emphasize the cathartic effect but tries to penetrate deep into the consciousness of the protagonist hero in the context of the choice he makes. With Hairy Ape and two natural lovers Abbie and Eben, O'Neill's tragic vision deepens to include the hidden primitive forces deep down human consciousness. These powerful instincts man shares with animals, and these dark forces finally overthrow the pretensions of man. These dark forces which man carries within his psyche are the real forces behind the motivation of later tragic protagonists like Nina in Strange Interlude. Man is not what he appears to be and that values based on appearances are bound to crumble at the first touch of reality is what O'Neill took pains to develop from the Great God Brown (1926), a turning point in his tragic vision in twenties to Mourning Becomes Electra (1931). The Tragic hero struggles with his own values and he learns as he struggles. In this lies the transfiguring nobility of tragedy. Tragic protagonist becomes aware of the force that works through him. The 1920s and 1930s was perhaps the greatest period in the history of American drama. The twenties may also be called O'Neill decade. In tragedy there were the plays of Eugene O'Neill, by common consent the greatest dramatist America has yet produced. Among O'Neill's more important works are Beyond the Horizon (1920), The Emperor Jones (1921), Anna Christie and The Hairy Ape (1922), Desire Under the Elms (1924), The Great God Brown (1926), Strange Interlude (1928) and Mourning Becomes Electra (1931). O'Neill's creativity had declined in later years (owing to ill health). “Interesting drama was not lacking in 1930s and 1940s as is evidenced by Maxwell Anderson's Winterset, Clifford Odet's Waiting for Lefty. Lillian Hellman's The Little Foxes and Tennessee Williams' A
Street Car Named Desire. But despite success like these,' the great work of O'Neill in the 1920s stands out still as the high point in American dramatic literature. (5)O'Neill once referred to his last four plays as 'an interlocking series'(6) with the order The Iceman Cometh, A Moon for the Misbegotten, A Touch of the Poet and A Long Day's Journey into Night'. In these plays O'Neill appears to return to a naturalistic portrayal of characters recalled from his own impressions and experiences. The Iceman Cometh, as the title suggests, concerns people who console themselves with pipe dream. They live only by illusion and when the illusion disappears there is only death. The characters achieve tragic delusion and not illumination. A Moon for the Misbegotten is an autobiographical play like A Touch of the Poet and Long Day's Journey into Night. In these plays O'Neill seems to be digging into his family history in order to deepen the impact of tragedy. These last plays seem to lack dramatic action which is so essential for dramatic effect. Of course O'Neill's exclusive concern with emotion made his tragedies less prone to action. His plays fall short of the dramatic action that obtains in Attic and Renaissance tragedies. (7) If there is any action in his plays it is there in intense conflicts in the mind of his character. This is expressly manifest in the plays written in the 20s, his middle period of creativity when the playwright was at the peak of his achievement.
Works Cited


