CHAPTER II

HIS LIFE AND WORKS
(1) His Birth:

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill (16 October 1888-27 November 1953) was born in a Broadway hotel room in Times Square. The site is now a Starbucks (1500 Broadway, Northeast corner of 43rd & Broadway); a commemorative plaque is posted on the outside wall with the inscription:

“Eugene O'Neill, October 16, 1888-November 27, 1953 America’s greatest playwright was born on this site then called Barrett Hotel, Presented by Circle in the Square.”

[From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia]

He was the son of Irish actor James O’Neill and Ella Quinlan. Because of his father’s profession, O’Neill was sent to a Catholic boarding school where he found his only solace in books. O’Neill spent his summers in New London, Connecticut. After being suspended from Princeton University, he spent several years at sea, during which he suffered from depression and alcoholism. O’Neill’s parents and elder brother Jamie (who drank himself to death at the age of 45) died within three years of one another, and O’Neill turned to writing as a form escape. Despite his depression he had a deep love for
the sea, and it became a prominent theme in most of his plays, several of which are set onboard ships like the ones that he worked on.

He was an American playwright, and Nobel laureate in Literature. His plays are among the first to introduce into American drama the techniques of realism, associated with Russian playwright Anton Chekhov, Norwegian playwright Henry Ibsen, and Swedish playwright August Strindberg. His plays were among the first to include speeches in American vernacular and involve characters on the fringes of society, engaging in depraved behavior, where they struggle to maintain their hopes and aspiration, but ultimately slide into disillusionment and despair. O’Neill wrote only one well-known comedy (Ah, Wilderness!).

His birth proved calamitous to the family. Although things were not right with the O’Neills even before Eugene was born, they were far worse afterward. The story of what happened, the quintessential story, is told in one of his last works, the autobiographical A Long Day’s Journey into Night, his “play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood.” O’Neill was born in 1888, the play is set in 1912, yet its principals—the author himself, his mother, his father, his brother—are still haunted by his birth, by something his birth had set in motion. His mother says:

“I was so healthy before Edmund was born. But bearing Edmund was the last straw. [Though O’Neill used in the play the actual given names of his parents and brother, he called himself “Edmund,” after a brother who had died in infancy]. ............... It wasn’t until after Edmund was born that I had a single gray
hair. Then it began to turn white............... He has never been happy. Nor healthy.

He was born nervous and too sensitive ............... I was afraid all the time I carried
Edmund. I knew something terrible would happen.”

[Shaffer, Louis, 1968, p.3]

Though time failed to soften the playwright’s memories, it apparently had a
muffling effect on Ella Quinlan O’Neill. In one of her rare extant letters, written to Eugene
in 1919, she was stirred to reminiscence. Ella Quinlan O’Neill says:

“I am one of the happiest old ladies in New York tonight to know I have
such a wonderful grandson but no more wonderful than you were when you were
born and weighed eleven pounds [her underscoring] and no nerves at that time. I
am enclosing a picture of you taken at three months. Hope your boy will be as
good looking.” She ended the letter with love to his wife, baby, “and the biggest
baby of the three, You.”

[Shaffer, Louis, 1968, p. 4]

Mr. & Mrs. O’Neill, several close friends, and a nursemaid baptized and christened
the child Eugene Gladstone O’Neill. With his father an emotional sounding board for the
disturbances on the other side, Ireland was never far away throughout Eugene Gladstone
O’Neill’s formative years. O’Neill says:

“One thing that explains more than anything about me,” he once said, “is
the fact that I’m Irish.”
In *A Long Days Journey into Night* he tells his essential story in a few words:

“It was a great mistake, my being born a man; I would have been much more successful as a sea gull or a fish. As it is, I will always be a stranger who never feels at home, who does not really want and is not really wanted, who can never belong, and who must always be a little in love with death!”

[A Long Days Journey into Night, p.135]

O’Neill was married to Kathleen Jenkins from October 2, 1909 to 1912, during which time they had one son, Eugene Jr. (1910-1950). In 1917, O’Neill met Agnes Bolton, a successful writer of commercial fiction, and they married on April 12, 1918. The years of their marriage—during which the couple had two children, Shane and Oona—are described vividly in her 1958 memoir *Part of a Long Story*. They divorced in 1929, after O’Neill abandoned Bolton and the children for the actress Carlotta Monterey. O’Neill and Carlotta married less than a month after he officially divorced his previous wife.

Eugene had a literary taste. His favourite writers of fiction were Jack London, Conrad and Kipling. He often talked of Nietzsche, Ibsen, Schopenhauer, and Dostoevsky when Kathleen responded with little interest in his talks. Eugene was disappointed and thought it difficult to maintain a harmonious relation with her. Further Eugene joined the ‘White Sister’s theatrical company as an assistant Manager. This was Eugene’s first formal connection with theatre.
(2) The First Voyage:

This voyage of “sixty-five days on a Norwegian baroque,” took him to Buenos Aires. He worked there first for the Wasting-house Company; he liked to hang about the waterfront, making friends with sailors, stevedores, the down-and-outs. And he liked to drink. In the evenings he used to go to the sailor’s opera, “a large café to which all seamen automatically went. O’Neill says:

“These moving pictures were mighty rough stuff. Nothing was left to the imagination. Every form of perversity was enacted, and of course sailors flocked to them. But, save for the usual exceptions, they were not vicious men. They were in the main honest, good-natured, unheroically courageous men trying to pass the time pleasantly.”

[Clark, Barrett H., 1947, p.15-16]

(3) He becomes a Reporter:

O’Neill began his work as a club reporter on the Telegraph. He did regular reporting. It has been said that his half year as a newspaperman was a period of unhappiness and depression. His friendship with the boss, Frederick P. Latimer meant a great deal in those days. O’Neill says:

“He’s the first one who really thought I had something to say, and believed I could say it.”

[Clark, Barrett, H., 1947, p.18]

(4) Illness:
In December, 1912, O’Neill’s health broke down. He had spent little time at home and for sixteen years he had been attending school, travelling with his parents, venturing forth on the high seas or drifting from job to job in North or South America; his nervous system, never too strong, had been seriously taxed by a good deal of hard and indiscriminate drinking.

Now out of a clear sky the doctor told him he had a touch of tuberculosis, and for the first time he would have to take a hold of himself. At Gaylord the urge to write first came to him, the desire to express what he knew and felt about life. Eugene O’Neill says:

“My father was worried about me. He didn’t know how to handle me, he didn’t ‘get’ what I was trying to do; he only wanted me to settle down and make a living. He often used to think I was just crazy.”

[Clark Barrett H., 1947, p. 21]

The five months at Gaylord marked a turning-point in his life. Eugene O’Neill says in the Journal of Outdoor Life, in 1923:

“…………… It was at Gaylord that my mind got the chance to establish itself, to digest and evaluate the impressions of many past years in which one experience had crowded another with never a second’s reflection. At Gaylord I really thought about my life for the first time, about past and future. Undoubtedly the inactivity forced upon me by the life at a san forced me to mental activity, especially as I had always been high-strung and nervous temperamentally.”
(5) The Turning Point:

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of O’Neill’s breakdown in the winter of 1912-13. The youth who entered Gaylord and the man who left it were two different beings. The first was occasionally a wild boy who loved life in the raw, whose restlessness and curiosity drove him away from family and friends in search of strange countries and still stranger men. He drank when he had the money, though that was not so very often. In the course of his wanderings he learned something about men, not their hypocritical manners and the masks they wear, but their minds and hearts, their ways of speaking and behaving. He was not an intruder in the underworld, but in some ways a part of it. He had made up his mind that he wanted to be a playwright. He was, and always has been, a seeker of what lies beyond the horizon, of the elusive forms of beauty and truth that float in the imagination of the poet.

When he began writing in earnest, his equipment was a clear mind, an innate sense of the theatre, a sensitive and powerful imagination, and a fund of human experience—of a kind. He had read much for spiritual sustenance. He was familiar with Nietzsche in translation before he went to Harvard. His own earliest attempts show signs of revolt against the form and content of the American drama of the past. He wanted to make no use of its conventions. Besides, he was well up on recent drama. Even during his years of adventure and aimless wanderings, he often went to the theatre: as a son of James O’Neill he could get free seats at almost any box office. He was especially impressed by Nazimova’s first productions of Ibsen. He was also a voracious reader of
plays, and during his stay at the Rippins’ he read nearly all the time when he was not exercising or writing.

At the suggestion of his friend Clayton Hamilton, Eugene went to Cambridge in the fall of 1914. There he wrote two plays, *The Personal Equation*, in four acts [at one time called *The Second Engineer*], and a one-actor called The Dear Doctor. A fellow-student has recorded in a letter the impressions of the young O’Neill as a playwriting student in the class-room at Cambridge:

“My own memory of O’Neill is that he was good-looking, very nervous, extremely impatient with 47, and anxious to get down to live in Greenwich Village. I happen to remember two things he wrote: a one-act farce.............. which he called The Dear Doctor, and a long play about sea life called The Second Engineer. The first was inconspicuous [I don’t know why the title sticks with me] and the latter was labored and stiff. His worst fault, I think, was ineptitude at dialogue, except when the speakers were raving drunk, or profane. He was friendly, though rather uneasy and inarticulate at times. You got the impression that he trembled a little, and seemed trying to keep from stuttering. But when he delivered himself of a remark, it was impressive......... I always thought him very likeable.”

[Clark, Barrett, H., 1947, p.26]

A picturesque account of the Cambridge days was published some years ago by another classmate, John V. A. Weaver, under the title *I Knew him When*----, in the New
York Sunday World [February 26, 1926]. Though Mr. Weaver waxes bitter at the end of his glowing story, and thinks Gene has become high-hat, what he writes is vivid and characteristic, if not exact in the details. Here are a couple of paragraphs:

“Going out of the class-room Elkins [the society man] and myself moved on O’Neill. His difference seemed to have gone. We repaired to one of the Shamrock bars......... We drank ale. We continued drinking ale until four in the morning, feet on the rail, one hand in the free lunch. It was just one of those nights. Ribald tales, anecdotes of experience, theorizing about the drama—what the collegians used to call a ‘bull session.’ A bull session de luxe. We piled finally into a decrepit hack. We fell into O’Neill’s room some time about five. I had just purchased that day a copy of ‘Spoon River Anthology.’ When the dawn broke, I was sitting on a trunk, Elkins sprawled across the bed, O’Neill reading in his powerful, melancholy bass, poem after poem from that disturbing collection..........

“Women were forever calling for’ Gene. There was something apparently irresistible in his strange combination of cruelty [around the mouth], intelligence [in his eyes], and sympathy [in his voice]. I would not say that he was ‘good looking.’ But one girl told me she could not get his face out of her thoughts. He was hard-boiled and whimsical. He was brutal and tender, so I was told. From shop girl to ‘sassiest’ queen, they all seemed to develop certain tendencies in his presence. What may have resulted, deponent sayeth not. About somethings’Gene was Sphinx-like. All I can report is the phenomena.”
Professor Baker’s own words, written in a letter [January, 1926] are worth quoting. He says:

“When O’Neill was working with me, he showed by the end of the year that he already knew how to write well in the one-act form, but he could not as yet manage the longer forms. I was very eager that he should return for a second year of work in these longer forms, but did not know till later that, though equally eager, his means at the moment made this impossible. O’Neill, when with me, worked steadily and with increasing effectiveness. He seemed absorbedly interested in what he was trying to do. Because of his wider experience of life, he seemed a good deal older than most of the men in the course, although not really so in years. He seemed a little aloof, though I never found him so personally. This, I think, came quite as much from a certain awe of him in his fellow-students because of his wider experiences, as from any holding apart by him............. After all these years my pleasant memory of O’Neill in the work is far more vivid than the memory of the details of that work.”

In the summer of 1915, Eugene went to Provincetown on Cape Cod for what became a fateful meeting with George Cram Cook ‘Jig’ and Susan Glaspell. O’Neill was continually writing plays these days. From the very first O’Neill had been trying his hand at long plays. In 1918, he married Agnes Bolton. There were two children, a boy and a girl. Early in 1928, O’Neill went to Europe and then to the Far East, where he stayed for
several months. Late in 1928, he settled in a Chateau near Tours in France, and after his divorce, he married Carlotta Monterey. Early in 1946, they came back to New York, where they are [1947] apparently planning to settle down for a while. One of the poems he wrote, “Upon Our Beach,” begins:

“There is a house on a distant hill—
A cold lonely ugly house, a millionaire’s house,
The world would say this is his beach;
He has a stamped paper to prove it—
We know better—and we have our hearts
To prove it. This is Our Beach.”

[Shaffer, Louis, 1968, p. 283]

In later years O’Neill repeatedly acknowledged his debt of gratitude to Hamilton for the Thirst review. When “Ham” and his wife returned to New London this summer, taking a cottage near Ocean Beach, Eugene showed him some of his plays—the critic found in them “appreciable promise”—and asked his opinion of Professor George Pierce Baker’s playwriting course at Harvard. Eugene wanted to study under him. Hamilton, who thought well of the plan, helped him to win his father’s approval and suggested to Eugene that he should communicate directly with Baker. Eugene wrote to Hamilton:

“All my life I have been closely connected with the dramatic profession. My father is James O’Neill, the actor, of whom you may perhaps have heard; so, although I have never been on the stage myself............ I can claim whatever
knowledge there may be gained from a close association with members of the profession.

“Although I have read all the modern plays I could lay my hands on and many books on the subject of the Drama, I realize how inadequate such a haphazard, undirected mode of study must necessarily be. With my present training I might hope to become a mediocre journeyman playwright. It is just because I do not wish to be one, because I want to be an artist or nothing, that I am writing to you.”

[Shaffer, Louis, 1968, p. 292]

In the year 1918 Eugene met with Agnes Bolton, a young writer of short stories. Their friendship turned into marriage on April 12, 1918, in Provincetown. By the end of the year 1918, both Eugene and Agnes shifted to the Coast Guard Station at Peaked Hill Bars on Cape Cod. The new house was presented to them by O’Neill’s father James. In February 1920, O’Neill received his first Pulitzer Prize for his first full-length play *Beyond the Horizon*. In quick succession followed *The Emperor Jones*. O’Neill won a nationwide recognition with this play.

In the summer of 1920, O’Neill’s father James died of cancer. The star father disappeared from the world of theatre. Eugene had to restore Ella who was completely broken now. In 1921, Eugene O’Neill received his second Pulitzer Prize for *Anna Christie*. The year 1922 was full of diverse events to O’Neill. He chanced to meet his son Eugene Junior from Kathleen. Their meeting was full of happy and hopeful feelings although
Kathleen had divorced O’Neill. The year also witnessed the opening of O’Neill’s greatest work *The Hairy Ape*. But although the most pleasurable experiences of life, the tragedy was also lagging behind. The same night of the opening of his masterpiece, O’Neill had to receive two bodies at New York Station. One was his dear mother’s coffin and the other was his brother Jamieian an unbearable pain to O’Neill. He began drinking again. Then he left Ridgefield Connecticut and shifted to Bermuda where in May 1923, his daughter Oona was born.

In 1925, he was awarded a gold medal from ‘The National Institute of Arts and Letters.’ Bermuda was a fine spot, full of quiet and serene and natural beauty. But the relations of Eugene and Agnes were becoming sour. The love of Agnes was replacing a sense of rivalry with her husband. He was at New York for the rehearsals of his plays (1927) when O’Neill got acquainted with Carlotta Monterey a famous film actress, who had played the role of Mildred Douglas in O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape*, in 1922. O’Neill expressed his desire to make her his life-partner. They decided to marry and O’Neill asked Agnes for divorce. She refused. Now much time was wasted in the legal proceedings for divorce. O’Neill succeeded in getting the divorce. They got married in Jan. 1929 and stayed at France.

In 1931, both Eugene and Carlotta returned to New York and settled at Sea Island Georgia. This time Eugene was working on cycle of plays on American historical subjects. His mind was full of the ideas for *Ah, Wilderness!* Life was becoming charmless to the great writer who was finding himself unable to continue his work. His health was also deteriorating. The world for him seemed sometimes dark and gloomy. Despite all these
painful experiences, the shining hour of his life was near. He was acknowledged as a dramatist of genius in recognition of whose vital contribution to the world drama, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1936. Eugene Jr. the elder son of O’Neill had become a young scholar and had married in 1931. The daughter Oona married Charles Chaplin the famous film comedian in 1943. Eugene was displeased at this marriage because Charles was of his own age. Eugene Jr. had divorced and soon after that he committed suicide (1950). These events were so much to shatter O’Neill who himself was suffering from illness. Highly upset he abandoned his routine and kept himself in complete isolation. In 1952, he won this fourth Pulitzer Prize for literature which proved his still having a strong hold among the American dramatists of the century. When Eugene O’Neill was in a Boston hotel room, the long journey of his life ended in Nov.27, 1953. And the great man who was born in a hotel, died in a hotel.

(6) The Works of O’Neill:

O’Neill is the only dramatist who is credited for revolutionizing the American theatre and bringing it to world recognition. There is little conventional about O’Neill. Although born and bred in the theatrical atmosphere, he never relished it. His opinion about the theatre of his father was damning. O’Neill says:

“A cheap, Jack enterprise, soul destroying a kind of dope, hollow, false, demanding a wasteful expenditure of spirit.”

[Dixit, Neeta, 2004, p. 63]

(7) Full-length Plays:

(1) Bread and Butter, 1914

(2) Servitude, 1914
(3) The Personal Equation, 1915
(4) Now I Ask You, 1916
(5) Beyond the Horizon, 1918-Pulitzer Prize, 1920
(6) The Straw, 1919
(7) Chris Christophersen, 1919
(8) Gold, 1920
(9) Anna Christie, 1920-Pulitzer Prize, 1912
(10) The Emperor Jones, 1920
(11) Different, 1921
(12) The First Man, 1922
(13) The Hairy Ape, 1922
(14) The Fountain, 1923
(15) Marco Millions, 1923-25
(16) All God’s Chillun Got Wings, 1924
(17) Welded, 1924
(18) Desire under the Elms, 1925
(19) Lazarus Laughed, 1925-26

(20) The Great God Brown, 1926
(21) Strange Interlude, 1928-Pulitzer Prize
(22) Dynamo, 1929
(23) Mourning Becomes Electra, 1931
(24) Ah, Wilderness!, 1933
(25) Days without End, 1933
(26) The Iceman Cometh, 1939
(27) Hughie, 1941
(28) Long Day’s Journey into Night, 1941, Pulitzer Prize 1957
(29) A Moon For the Misbegotten, 1941-43
(30)A Touch of the Poet, 1942
(31) More Stately Mansions, first performed 1967
(32) The Calms of Capricorn,

(8) One-Act Plays:
(1) Bound East for Cardiff, 1914
(2) In the Zone, 1917
(3) The Long Voyage Home, 1917
(4) Moon of the Caribbees, 1918
(5) A Wife for a Life, 1913
(6) The Web, 1913
(7) Thirst, 1913
(8) Recklessness, 1913
(9) Warnings, 1913
(10) Fog, 1914
(11) Abortion, 1914
(12) The Movie Man: A Comedy, 1914
(13) The Sniper, 1915
(14) Before Breakfast, 1916
(15) Ile, 1917
(16) The Rope, 1918
(17) Shell Shock, 1918
(18) The Dreamy Kid, 1918
(19) Where the Cross Is Made, 1918
Before he had started his carrier as a playwright, O’Neill had certain alternative to pursue the dramatic art. But he hated the available devices. He rejected to work under the conventions or the limitations of space, time, and honour fashionably imposed on the dramatists. He decided to choose his own subjects and carved out a suitable dramatic style for effective presentation. Though beginning with the popular realistic method, O’Neill had skillfully employed it in probing the psyche of his characters. After the realistic method, he wrote his plays in the expressionistic, psychoanalytical and autobiographical methods. O’Neill was a constant experimentalist. The modern American drama is heavily indebted to O’Neill for giving it depth and variety. O’Neill’s plays are not so much the summary of an era as a new mode and a new theme for American stage. In one of his letters to George Jean Nathan, he contributed the real objective of a playwright:

“The playwright today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it—the depth of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfactory new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with. It seems to me that anyone trying to do big works nowadays must have this big subject behind all the little subjects of his plays or novels, or he is scribbling around the surface of things.”

[Quoted in Crutch, J. W., 1959, p. 34]

O’Neill began his carrier with the realistic one-act plays. In the background of the sea, these plays present the stark realities of life based on O’Neill’s own experiences of
sea and a seaman’s life. These realistic plays depict the irony of life besides the sense of mystery and destiny as the dominating elements in them. O’Neill wrote his realistic plays under such a conviction as the dark experience of tuberculosis had strengthened his faith in destiny which meant to him an awareness of some mysterious force that shapes the course of human life.

1] The first realistic play that O’Neill wrote in 1913 was *A Wife for a Life*. Between 1913-1914, O’Neill wrote more than ten plays. Among the first group, *The Web, Recklessness, Abortion, Warnings, Fog, Thirst, Bread and Butter, Servitude* and *Bound East for Cardiff* are important realistic plays.

2] The second group of his plays is known as the Cycle Plays. During the second group i.e. 1916-1917, O’Neill wrote four plays which were produced in Nov. 1924. The first performance of these plays was organized as a cycle in Provincetown. The plays are *In the Zone, The Long Voyage Home* (1917), *Bound East For Cardiff* (1916), and *The Moon of The Caribbees* produced in 1918.

3] The third group of his plays is called as the Naturalistic Plays. The play in which emphasis is given upon environment and against social conditions can be categorized as naturalistic play. These plays are *Beyond the Horizon* (1918-1919), *The Straw* (1920), *Gold* (1920), and *Anne Christie* (1920).

4] The fourth group of his plays is called the expressionistic plays. O’Neill was writing at a time when society was undergoing a great change. O’Neill himself felt the psychic tensions of man and was keen to express them in his plays. Realistic and naturalistic methods were proving inadequate to serve his purpose. So he adopted the expressionistic method for probing the psychic realities of mankind. Both the expressionistic plays *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape* are
monologues for the most of the parts. Besides this the use of masks and asides are the original qualities of O’Neill’s expressionistic plays.


6] The Sixth group of his plays- The Plays of Mystic Symbolism- includes his major plays: Welded (1924), Marco Millions (1927).

7] The Seventh group of his plays- The Plays of Psychological Realism- includes his plays: Desire Under the Elms (1924), Strange Interlude (1927), and Mourning Becomes Electra (1931).

8] The Eighth group of his plays- The Autobiographical Plays- includes his major plays: The Iceman Cometh (1946), Long Day’s Journey Into Night, A Moon For the Misbegotten (1947), Ah, Wilderness!

O’Neill is considered to be the greatest dramatist of America. He was always searching for the missing elements in life with a restless curiosity. When O’Neill received the Nobel Prize, Bernard De Voto wrote his famous Minority Report, in which he claimed that O’Neill falls short of literary distinction both absolutely and relatively, saying in conclusion,

“Mr. O’Neill has given us many pleasurable evenings in the theatre, though he has also given us some pretty tiresome ones. But he has never yet given us an experience of finality, of genius working on the material proper to genius, of something profound and moving said about life. Just why, then, the Nobel Prize?”
O’Neill had the tragic conception of life. He believed that a really worthwhile life is always tragic. When he was accused of unmitigated gloom, and of having a pessimistic view of life, O’Neill replied,

“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.”

O’Neill had a single-minded devotion to playwriting. Once, he began his career, he ceased to be a sociable creature. He did not dabble in politics or promote the causes. He did not join professional organization, attend conventions or make speeches. He did not write novel or fictitious stories or literary criticism. He did not even join the opening nights of his plays. His entire energy and the talent were dedicated to a single activity of writing plays. Such dedication and devotion resulted in a considerable output and also in the steady development of his skill and potentialities as a dramatist. Referring to this, J. W. Crutch has observed in his Introduction to Nine Plays by Eugene O’Neill:

“During the last fifteen years, the American drama has become for the first time, a part of American literature.”
It is a commonplace in O’Neill to call him a pessimist. He is not concerned about man’s ultimate destiny; he is not disturbed by the fact that man and all his works may some day drift into the darkness of space a frozen and unseen monument to the vagaries of the creative process. His pessimism is of man in this world in which he must live and justify himself if 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 that man may unmake them. O’Neill may recognize the persistence of man’s hopeless hope, but even granting all that, there is a vast difference between the position of O’Neill and that of Schopenhauer. There the life of an indomitable will-to-life in the world of O’Neill. His world is thoroughly hostile to human life.

O’Neill’s characters are all of one family in that they are all rebels against the world in which they live. They are all nervous, high-strung, impetuous, and they are also determined that life shall give them more than it is willing to give. In this sense, they are idealists, for they are not reconciled to the inevitable limitations of their world. In the end, they discover their limitations, and accept their doom, but not quietly or without protest. The men and women that move in the world of O’Neill’s are boldly defiant. They realize defeat, but scorn it —even cursing it. This world of O’Neill is a world bitter struggle and tragic lives, but to those who accept its reality, it is a world rich in experience, adventure and daring, where men and women demand that life giving them some positive value. This is a world where brave, charming, complex and interesting men and women are present at every turn. They are in a sense sick, that is, they are not fat, happy, contented and resigned to a gospel of prosperity and good business opportunities. They yearn for happiness as the ultimate good. Living in the world of O’Neill is not an easy
task, but it is interesting. It is a world that demands courage, that is intense with experience, and that above all is not supine. It is a world in which we are not allowed to delude ourselves with some tawdry substitute. To O’Neill, Life does not end. One experience is but the birth of another.

O’Neill is a prolific writer. He gave the world at least thirteen major short plays and twenty-four major long plays in the 29 years between 1914 when he wrote Thirst and 1943 when he completed A Moon For the Misbegotten. During the last eight years of his productive life, he withdrew himself from active contact with the professional theatre and concentrated on writing a vast cycle of nine plays, most of which were destroyed before he died.

“O’Neill thought of himself as a writer of ‘ironic tragedy,’ but irony requires a detachment which he found impossible. Pity, indignation, despair at the human position, robbed his tragedies of the irony he intended them to convey.”

[Falk, Doris V., 1958, P. 3-4]

In a letter written in 1925 to Arthur Hobson Quinn, O’Neill stated the objective to which he held consistently all his life:

“............... 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 a modern audience their ennobling identity with the tragic figures on the stage.”

[Falk, Doris, 1958, P. 25-26]

O’Neill’s plays are endowed with various qualities. He was unique in employing themes on the search for a meaning of life. In this search for a meaning of life and also in his inventions of various effective methods of communicating meaning through the dramatic devices. He experimented with a number of technique and devices, as were known to the theatre symbolism, expressionism, masks, aside and verbalization of inner thoughts. Besides, he devised techniques himself. His sole aim was to invent a perfect way to communicate both thought and emotion whether it was a realistic or expressionistic or a psychoanalytical play. O’Neill’s problems are eternal and everlasting and pertain the entire human race. His subjects are also out of the common beat. He always concerned himself with the plight of man in the universe. The inevitability of human tragedy is the recurring subject of O’Neill. O’Neill mastered the realism of setting from mechanical to a convincingly actual standard. His play Beyond the Horizon conveys the impression of a true realistic setting.
O’Neill is a critic of the American society. He thinks of man in relation to his social system. He emphasizes the psychological aspects of modern and social set-up. He shows how the workers are exploited in our modern, machine-made world and how they are deprived of the sense of harmony and mental well-being. O’Neill is at his best in the superb handling of this problem: the theme of ‘belongingness’ in the present world. For him, man remains a searcher with no clear-cut destination. He has no place in the highly industrialized set-up of modern society, and remains as an outsider, an alienated person from the beginning to the end of his life. He has lost the centre, and moves from pillar to post in search of some centre of ‘belonging,’ but he fails to find root anywhere.

Eugene O’Neill has very effectively made the use of the symbolism in his plays. This is an important aspect of the plays of O’Neill. Through the use of these, the dramatist has achieved a prominent place in the history of American literature. His plays reveal the social life where one individual looks upon the other as a hostile force. Man is isolated not only from himself but also from nature, culture, society, religion and God. He is a lost and lonely soul. John Gassner, one of the most ardent proponents of O’Neill, rightly observes,

“O’Neill was virtually the only American playwright to confront ideas on more than an elementary level and to wrestle with them ‘tragically’ – ‘heroically.’ [And earlier].......... if he failed to write tragedy [as plainly intended] he achieved a noble tragic mood.......... In a context of exciting drama.”

[Gould, Jean, 1969, P. 77]
It is significant that Gassner, Harold Clutman and George Jean Nathan [and one might even add the acid Eric Bentley]—all eminent writers on the theatre—agree, in their books on drama in the fifties, that O’Neill is our outstanding dramatist. Whatever his faults, and all agree, there are many, he is the one American playwright who has consistently written as an artist.
Bab, Julius, “As Europe Sees America’s Foremost Playwright,” O’Neill and His Plays.


Falk Doris, V., 1958, Eugene O’Neill and The Tragic Tension, New Delhi, Choudhary Brothers.


