CHAPTER IV

Themes of O’Neill’s Plays
Eugene O’Neill is the dramatist of an idea. He thought of himself as a writer of “ironic tragedy,” but irony requires a detachment which he found impossible. His plays are attempts to explain human suffering and, somehow, to justify it. 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 V., 1958, p. 25-26]
O’Neill is a critic of the American society of this kind, and also of society as a whole. He thinks of man in relation to his social system. He treats a person against the background of social forces. It is the social implication that makes O’Neill’s plays lively in the minds of audience. In early September, 1946, O’Neill gave an interview to the press. The playwright elucidated his ideas as follows:

“I’m going on the theory that the United States, instead of being the most successful country in the world, is the greatest failure... because it was given everything, more than any other country. Through moving as rapidly as it was, it hasn’t acquired any real roots. Its main idea is that everlasting game of trying to possess your own soul by the possession of something outside of it, too. America is the prime example of this because it happened so quickly and with such immense resources. This was really said in the Bible much better. We are the greatest example of ‘For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole human race is so damned stupid that in two thousand years it hasn’t had brains enough to appreciate that the secret of happiness is contained in one simple sentence which you’d think any grammar school kid could understand and apply, then it’s time we dumped it down the nearest drain and let the ants have a chance. That simple sentence is: ‘What shall it profit a man.”

[Barrett H., Clark, 1947, p. 152-153]

The first of his plays that was preserved is The Web. It was written early in the fall of 1913, and printed in the Thirst volume the next year. The Web comes first in order of composition. Thirst, called a “tragedy,” is more original in conception. There are just
three characters: a gentleman, a dancer, and a West Indian mulatto sailor. *Recklessness* is a swift-moving drama of revenge. A husband returns home and learns that his wife is having an affair with the chauffeur; after getting the facts from a jealous maid, he sends the chauffeur out, knowing that the steering-gear of the car is out of order—and we are left to shudder at the knowledge that he rides to certain death. *Warnings, Fog* are also beautiful pieces by O’Neill. His *Bread and Butter* is in four acts and *Servitude*—in three. *Bound East for Cardiff* is the one really mature play. *Tomorrow* is his short story printed in *Seven Arts Magazine*. His ‘*Honor Among the Bradleys,*’ *The Trumpet* and *Exorcism* are one-act plays.

*Beyond The Horizon* was written at Provincetown in the winter of 1918. In this play, Robert Mayo is the victim of his dreams. As he is about to start on a long sea-voyage with his uncle, he believes he is desperately in love with the girl who is engaged to his brother Andrew; she impulsively throws Andrew over and accepts Robert, while Andrew sails in his place. Before long Ruth discovers that the marriage was a mistake and is sure that she is still in love with Andrew. Robert is the central figure. We are shown the mental and physical degeneration of a man who cannot live without illusions. Indeed, each character in the play is obsessed by his desire for what he can never have—for what lies beyond the horizon. About this play Arthur and Barbara Gelb remark:

> “O’Neill expressed for the first time on a large scale his ‘hopeless hope’ philosophy, painting with sweep and grandeur the tragic theme that was soon to distinguish him from all American playwrights who had come before.”

This play deals with his sense of special relationship between man and his environment. The play depicts the tragic story of Robert Mayo, the true tragic protagonist who has lost his harmony with the environment. A few months after this play appeared O’Neill received the Pulitzer Prize. *The Straw* was written at Provincetown in 1918 and 1919. This is a love story about an Irish girl who meets a young newspaperman at a tuberculosis sanatorium. *The Emperor Jones* is one of the best of all the O’Neill’s plays, though most of it is only a dramatic monologue. It is the tragical epic of the American Negro. The theme of *The Emperor Jones* is the struggle between good and evil symbolized by Jones In a fit of anger Jones commits two murders and when he is arrested he breaks law and runs away from jail. Since then the evil in him grows. He is proud of his intelligence, and of his crooked ways of exploiting his ignorant subjects. The struggle between good and evil within his soul begins when he runs away from his palace. Man is represented in relation with God. As the playwright opines,

“most modern plays are concerned with the relation between man and man, but that does not interest me at all. I am interested only in the relation between man and God.”

[Monika Gputa, 2001, p. 26]

*Anna Christie* is a play about a woman. The story tells of the regeneration of Anna under the influence of the sea and the love of a man. *The Fountain* was written at Provincetown in 1921 and 1922. The chant that runs through the play is a lyrical comment on the theme:
“Love is a flower
Forever blooming,
Beauty a fountain
Forever flowing
Upward into the source of sunshine,
Upward into the azure heaven;
One with God but
Ever returning
To kiss the earth that the flower may live.”

[Barrett H., Clark, 1947, p. 100-101]

*All God’s Chillun Got Wings* was written at Provincetown in 1923. It is play of love and passion, and not a propaganda piece. The play deals with the tragic marriage between Jim Harris, the intelligent, sensitive negro boy, and Ella Downey, his white wife. Both are unable to adjust themselves with their circumstances. Growing up in the slum area of New York, in the innocence of childhood, they pledge their love. She lives with Mickey, a white vagabond, and becomes the mother of an illegitimate child. Mickey deserts her and the child dies. In despair, Ella accepts the proposal of marriage of her true worshipper Jim, and they live in France. After two years, they return to New York with the hope that Jim would appear in the Bar examination. But his effort to study law is defeated by his sense of racial pride. Ella is inferior in mind and feeling to her husband, and, in conflict with his mother and sister, is unable to conceal her dislike for his race. She belongs neither to her own race nor to the race of her husband. By marrying a white girl, Jim also faces the same problem. Jim considers himself inferior to the white boys of
the street because they call him “Jim Crow.” He does not like to be called negro, though he belongs to that race. Ella consoles him;

“I wish I was black like you.”

[All God’s Chillun Got Wings, p. 94]

This superiority complex grows in his mind, and for the sake of Ella he unconsciously separates himself from his own race. But after some days, Ella begins to hate him for his race. She refuses friendship with him. But still, he has the same faith, the same devotion towards her. He is teased by the whites for his black skin. To become a lawyer and to get Ella as his own companion keeps him isolated from both the races. This play is a tragedy of man’s isolation and loneliness. Both Jim and Ella fail to ‘belong’ to anyone and anywhere. They cannot even belong to each other. Though the title conveys the message of man’s professed faith that “All God’s Chillun Got Wings,” there are several barriers that separate God’s one child from another. Jim might have got ‘wings’; he has the new hope with him but his hope, entirely based on illusion, remains an illusion. In the play Desire Under the Elms, we find that every character desires some one thing or the other. As the play opens we are introduced to the three sons of Ephraim Cabot, the owner of the Cabot farm and farmhouse. The damaging influence of mother-fixation or excessive love for the parent of the opposite sex is seen in the life and character of Eben. Eben’s mother is dead but he cannot forget her. The mother-image is constantly present before his mind’s eye. He desires to possess the farm, for he knows that it lawfully belonged to his mother, and after her death it should belong to him as he is her heir.
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 faces 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 work now-a-days 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 is not only a dramatic poet, but also a mystic. Generations of Celtic ancestry flower in him, just as the generations of the Puritan mystic flowered in Hawthorne and Emerson. In him, the Celtic nature, with its intimate relations with the past, catches a glean now and then of the dim regions where God brought into being a nobler form of life than had before existed. O’Neill goes down into the depths of human life to study apparently degraded forms. O’Neill’s Celtic ancestry leads him to symbolism. The race, in its painting, its poetry, its religion, thinks in symbols, knowing that mysticism has to be tied down to reality by some concrete expression. O’Neill declines to be limited in his theme or locality. His roots are in America, often in the New England where he lived so long and which he understands so well, from its farms to its police courts, which
as a reporter had to frequent. He can describe the decadent aristocracy of the small town in New England.

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 organizations, 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, for it holds that man’s greatest tragedies are of his own making, and thus it is fair presumption to 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 is the fire 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 are boldly defiant. They realize defeat, but scorn it—even cursing it. This world of O’Neill is a world of bitter struggle and tragic lives, but to those who accept its reality, it is a world rich in experience, adventure and daring, where man and women demand that life give 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 doesn’t end. One experience is but the birth of another.

O’Neill’s expressionistic plays deal with the contemporary social, economic, and political evils. The setting of The Hairy Ape is taken from a transatlantic liner for a theme of the danger of man’s submission to the dominance of materialism and the inevitability of the little man’s fight against social circumstances. In The Hairy Ape, John Gassner picks up the central idea when he culls out this quotation from the play,

“The bell rings for the stokers to go on duty, they all stand up, come to attention, then go out in a lockstep life.”

[Gassner, John, 1965, p. 231]

Characters of O’Neill’s world live in a real world and speak the language of the living people. He was a great master of speech in so far as the words spoken by characters concern us as coming from them. He was able to make the characters speak authentically at the critical points of their life. The kind of language employed by O’Neill is a readable prose which slides gradually into a kind of poetic symbolism. His language is filled with varied idioms of the American people. The different idioms present the dialectical variations which represent faithfully the most elemental emotions.
Realism of character, setting and dialogue are prelude to realism of action. No longer could the audience be convinced to see an overdue letter or an unexpected legacy should arrive in the end to set everything in order and bring about a happy conclusion. Action of the plot in all O’Neill’s plays is neither contrived nor presetttled. Action progresses according to the need of the theme. It is not only the setting but also the characters who come alive through their peculiar speech and mannerism. His subjects are also out of the common beat. The selection of his subjects shows the seriousness of his purpose and the awareness of his responsibility towards society. His chief concern was the psychological rather than sociological treatment of the characters in his plays.

In subject-matter, O’Neill’s plays cover a large area of life. They range in subjects from the scenes of well-bred suburban life to the studies of prostitutes and pimps the material difficulties, illusory idealism wrecking the life of free love, the poverty of sailors, the need for the artistic freedom, the problem of college students, dual personality, desire for the possession of land, the problem of miscegenation, frustrated behavior of a woman whose fiancé has been killed. His last play Long Day’s Journey into Night is largely autobiographical. In the play, each character journeys from an apparently happy life to the memory of the painful experiences of past life. Each one blames the other for his or her failure.

The sense of isolation and loneliness in the plays of O’Neill causes suffering to his characters, and their failure to control it in an effective manner brings tragedy in their lives. The Iceman Cometh shows how man’s inability to cope with life can create a feeling of isolation and loneliness in his life, forcing him to withdraw from others. We find that
too much mechanization of modern life is also one of the important factors responsible
to generate the sense of isolation, loneliness, estrangement and insecurity in the life of
an individual.

O’Neill’s plays of the three different phases show that his early plays deal with
isolation and loneliness brought out through the failure of the romantic dreams, the
dreams of escape. In the plays of the middle phase, isolation and loneliness is caused by
the ugliness of reality for which he chooses the American social scene. In the later phase,
isolation and loneliness are caused by the defeat or failure of the ideals, illusion and
romantic dreams in actual life. O’Neill’s primary interest in writing the plays was to justify
the ways of god to Man. He believed that a really worthwhile life is always tragic.
According to him the high ideals or nobility of life can be found only in tragedy.

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.


