CHAPTER III

THE NEGATIVE SAINTS: VICTIMS OF NIHILISM

One of the most controversial aspects of the recent American theatre is emergence of the nihilist as an image of man. The American playwrights have rejected the Aristotelian concept of the protagonist to substitute for it an anti-hero who is the personification neither of good, virtuous and religious, nor of the courageous in the traditional sense. This anti-hero, deprived of God, appears in a truly alienated state, suffering extreme despair in the very triumph of his willed assertion of autonomy. In the absence of faith, the anti-hero is seen as a biological organism whose behaviour is represented as an adaptation of environment. Though a creature of instinct, his metaphysical craving gives him no rest. Feeling isolated, he strikes as a stranger in a mysterious and hostile universe. The essential cause of this defeat of the spirit is to be sought not in history or in socio-economic conditions but in his own rebellious decision to shut out the horizon of the divine. The protagonists in Dostoevski and Strindberg suffer "because God has become distant or, perhaps is dead - and because man is degraded."¹

¹ The pervasive vogue of nihilism in the post-World War
theatre is the result of new consciousness that nothing in this universe is worthy of credence. Consciousness of man is simply an instrument to apprehend an enigmatic universe. Truth is but a life-sustaining illusion and mind the creator of all values. Man tries to convince himself that everything outside of him proceeds according to the laws of reason, yet it is a patent fact that human intellect may err and his consciousness betray the process of perception. Mind, consciousness and soul are supposed to be meaningless and fictitious things, the "facts" being totally non-existent in this universe. Everything that is objective is merely an interpretation, and such interpretations are limitless. Nietzsche, the father of modern nihilism arrives at what he calls a philosophy of "perspectivity." The thinking "I" of consciousness is treated only as a metaphysical postulate, there being no substantive ego functioning behind the activity of thought. Nihilism acts as the principle that there is no God, no purpose, no higher world beyond.

American theatre of the post-World War II era voices an excruciating mood of this nihilistic despair, and the modern anti-hero protests against a life that has been drained of ultimate meaning. In the plays of this period, the protagonist is reduced to an interrogation-mark in a world in which everything, without any exception, is to be questioned. He lives in a universe where the light of the divine has been extinguished and the spontaneity of faith lost for ever. This anti-hero regards God as a question mark, a mere figure of speech, an absence, and a vain longing of
the soul. Having lost his identity, he is swept along by the tide of events. Time destroys his personality and things simply happen to him. Unlike the great traditional heroes, he cannot form a valid image of himself. There is no consistency or continuity in his behaviour. Tennyson's Ulysses believed that beyond the twilight there were always gleaming worlds; for the modern nihilist there is no enchanted future beyond this world, and humanity is moving toward a darkness from which comes no morning. The great Greek heroes like Oedipus, Agamemnon, Prometheus and Orestes never lost faith in the divine order of the universe; Macbeth, Hamlet and King Lear suffered anguish and despair but they remained positive and affirmed their faith in the "justicers" above, for else "humanity must perforce prey on itself." The modern anti-hero, on the other hand, stands naked, with no myth of redemption to console him.

Experience teaches this type of protagonist to look upon the traditional virtues of goodness, nobility and courage with disgust. Filled with moral despair, he engages in introspections that disclose not only the persistence of the irrational in human behaviour but also the steady fragmentation of the self. Without either the "inner-oriented" ethics of the Christian protagonist or the "outer-directed" heroism of the Greek hero, this anti-hero is possessed of no essence, and has no fixed characterological basis. Unlike the great traditional heroes, he feels homeless and redundant in an inscrutable universe. He distrusts truth, justice and love, and negates all social, religious and moral values which have been sustaining the human civilization. No
wonder, in the plays of Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Albee, Gelber, Richardson and MacLeish, who dramatize the breakdown of the ego, all myths are shattered and their anti-heroes reveal the tragi-comedy of the human condition. In Hickey, Blanche, Alma, Brick, Kilroy, Val, Chance, Shannon, Jerry, or J.B. we encounter a self that is lost in the wasteland of nihilism. Perhaps one could call this kind of anti-hero a negative saint because he is a Messiah with Satanic powers, and the saviour emerges as a destroyer.

Revolting against the traditional norms of heroism, most of the post-World War II playwrights probe the inner recesses of the self, the elusive secrets of the personality, to highlight the conflicts between sexuality and spirit, good and evil, matter and mind, the world and the unconsciousness. The plays of the period in hand set forth the encounter of the protagonist with the archetypal problems of identity (God, destiny, Death, the polarities of existence). As their anti-heroes never arrive at a point of consummation due to the dialectical play of opposites, they are seen engaged in a spiritual struggle without end.

Eugene O'Neill wrote his last plays, *The Iceman Cometh* (1946), *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1956), *A Moon For The Misbegotten* (1947), and *A Touch of The Poet* (1957), in a mood of nihilistic despair. For a generation that had witnessed the sordid ugliness of two World Wars and a Depression that ravaged an entire nation all quest was over. This was the time to be totally honest with
oneself and with one's audience. O'Neill suffered both a terrible sense of guilt and isolation as his marital life had gone beyond hope of change, his physical health was declining, and the world was on the brink of total annihilation. What is more, O'Neill's soul-searching had resulted in an impasse—the loss of faith and the futility of any absolute philosophy. He had discovered that nothing in the world was worthy of credence. Nothing was to be trusted as "all conviction was transient; that no absolutes existed, save emptiness and death; and that man could only go on, seeking and never finding. But in the wilderness of his despair, O'Neill challenged the will of the gods."³

No wonder, in 1946, O'Neill admitted, "The Iceman is a denial of any other experience of faith in my plays."⁴ In a letter to Lawrence Langner, O'Neill states that The Iceman Cometh is "perhaps the best" play he has written because "there are moments in it that suddenly strip the soul of a man stark naked, not in cruelty or moral superiority, but with an understanding compassion which sees him as a victim of the ironies of life and of himself."⁵

Decades ago, Ibsen had also examined the psychological nature of ideals and the idealist in The Wild Duck, projecting his middle class illusion-ridden characters. But The Iceman Cometh, compared with The Wild Duck, strikes one more as a nihilistic treatise in the garb of a drama. In Ibsen the area of operation is smaller; O'Neill considers a number of questions in The Iceman Cometh—loss of self, the pervasive sense of guilt, illusions and commitment. Unlike Ibsen, in The Iceman Cometh, no thesis is offered, no philosophical theory is advocated as the solution
to the problem of existential despair. Breaking from the nature of hope and faith that we find in his earlier plays like Days Without End (1934), and Beyond The Horizon (1920), O'Neill in The Iceman Cometh is "reflecting not ethically, on Right Action or Right Thought, but metaphysically, on the very quality of existence."  

Unlike Ibsen, O'Neill dramatizes the nihilistic despair of a negative saint in his protagonist, Hickey. The world in which he lives is a world of total illusion, of life reduced to nothing. The derelicts who nurture pipe dreams from a rotgut whisky bottle are not mankind in classical, neo-classic, Romantic or modern sense. Travis Bogard observes that Hickey's world has "the fragile ecology of a tide pool," 

It is a world that barely holds to the fringes of consciousness, moving hesitantly between sleeping and waking, fusing the two conditions into a continuous trance-like existence. The light that filters through the dirty windows from the street is pale and insufficient to separate day from night. Time is meaningless. Voices are nearly unheard in the comatose silence. Existence at Harry Hope's is reduced to its lowest denominator, a hibernation of animals huddled together in dread of waking. 

The alcoholics who gather in Harry's saloon are about a dozen - all failures in the outside world; only by sympathizing with each other's illusion do they share a contented existence. Alcohol makes them oblivious of harsh reality; it saves them from a hostile society to which no man can possibly belong. To these derelicts past and future have no significance. "The truth has no bearing on anything" in this dream world where "worst is best" and "tomorrow is yesterday" (Iceman, p. 600).
Hickey, the negative-saint, is a Prince of this dark "hell-hole." Reputed for his famous "periodicals," crude jokes and free drinks, he is loved by the bums for his kidding humour and for his tricks to make people believe "what they wanted to believe themselves" (Iceman, p. 711). No wonder, they eagerly wait for his arrival in a nihilistic frenzy; "Would that Hickey or Death would come!" (Iceman, p. 596). Besides this, the iceman is an anti-bridegroom of the scriptures, for Hickey stands for all those negative values against which the mythical Bridegroom fought. In the theological symbols and myths, the bridegroom is Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind. Waiting for him symbolizes redemption, salvation and rebirth. Cyrus Day has highlighted the mythical significance of the marriage with the bridegroom:

Union with the bridegroom conceived as a marriage, is the 'final end and realized meaning' of the life of every Christian, 'the fulfillment of promise and (the) consummation of hope.' Union with the bridegroom signifies victory over death and salvation in the world to come.9

Using the mythical bridegroom symbol in the contemporary mood of unqualified despair, O'Neill makes Hickey a negative saint, a foil to the traditional bridegroom. The birthday party that Hickey celebrates for Harry Hope ironically imitates Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper," with Hickey as Christ and the twelve bums as his disciples.10 But the role that Hickey plays is that of a negative-saint. Instead of love and faith, he supplies them the "bitter medicine" of hate or despair. The derelicts have no urge to seek either love or faith for they are aware that the pursuit of such ideals is through the door of disillusionment.
"If he (an anarchist) do ever get a nickel, he blows it on bombs," says Joe Matt (Iceman, p.584). No wonder, all the derelicts express their apprehensions and distrust for Hickey's truth-crusade. Though his philosophy of denial does infest the derelicts momentarily, yet each one of them soon returns defeated and despairing, to the "hell-hole". True to his Satanic self, Hickey gives to the bums scepticism instead of faith, hatred instead of love. To Edwin A. Engel, in The Iceman Cometh O'Neill is unmasking love:

Love is an illusion, and all women are bitches or whores. Palpable and disguised symbols of this truth are the three prostitutes, the only women to appear on the stage. Yet the presence of four others is felt: Hickey's wife, Evelyn; Parritt's mother, Rosa; Hope's wife, Bessie; Jimmie Cameron's wife, Marjorie.11

Hickey's infernal world is spiritually blighted; love, hope, faith, mercy and compassion are totally nullified by the carousing multitude. The loss of love kills Don Parritt and half-kills Larry. Hickey's ambivalent love-hate relationship for his wife Evelyn reveals the real negative self of the protagonist. Pretending to be a true lover, he claims to have killed his wife just to end the misery her love caused her; but he is forced to taste his own death-loving medicine when the truth comes out at the end of his neurotic confession: "Well, you know what you can do with your pipe dream now, you damned bitch!" (Iceman, p.716). Thus "just as the Movement led to mass violence and hatred, as seen in the bombings on the West Coast, so Hickey's messianic complex led him to kill his wife and to incur the wrath of his
fellou men." In the end, the fog is clear as Hickey senses the total collapse of his salvation crusade. "It was a waste of time coming here" (ICeman, p. 718), Hickey admits in disgust. However, he puts up a "bluff" that he was insane at the time he killed his wife Evelyn: "I've been out of my mind . . . . All the time I've been here! you saw I was insane, didn't you" (ICeman, p. 717). But this new "bluff" does not work; instead, his unmasking frees the derelicts from despair. The message of the negative saint counts for naught: the bums are free once more to return to the security of their pipe dreams. Indeed, the prayer of Don Parritt for Hickey in the end has the effect of a ritual exorcism; "May the Chair bring him peace at last, the poor tortured bastard!" (ICeman, p. 719).

Thus, through inverted mythical symbols, O'Neill dramatizes the anti-heroic personality of Hickey whose death in the end is a parody of the epical sacrifices of Saint Aquinas, Saint Augustine and Saint John. The ancient saints had the divine urge to grapple with chaos and disorder of the outside world. Their integrated self, transcendental vision and indomitable faith led them to victory over evil forces. No wonder, they brought order, redemption and rebirth. O'Neill in The Iceman Cometh is not "justifying the ways of god to man;" instead, he is dramatizing through Hickey "the impossibility of salvation in a world without God." One can observe in Hickey the levelling of the distinction between Christ and Cain. As a negative saint, he becomes the symbol of an age in which the quest for love,
faith, truth inevitably leads to existential nausea and despair. Like Milton's Satan, Hickey has made evil his good; his quest for peace without love is a parody of the Greek or Hebrew Saints. Indeed, he turns out to be a false Messiah, a murderer, a "bluff", a nihilistic bum and, above all, a negative saint affirming death and destruction.

Like O'Neill, Archibald MacLeish also illuminated the most serious dilemmas that afflict the contemporary Americans. From a stage play in verse, *Panic* (1935), to *J.B.* (1956), his consistent concern is the moral and spiritual gloom and the alienation of man from Nature. Even in his poem, *The Hamlet of A. MacLeish* (1928), he highlights his negative vision of life. No wonder, the quest of the poet is not for "acceptance" or "belief" but what he regards the cosmic doom imminent in the universe. The pessimistic note and the tone of anguish govern the structure of the poem. This nihilistic vision is extended in such plays as *The Fall of The City* (1937) and *Herakles* (1967). The protagonist Herakles is an Einsteinian philosopher struggling to master nature. Like another Cain, he desperately seeks godhead; but, later on, confronted by the limitations of human power, he realizes his sordid, unheroic predicament. *Herakles* is based on the Greek hero myth and the dramatist projects the impossibility of any heroism in the contemporary world.

MacLeish's modern Everyman, *J.B.* is a product of the post-World War II nada forces which consecrated the death of God and encouraged man not only to believe in the absurdity of life but also to feel alienated from both man and society. He was urged
to rebel against natural chaos and against the values that obstruct his existence in the universe. J.B. is the product of these intellectual forces and he rightly strikes as "a man on a fence - on a high tension wire." The play raises serious questions that have challenged and tormented men for centuries: why people suffer in this universe; why is there horror and injustice in the world; why does God permit inequity and permit those who believe in His watchfulness and benevolence to be victimized? These are the questions raised by heroic literature in general, but J.B. has failed to find "enlightenment" which is an essential attribute of the tragic vision. Instead, Samuel Terrien found J.B. a weak personality, "one who remains as dormant as the water of a pond, with green scum on its surface." According to the traditional classical norms of heroism, J.B. should rise to the stature of a champion; but throughout the play, J.B. remains static, sick and passive - a broken man, almost like an empty shell. Indeed, MacLeish's J.B. is a negative saint who has no message to give out at the end of the play, for he is merely a victim of fate.

The playwright introduces J.B. and his New England family to the audience on Thanksgiving Day as the protagonist carves a turkey, happily secure in family and fortune. Smug and complacent, he loves his wife and is contented with life. Convinced that "God was on my side, was good to me," he has puritanic faith in His goodness and justness. But this faith is full of contradictions and uncertainties - unlike the rock-like faith of the Biblical Job who was the model for the
playwright. Not his wife Sarah, but Nickles it is who exposes the hypocrisy of J.B.'s faith in God. In fact, the most powerful spokesman of the agony of man is Nickles, not J.B. The old circus vendor, having donned the mask of Satan, gives a running commentary on the working of the heart of J.B. whose faith is an illusion, and who prefers the world of illusions to the realities of human existence.

Samuel Terrien maintained that MacLeish's J.B. is an entirely different character from The Biblical Job. The latter "shouts his pride, shrieks his blasphemy, and fights with a God who eludes his attacks." By comparison, Dr. Terrien finds MacLeish's J.B. as an "emasculated" protagonist. He is merely "the diseased victim of fate, who hardly, if ever at all, rise above the level of intellectual stupor and spiritual impassivity." The traditional heroes exulted in the suffering born of confrontation with the realities of life, but J.B. is scared of realities. Nickles, like the Fool in King Lear, is the conscience-interpreter of J.B. An intelligent man with a sense of history as well as with a bitter taste of the poetry of despair in his mouth, Nickles is a great nay-sayer.

J.B. fails as a protagonist "in conveying the real dramatic tension," because the playwright has made a mess of the Book of Job. The reason for this is that while the subject matter of the play is epical and involves all the forces - God, society, chance, good and evil - the protagonist is an unheroic man, too weak to explore the mysteries of human existence. Like Hamlet,
J.B. discovers void in the universe, but while Hamlet had fought bravely to bring order out of chaos, J.B. is just overwhelmed by the mysterious working of Nature and God:

What I can't hear is the blindness -
Meaningless - the numb blow
Fallen in the stumbling night.

(J.B., p.108)

J.B. lacks the epical grandeur of the classical epics of Homer and Virgil. Henry Hayes observes that one is totally "disappointed" at the "lack of characterization" in the play. "Certainly a man of Job's extreme faith is a special human being, but Mr. MacLeish has neglected to draw J.B. in such a way that his unusual behaviour in the face of adversity seems characteristic of a particular man." No wonder J.B.'s personality is marked by duller elements like stupidity, boredom, tenacity, disappointment, reluctance and mediocrity. His son is killed in war, a daughter is raped mercilessly, two other children are killed in an automobile wreck, his property is destroyed and finally his wife deserts him because he will not ascribe evil to God. These calamities bring forth the real J.B., the sceptic protagonist, who has shifted from God the giver of things to God the destroyer. J.B. finds that God's will is malicious and destructive.

His will is everywhere against us -
Even in our sleep, our dreams...  

(J.B., p.108).

J.B. can no longer look to his luck; if he suffers, then God is somehow involved in that suffering. In the Book of Job
and in Milton's *Paradise Regained*, Satan fails to subvert the fidelity of God's servants. But MacLeish's *J.B.* is a modern negative saint caught between his consciousness and his ignorance. He sees the world swept by wind and water, but he lacks the sensibility of the great epical heroes to capture the mysterious voice which fades on the wind. He is not a traditional Job — the faithful saint dutifully rewarded by God — rather he is a picture of the modern unaccommodated man who must live with unanswered questions. Indeed, as MacLeish himself told "he is brought not to know but to see." His undeserved sufferings fail to excite passions or spiritual awareness in him and thus, belying the hopes of the audience, he only expresses his pathos in an agony of prayer — "Show me my guilt, 0 God!" (*J.B.*, p.112) — something unconventional in heroic literature.

In the traditional heroic format, the quest of the protagonist inevitably urges him to seek meaning, salvation and redemption. He becomes one of the gods. He searches for the infinite beyond space and time. This is the hubris of the Greeks, the spiritual pride of the Christians. It is man's glory and his doom. But *J.B.* learns to accept an inscrutable destiny without struggle; he is content to endure sufferings rather than explore the mystery of suffering. No wonder, there is no development in his personality and he keeps crying to heaven to let him know his sin. He wishes to die but lacks the passions to act because he is scared that "Death cannot heal him" (*J.B.*, p.114). His tragic experiences have taught him only the philosophy of guilt and he can still philosophize over the values. Being an anti-hero
he is passive and detached to the core. After such experiences as J.B. has encountered - afflicted by disease, scorned by men, abandoned by wife, and dispossessed of children by wars, accident, rape and murder - he might as well follow Nickles' advice to "take a rope's end," or wife's malediction to "curse God and die!" Suicide in such a misery would be the way of the great tragic heroes, who thus seek redemption after tragic experiences; but being a fathead, his "sin is a piety so shallow and so fatuously self-righteous that even when he first hears that two of his children have been smeared against a wall in an auto- wreck, he must take the occasion to philosophize upon the righteousness of his behaviour, and of his convictions.\textsuperscript{22} J.B. knows that he has not sinned, and yet he feels inexplicably guilty and betrays his faith in God while philosophizing over the pervasiveness of guilt in human existence:

\begin{quote}
Guilt matters. Guilt must always matter.
Unless guilt matters the whole world is Meaningless. God too is nothing.
\textit{(J.B., p.118)}.
\end{quote}

The ancient saints, both Greek and Hebrew, had an indomitable spirit and courage to fight with the impersonal forces. They were blessed with an inner spiritual awareness which urged them to unravel the mysteries of the universe. Saint Aquinas, Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas had such tremendous personality. No wonder after their fortunate fall they were venerated and worshipped as demi-gods. J.B. is not a saint in the traditional sense; rather he is a modern negative saint, a typical modern American who is blessed by God with the sign of material success,
and who in turn uses his wealth faithfully as becomes a good steward. His vision of nature, life and God is material and not transcendental. His commitment is the commitment of the contemporary American to success, material prosperity and "God's goodness." On the one hand he believes in the deterministic view of the universe and on the other he fails to form a tenable image of himself. His "vision is neither a 'mystery' nor a transcendence. . . ." J.D.'s God is the vague figure who blesses a fertile America; as long as the land is fertile and its people prosperous, God can remain quietly in the background.\(^2\)\(^3\) His first comforter, a Marxist, tells him that historical necessity is punishing him:

\[
\text{Screw your justice!} \\
\text{History is justice!}
\]

\[(J.B., p.121)\]

J.B. reacts to this suggestion with a religious fervour. Created as spokesman for psychological (Freudian), economic (Marxian), and religious (calvinistic, Puritan) views, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar account for J.B.'s sufferings by projecting him as the plaything of powerful deterministic forces. They assail him for his stupidity and blindness, dullness and pretentious religious faith, and for his ignorance of the causes of his condition. But J.B. turns a deaf ear to what they say and doggedly affirms:

\[
\text{Can we be men} \\
\text{And make an irresponsible ignorance} \\
\text{Responsible for anything?}
\]

\[(J.B., p.123)\]
To realize the anti-heroic nature of J.B., one has only to recollect how Stephen Crane, Joseph Conrad and Matthew Arnold evolved heroes who could respond and act with answerable courage to the dilemmas of their times. Since J.B., the modern protagonist, miserably fails to respond, "all questions remain unanswered as the play ends and the enigma of innocent suffering remains unresolved." J.B. cries out to the blank spaces for justice, demanding an answer, "his voice a challenge thrown against the door of the ultimate mystery," but when "The Voice" finally answers, all that God has to say is that He is bigger than a man. But J.B. knows that he had asked for Justice, not for size. No wonder, J.B. emerges too weak in spiritual strength to be over-awed by the vision of God's majesty and excellence. J.B. is a modern hero balanced between life and suicide. He has no holy message to give to humanity as his sufferings yield no positive results. He can simply persist in spite of God's indifference to his suffering, a God in whose churches, the candles are out, in whose sky the light has faded. The "American hero quickly loses the Puritanic inspired dream of Paradise, a city set upon a hill as a beacon, reflecting the light of God. He learns that America is also on this side of Paradise, a long and impossible distance from the eye and the mind of God."  

The confrontation between J.B. and his wife, Sarah, comprises a major portion of the play. In this confrontation between stark realities and crude idealism, as Dr. Terrien points out, it is Sarah who emerges as an imposing character, a magnificent heroic
personality; by contrast, J.B. appears a helpless victim of undeserved suffering. No wonder, Kenneth Tynan found J.B.'s "heroism dull and boring":

Long before the final curtain I was bored to exasperation by the lack of any recognizable human response to calamity by the protagonist.26

J.B. is an anti-hero because there is no conflict in his personality; he has no vision which inspires him to reach the glorious heights. He never tries to grapple with the inexplicable dilemmas of human existence; his sufferings do not urge him to struggle; his quest does not lead him to doubt and despair.

In fact, for Dr. Terrien, the real protagonist of the play is Sarah, "who rejoins her destitute husband not for herself but for his sake... because she loves him."27 Not J.B., but Sarah explores the reality of the universe and discovers that "God's love" is the only solution of all the problems that afflict mankind. It is Sarah who first speaks of human love as a comfort against the loss of faith:

Blow on the coal of the heart
The candles in churches are out

(J.B., p.153).

At the end of the play, we have man and woman in rags, almost naked like Adam and Eve, willing to go through the cycle of rise and fall, happiness and disaster, sustained by the enlightenment that man can love and live. J.B.'s willingness, despite all that has happened, to begin all over again and affirm life is a characteristic trait of the negative saint. This is "J.B.'s
response to Satan who is, according to MacLeish, 'anti-life' force. Sarah's return is symbolical of a new society based on a new understanding. J.B., who fails to solve any riddle, accepts his isolation in a godless society. He concedes Sarah's new hierarchy to replace the old gods. Their "new society" will have no celestial archetype and J.B. and Sarah will depend solely on their own resources. J.B. rejects the traditional "high Gods with bullwhip and thunder" and embraces human love to survive in this cosmos. He forms an anthropomorphic view of God and is thus a rebel against traditional Calvinism. The protagonist has nothing to give to humanity at the end, for he never rises, as Job does, to the stature of a positive saint, or in the manner of great heroes of Homer, Virgil and Milton. He remains a static character of comedies, a broken and torn man in body and in spirits. The love that he accepts "appears to be noble, but it is noble only on the surface. For it cannot engender victory over the enigma of man's lovely last breath, the ultimate shudder before the open grave. It is a love that dies with the human flesh, for it knows nothing of eternity. It is a sentiment born of man, not of God, and man remains a speck lost in the infinity of space and time." J.B. is an antithesis of the traditional saints for he embraces human love instead of God's love. St. Joan is inspired by her "Voices" to fight with external forces. J.B. remains earthy at the end, merely the deceased victim of fate who never rises above the level of intellectual stupor and spiritual
impossibility. Unlike the Biblical prototype, J.B. lacks the potentialities to explore the enigmatic mysteries of God and His creation. He is doomed to live and love like an ordinary modern man and carry generation with the "same unanswering answer." To the man who has seen two World Wars and who now lives in the shadow of the bomb, God's providence is meaningless and sufferings are existential realities. MacLeish "has no excuses or solutions or promises. He accepts what has happened to this century without trying to justify it. . . . Using the Book of Job as a story of mankind, Mr. MacLeish has written the fable of our time in verse that has the pulse and beat of the modern living." 30 No wonder J.B. does not emerge as a Messiah or a tragic saint like Saint Joan or Thomas Beckett. As a character, he makes no essential advance beyond his type. In the words of Brustein, "when Job becomes J.B. he dwindles . . . into a small and familiar modern man." 31

T. Lawrence Shannon, the protagonist of Williams' The Night of The Iguana, is a negative saint literally - a defrocked clergyman and alcoholic who arrives on stage in a most helpless situation. As he is on the verge of going to pieces emotionally, physically, psychologically, financially, in almost every possible way, this anti-hero is at the end of the rope, just like the frantic iguana in the play.

In fact, he is a typical hero of Tennessee Williams, "the nightmare merchant of Broadway," 32 who is always the spokesman of the defeated, frustrated and beaten. The fatalistic and
nihilistic forces reign supreme in his plays as he deals with rape, castration, violence, cannibalism, nymphomania, brutality and madness. Every play of his is a psychological analysis of depression and frustration, as his protagonists live in a world of metaphysical loneliness, nausea and despair. Like Sartre, he sees humanity destined for ambiguous suffering, for comic and absurd anguish. His "heroes" are weak victims struggling with problems which exhaust their personal resources. Brick in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof affirms the negation of life because his alienation from friend, wife, father, mother and God makes him totally nihilistic. He describes his nausea through his lack of interest in all human relations.

Shannon, in a way, is a picture of Oresteian transgressor - the symbol of the guilty humanity, torn and shattered in body and in spirit. As we read the play, the playwright provides us with a plethora of explanations for Shannon's imminent breakdown. His concept of God, his nihilism, and his atheism spring from his harrowing past and his bizarre life style. Being rootless, Shannon roams about the world in quest of the most horrifying scenes he can find. The complaints posted by his parties, along with his reckless seductions of the young ladies of the tourist groups he accompanies as a guide, get him sacked from one travel agency after another. Sex is his weakness, cheating is his hobby, and a pack of lies is his personality. Like Blanche, he is a lost soul. The predominant reason of his total collapse is his pathetic alienation. Despite the busloads of companions, some
more intimate than others, he finds himself lonely and cut off from everyone else. His is thus history of a world-weary
negative saint who searches the earth for the face of God in vain. His story makes a downward progress, from divinity to rascality. The moral and spiritual disintegration of his self is a trait so characteristic of the anti-heroic stature. For Othello and Romeo, love was a spiritual feeling that sublimated their ideas; for an anti-hero, love is a false trap. No wonder, Shannon is cynical about it:

Honey, it's almost impossible for anybody to believe they're not loved by someone they believe they love, but, honey, I love nobody.33

Like love, marriage too has no meaning in the world of Shannon. It is no more a sacred institution for him: "A man in my condition can't marry, it isn't decent or legal. He's lucky if he can even hold onto his job" (Iguana, p.48).

In his conversation with Hannah Jelkes, the real anti-hero emerges in Shannon, as he explains seriously the forces that wrecked his life and personality. Hannah has also experienced harrowing moments, but she never lost courage and understanding in the face of tribulation as Shannon did. In the encounter between Shannon and Hannah, we have an encounter between heroism and anti-heroism. Hannah's philosophy of life can be a powerful rejoinder to the broken and dissipated men like Shannon, who are hateful of life and in love with the idea of death. The sympathetic and understanding attitude of Hannah prompts the discredited and drunken anti-hero to make a desperate attempt
to retrieve his former self which he lost ten years ago when he committed both fornication and heresy in the same week:

Yeah, the fornication came first, preceded the heresy by several days. A very young Sunday school teacher asked to see me privately in my study. A pretty little thing – no chance in the world – only child, and both of her parents were spinsters, almost identical spinsters wearing clothes of the opposite sexes. Fooling some of the people some of the time but not me – none of the time. . . .

(iguana, p.54)

When he knelt with her to pray for guidance, they suddenly found themselves enjoying lust. Afterwards, she went home and tried to commit suicide. On the following Sunday, he shouted an impromptu sermon that drove the people from the Church:

Look here, I said, I shouted, I'm tired of conducting services in praise and worship of a senile delinquent – yeah, that's what I said, I shouted! All your Western theologies, the whole mythology of them, are based on the concept of God as a senile delinquent and, by God, I will not and cannot continue to conduct services in praise and worship of this, this . . . this . . .

(iguana, p.55).

Defrocked, he became a tour-guide, but in his new job, he continued practising sin of fornication and heresy. His tours symbolize the continuation of his heretical sermons, for on them, he tells Hannah, he is trying to "collect evidence" of his "personal idea of God." Just as in Suddenly Last Summer, Venable saw God presiding over the Encontadas' slaughtering sea birds, Shannon sees God in the fierceness of a tropical thunderstorm. Shannon's God is personified as "a terrific electric storm . . . as lightning and Thunder . . . and also stray dogs vivisected. . . ." (iguana, p.57)
Shannon's descriptions recall the Old Testament God of overwhelming majesty and righteous wrathfulness. Shannon contends that a God who is all these things could not possibly be aware of man's extreme misery and let it continue to exist; therefore God must be unaware of it. Thus, the more examples of suffering Shannon can collect, the more he is demonstrating that God is ignorant, cruel and overwhelming. In the third act, when Maxine unravels the psychically damaging events that led to the release of Shannon's sexual repression, it becomes obvious that Shannon's hatred of God is an escape from his guilt and fear, and that his sexual promiscuousness is only a way to ward off anxiety and despair. She says:

You said you loved God and Mama and so you quit it to please them, but it was your secret pleasure and you harbored a secret resentment against Mama and God for making you give it up. And so you got back at God by preaching atheistical sermons and you got back at Mama by starting to lay young girls.

(Iguana, p.81).

Sex becomes safe for Shannon if he can deny his mother's idea of God. Thus the negative saint in him collects evidence for this denial. His voracious sexual appetite is a predominant trait in his personality. It aggravates his guilt and fear and leads him to despair. Shannon's predicament does not excite tragic feelings; instead, he strikes as a nervous case - a broken and spent-up nihilistic saint who has nothing to give to the humanity. In the third act, when Maxine has him tied in a hammock to keep him from drowning himself and he struggles melodramatically against the rope, Hannah accuses him of being
a perverse Christ-figure engaged in a self-indulgent passion play:

There's something almost voluptuous in the way that you twist and groan in that hammock - no nails, no blood, no death. Isn't that a comparatively comfortable, almost voluptuous kind of crucifixion to suffer for the guilt of the world, Mr. Shannon? (Iguana, p.96).

Shannon's parody of Christ's crucifixion is the most blatant evidence of his perversity as a saint. He appears a mass of contradictions - a "Doctor of Divinity" caught in sexual drives and religious fears. His need to deny God is balanced against his longing for forgiveness. His sensuality is primitive, his erotic compulsion unnatural, and his despair the product of his guilt and fears. Thus, "like the tied iguana being fattened up for slaughter under the porch, Shannon has reached the point where he can only try with pathetic futility to go on past the end of his rope."34

Shannon is exposed by Hannah who tells him how his religious beliefs make him suffer, and how his efforts to go away from God are degrading and dehumanizing him. His heretical and sexual offences have resulted in his metaphysical loneliness, nausea and despair. She makes him aware of his anti-heroic dimensions - "inaction, sex, habit, crack-ups and self-pity."35 She applies her therapy and frees him from his chain and his laceration. She tells him that he has been so self-indulgent that he has not been able to see that people might help him. He needs to find relief in "broken gates between people so they can reach each other, even if it's just for one night only" (Iguana, p.104).
But Shannon is so wrought in despair that Hannah's spiritualism cannot save him from the inevitable doom. He has been fighting for freedom, but at the end he embraces an eternal servitude in the zesty affections of the widow, Faulk Maxine. "Since the protagonist spends so much of the play fighting off Maxine, his staying might be seen as his final destruction." No wonder, at the end, the protagonist does strike a fragment of debris thrown up by the forces of sex and heresy.

Shannon fails to rise to the heroic level as he has been revolting against the cosmic laws rather wantonly. His revolt is not Promethean in nature; it symbolizes his deliberate flight from the consequences of his own transgression. The classical protagonists had a longing for a mode of healing, but Shannon, being an anti-hero, becomes a symbol of sick humanity - "a sickness unto death." As an answer to the existentialist absurd, a hero would discover goodness, mercy, compassion or love in the world. But the journey of this negative saint is not spiritual; rather it is a flight from goodness to evil, from faith to heresy, from purity of senses to fornication, from spiritualism to sadism and masochism.

That which forbids his ultimate salvation is himself. The negative saint is possessed not merely of a single flaw, but of a comprehensive condition of evil - an inner impurity far greater than the Greek hamartia. Thus, there is nothing tragic, glorious or redeeming in the fall of Shannon. As a matter of fact, instead of salvation, there is a loss of freedom, when the protagonist
simply "reconciles himself to becoming the champion in waywardness of the lewd and gusty lady whose hotel is the scene of the play." 37

Apparently, there is no optimism at the end for the protagonist does not become a saint. Hannah's nobility, goodness and compassion give him only a momentary release from the "spook," a mere glimpse of what it means to love. The arrangement between Shannon and Maxine is simply outrageous, for he agrees not only to live with her but also to cater to the sexual needs of the female guests of the hotel: "And you can take care of the Women that are with them. That's what you can do, you know that Mr. Shannon." (Iguana, p. 126)

Even "the director of the Original Broadway production must have sensed how inappropriate optimism is in the conclusion, for when Shannon returned to the stage after cutting the ignana loose, he was wearing the rope around his own neck." 38 Thus Shannon remains "rapaciously lusty." A supreme example of the typical Williams' anti-heroism, Shannon is reconciled to eternal damnation. As Blanche is removed to asylum at the end, Shannon is tied to "a bright spider" Maxine, to be consumed by sinfulness and sexual vulgarity. Indeed, a lost soul and a fragmented being, Shannon is the most representative negative saint in post-World War II American Drama.

Brick of Cat On A Hot Tin Roof is one shade too pale. Blessed with all the advantages - youth, beauty, strength and health - he gradually goes through a decline and finds himself detached from both life and sex. For him, his athletic fame
and his friendship with Skipper have been the only two reasons for living. Now both are gone, and Brick is left with his bottle. He pours himself one drink after another, waiting for the "click" that allows him to escape from the heat of life. For him, "Mendacity is a system that we live in - liquor is one way out an' death's the other. . . ."^9

Brick lacks all the traditional heroic dimensions, comic or tragic - the strength of character. Reflecting an anti-heroic image of man, he fails to confront the reality of life and refuses to grapple with the mendacity of the world. He finds solace only in nausea and disgust. For life has no charm, and beauty, love, riches are meaningless things. God, soul and salvation having become useless phrases in his vocabulary, Brick sees reality only in falsehood, treachery, fraud and lust, the only escape being "liquor" or "death". Big Daddy grabs Brick's crutch and would not give him a drink until he explains why he is wasting away his life:

I've lived with mendacity! - why can't you live with it? Hell, you've got to live with it, there's nothing else to live with except mendacity, is there?

(Cat, p.93)

Brick is a fine specimen of this anti-heroism. Devoid of the capacity to feel and act, he is conscious of being a nonself and lives in illusions. Like a Freudian psychoanalyst, Big Daddy tries to cure Brick by making him aware of his suppressed impulses:
And how now! - we have tracked down the line with which you're disgusted and which you are drinking to kill your disgust with, Brick. You been passing the buck. This disgust with mendacity is disgust with yourself. You! - dug the grave of your friend and kicked him in it! - before you'd face truth with him!

If Shannon affirms chaos and moral disorder, Brick negates life. Through these anti-heroic protagonists, Tennessee Williams dramatizes the moral and spiritual disintegration of mankind because, for him, the most pressing problem of man in the twentieth century is to avoid extinction - "to beat the game of being against nonbeing." Indeed, Williams has evolved a new type of hero, "a non-being", a symbol of moral and spiritual paralysis of the post-World War II society. No wonder, the anti-hero is not a man of action but one of reflection and contemplation, not heroic like Oedipus, Agamemnon and Achilles but a nihilist and spiritually bankrupt - a negative saint.

To conclude, the contemporary theatre has transformed heroism into anti-heroism. Whereas the traditional protagonist's heroism lay in heroic struggle against the forces of evil, the anti-heroes like Hickey J.B., Shannon, Brick, emerge as trapped victims, alienated in this universe, too feeble to confront the grim realities of human existence. Whereas the traditional protagonist's heroism lay in suffering for his faith or in upholding what was supposed to be ethically "good", the modern negative-saint forms ultra-skeptical view of love, religion, life, God and soul. Helpless and spiritually bankrupt, the
modern negative-saint is a stranger lost in the universe. Guilt-ridden, he is overwhelmed by the majesty and glamour of the divinity. Not a saint in the traditional sense, he is projected as anti-hero, a negative saint, the victim of sexual drives and religious fears.
Notes


10 Ibid., p.7.


16 Archibald MacLeish, *J.B.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1956), p.35. All subsequent page numbers refer to this edition and are incorporated in the text.
17 J.B. Versus Job, "Time, 73 (13 April 1959), 95.

18 Ibid., p. 95.


26 "Portrait of the Artist As A Young Camera," The New Yorker, 33 (20 December 1958), 70.


29 Samuel Terrien, "Job And J.B.," p. 11.


31 Quoted in Andrew MacLeish, op. cit., p. 226.


33 Tennessee Williams, The Night of the Iguana (New York: New Directions Books, 1961), p. 49. All subsequent references refer to this edition and are incorporated in the text, the title having been abbreviated as Iguana.


39 Tennessee Williams, Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (New York: New Directions Books, 1955), p.95. All subsequent references are from this edition and are incorporated in the text, the title abbreviation being Cat.