PREFACE

This thesis seeks to study Eugene Gladstone O’Neill’s treatment of the twin themes of love and marriage in his plays. It is male - female relationship - sick male - female relationship more often than not - that is at the core of O’Neill’s plays. Love in its myriad forms and matrimonial discords occur with unfailing frequency in his plays, right from his first One Act Play, *A wife for a Life*, to his last play, *Moon for the Misbegotten*. Plays like *Hairy Ape*, *The Emperor Jones* and *Lazarus Laughed* are exceptions. Even a play like *Days Without End*, often described as a play signalling O’Neill’s possible return to Catholicism, is built around the complex relationship of John Loving and Elsa. If John Loving returns to church, it is to pray for the life of his wife *Marco Millions* has to do with the business-like relationship of Marco Polo with Donata and Kukachin. *The Fountain* shows how Juan de Ponce falls a prey to love at an old age.

Love and marriage are two essential aspects of life that make life worth living and dying for. It is equally true that they can make one’s life miserable and wretched. Everyone of us has his or her own concept of what love is and how marriage should be. Disappointment creeps in when reality makes us realize that our theories are at variance with practice. O’Neill’s concept of love as well as marriage is idyllic. He seems to believe in the concept of ‘all for love’ and to him marriage is a sacrament in which the wife sacrifices everything for the cause of marriage. As one who was married thrice, divorced twice, parted for some time from his third wife and one who had a few love affairs to boot, O’Neill must have been acutely conscious that in this complicated world it is difficult for love and marriage to be what he expected them to be. It is this consciousness of the unbridgeable gap between what is and what ought to be that makes his plays interesting subject for study.
The study consists of eight chapters. The introductory chapter opens with a brief assessment of O’Neill’s contribution to American drama. This assessment is based on the views of critics who are neither unduly adulatory nor unjustly harsh. The chapter also outlines O’Neill’s attitude to life and drama. Since O’Neill’s personal life does have a bearing on his treatment of love and marriage, his married and love life is looked into. Brief summaries of the plays of O’Neill taken up for study are also given to establish that O’Neill’s plays revolve round the themes of love and marriage.

The second chapter discusses the various forms of love that we come across in O’Neill’s plays. Since a study of the themes of love and marriage in the writings of any post-Freudian writer can never be complete without a study of sex, one chapter is devoted to this aspect. One chapter, euphemistically called ‘Love and Marriage’, studies adultery. It is so titled because O’Neill’s women tend to find love outside their loveless marriages. What makes them seek love outside wedlock and how far they succeed in balancing their love and marriage are dealt with in this chapter. Three chapters are devoted to the study of marriage. One chapter is on the plays with a positive outlook on marriage, though such plays are few and far between. The chapter ‘Marriage Malignity’ studies the destructive side of marriage. The bond of marriage kills love and in fact brings the worst out of O’Neill’s characters. One chapter studies the love-hate relationship which O’Neill seems to suggest is inevitable in a modern marriage. The concluding chapter is not merely an attempt at reductionism. It tries to find out why love is lovely while marriage is nothing short of hell in O’Neill’s plays. What are the solutions that O’Neill has to offer and their practicability.

The thesis is not a sociological one. It is not a thesis on love and marriage per se. It is a purely literary thesis and the study is confined to O’Neill’s presentation of
them. The study attempts to cover all the relevant plays of O'Neill, his One - Act plays not excluded. The study is not done from a moralistic angle. The attempt is to study what makes O'Neill's characters behave the way they behave. Care is taken to avoid passing judgements over the actions of his men and women, however outrageous their actions may be.

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I dedicate this little critical excursion to the memory of my mother, Mrs. Thirupurasundari Naganathan who has always remained the soul of my being.

MADRAS.


N. Seshasayee
While the subject of this chrestomathy of the writings on O'Neill is O'Neill and his plays - their meaning, value, strength, and weaknesses - other subjects emerge. One is the old question of whether absolute, dramatic criticism or any kind of criticism is possible. It seems clear once again that criticism can be only relatively objective, especially when it is competent, for then it partakes of the creative act, and all creative expression involves a commitment to a point of view, an orientation and a strategy which, in turn, involves selection, organization, suppression and stress - in other words, subtle participation as man and writer. A play is not only what it is but what it does to and for the critic, and what it does depends upon who he is and in what intellectual and aesthetic ambience he moves.

Oscar Cargill in his "Introduction" to O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism.