CHAPTER THREE
THE BACKGROUND TO O'NEILL'S CONCEPT OF TRAGEDY

This chapter falls into different sections: modern British tragedy and its diversity of philosophy; the development of the American drama; modernism and the new trends of realism, naturalism and impressionism; and finally, the concept of modern American tragedy and its development with Eugene O'Neill.

The chapter shows the extent of impact that each of the following aspects had on O'Neill's tragic vision: the change in the structure of society, the impact of wars, the years of depression, the adoption of scientific and rational approaches in tackling man's problems which resulted in the questioning of man's proper position in the universal scheme of things. Modern man's feeling that he no longer constitutes a meaningful part of the universe leads him to be dominated by a sense of bewilderment, anxiety, alienation and existential vacuum. O'Neill as a playwright holds a mirror up to reflect all these influences on his society in tragic plays that proved his artistic skill and ensured his position as a master in the world of tragedy as the following chapters will show.

3.1 Modern British Tragedy: Diversity in Philosophy

As we have seen earlier, tragedy as a dramatic genre in English drama went through a period of steady decline from the end of the Jacobean period (1603-1625) until the middle of the nineteenth century. Melodrama with its substitution of sensation for
emotion, situation for structure and spectacle for nearly everything had taken the place of tragedy. The decay of religious faith and observance, a disregard for discipline, a dismissal of authority, and a gross slackening of personal and general standards are considered as possible reasons for the decay of tragedy. Tragedy, as we have indicated in Chapter Two, was developed out of a sense of theological or metaphysical stability. Man was dignified; he had some direct or personal relationship with forces of the cosmos. Consequently, tragedy is ruined when the illusion of man's personal connection with superhuman processes is lost, when he is looked upon as a mere species of animal that happens to inhabit the earth for a certain number of years between its birth and death, according to Charles Darwin's theory of Evolution.

Raymond Williams points out that the French Revolution in 1789 is a decisive step in changing the premises upon which tragedy is based. He remarks that "since then, the idea of tragedy can be seen as a response to a culture in conscious change and movement."¹ Tragedy, which had traditionally dealt with the fate of a singular individual from the privileged aristocratic class of society, has to cope with the fact that the destiny of a nation is no longer being shaped exclusively or even predominantly by a dynasty or an aristocracy. Hence, we can find tragedies that are based on the reduction in status of the conventional tragic hero to the lower level of the social classes: the lay or common man. In fact, the most obvious reason for the disappearance of the 'larger than life' tragic hero and his replacement by the 'slice of life' victimized hero is the change wrought in the structure of society as Evans points out.²

The destruction of deeply rooted beliefs results in the questioning of man's proper position in the universal scheme of things. In fact, modern man's feeling that he no longer
constitutes a meaningful part of the universe, leads him to be dominated by a sense of
bewilderment, anxiety, alienation and existential vacuum. Hence, his constant
engagement in strife and bloody struggles to survive in a world that continuously
alienates him from his true self can be viewed as attempts, if partially successful, to assert
his value as a human being.

This feeling necessitates a reconsideration of the questions of good and evil and
their role in determining modern man's life. In modern times, these crucial terms have
been institutionalized in the sense that, in so many plays, the conflict is between an
individual or group and a threatening system. Accordingly, the systems predominant in a
society, whether political, economic, or religious are to be blamed for the downfall of
modern common man.

Evil in post-Freudian era is largely regarded as a sickness for which the individual
is not responsible. Accordingly, wrongdoing is often attributable to deprivation,
sometime by environment, sometimes by neglect, not to any personal shortcoming, and
as a result the wrong-doer is not to be blamed. Since man is not responsible for shaping
his life, sacrificial and dignified death, characteristic of some classical tragic drama, is
denied to him. Spiritual rather than physical death is the predominant feature of almost all
temporary tragic drama.

It is noteworthy here that the conditions which were behind the decline of Greek
tragedy in the second half of the fifth century B.C. already existed in the West when the
dramatists of the modern European theatre were contemplating not only the possibility of
writing tragedy that reflect the modern mode of uncertainty and spiritual inertia, but also
of extending its range and enlarging its potentialities as a study of the tragic dilemma of
modern man and his world. In fact, the turbulent experiences of this period can be best described in terms of the loss of innocence. Like the modern age, this was a period of immense cultural crisis and political convulsion. In culture, the emphatic movement encouraged skepticism in the old beliefs the outcome of which is the undermining of the old sense of moral security.

Hence, the ideological presuppositions of tragedy—namely, the immutability of the social order, the unequivocal acceptance of moral authority, the relation between the human and the divine and lastly the sacrificial heroism—are shattered in modern western culture, under the heavy blows of materialistic philosophy as well as intellectual and technological developments which contributed a great deal to the inquisitiveness and skepticism of modern man.

The other serious factor that helps to accelerate the dissolution of traditional values and systems upon which society is based is the First World War and its devastating effect on the whole fabric of modern western society, where life became a circle of broken passions, lusts, fears and horrors. The integrity of the world collapsed and serious debasement began. Furthermore, the reaction of post World War I society was to suspect too easily all manifestations of authority. The question, as Gassner puts it, is "how should the nobility and splendor of the tragic vision survive in a world leveled down by democracy and cheapened by mass production and mass consumption, a world in which even emotion and ideas have been converted into commodities gaudily packed for the buyer?" ³

David Mercer attributes the death of tragedy to the deep spiritual and cultural impoverishment of modern communities; "There is no communality of belief, no
communality of assumption no communality of purpose...We're unified neither by God nor man and divided by everything." 4 Therefore, a common realism takes the place of idealism to which the art of tragedy aspires by historical examples since the time of Aristotle.

The most important exponents of realism in modern theatre are Johan August Strindberg (1849-1912) and Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) whose views on tragic drama are of special importance here.

Ibsen, under the impact of realism and later on naturalism as new attitudes and philosophies in drama, was in rebellion against romantic situations and characterization. He tried to put on stage, as a realist, only what he could verify by observing ordinary life; and as a naturalist he tries to present a specially angled view of real life under the powerful forces that governed human lives; the forces of heredity and environment. He wrote what might be called, "bourgeois tragedy" in which he deals with the lives of people from the middle class. It can be said that "Ibsen and Strindberg, the fathers of modern drama, begat O'Neill, who was to become the father of American drama." 5 Thus, his works are real reflections of what have been mentioned as the new characteristics of tragedy which depend not on the British heritage, but on his ability to make use of the American native subjects and scenes.

Not only O'Neill but also George Bernard Shaw finds in Ibsen a model worthy of imitation. Shaw promoted realism on stage and established prose as a very powerful medium of drama. In his book The Quintessence of Ibsenism (1891), Shaw attacks the nineteenth century English theatre which consists, according to him, of the rags and tatters of Shakespeare and he awakens theatergoers to the possibilities of socially
conscious drama. In revolt against these decadent theatrical practices, he proposes a drama of ideas which puts the audience into a critical frame of mind when watching the dramatic situation presented. Instead of the familiar structure of the well-made play, which is built on the scheme: 'exposition, situation, unraveling', Shaw adopts the technical scheme used in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*: 'exposition, situation, discussion.'

Shaw believes that discussion is the crucial technical innovation which accompanies the change in outlook which he was the first to be aware of. Moreover, his belief that good and ill-intentioned people alike can commit the cruelest actions accounts for the absence of the traditional villain characters in his tragic plays. This implies that Shaw is intent on excluding any philosophy of evil and choosing to focus instead on stupidity, ignorance, self will, and a general blindness to the ultimate cause of a given action in time. Shaw actually believes that it is impossible to compose tragedy according to the histrionic notion of heroism. He firmly holds the view that non-heroism and the modern intellectual climate are incompatible with the requirements of the Aristotelian tragic dictum. Therefore, Shaw takes for his heroes and heroines ordinary men and women. As a matter of fact, what Shaw has done is to bring the hero off his pedestal, but only to demonstrate that the flesh and the blood was much more of a hero than the statue and the legend. This is apparent in his treatment of historical figures such as Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte, for he presents them not as exceptional persons, but as ordinary human beings like any one else.
3.2 The Development of the American Drama

3.2.1 Historical Background

The American theatre, now considered one of the strongest and the most outstanding world theatres, was really out of focus until the end of the nineteenth century. It was the last major genre to come of age. At the beginning there were hesitant and stumbling steps in trying to create a serious American theatre and to have stable cornerstones of the American play. It is worthwhile to mention that "drama was the last of all the literary types to come to full flower in America." 9

Through its history, the American drama faced lots of difficulties and obstacles that hindered its foundation and proliferation. These obstacles were social and religious. They refer to the narrow-mindedness and illiberality of the dominant authority at the time. One of these obstacles is the power of the Puritans, a group of religious people, who regarded the theatre as a sort of sinful entertainment that evokes the passions and promotes objectionable desires. Thereupon, in an attempt to gain approval in the eyes of the public officials and in order not to upset the Puritans, plays were billed as moral dialogues, and theatres were called opera houses or school houses.

Theatres were used as an educational vehicle to the extent that some early American theatrical offerings included lectures with a single performer dispensing homely wisdom and commenting on current social manners. In Ohio, a catastrophe shocked all American theatres and supplied the opponents with evidence of God's avenging hand at work when a theatre was burned down taking the lives of seventy two people. Strict regulations kept many theatres closed and the stage rapidly declined soon after. Many applications begged the government to stop the open contravention against
the exhibition of stage plays but the appeals failed. In March 1789 a civic group called The Dramatic Association won a hard fight to make the theatre permanently legal. Thus, "all plays dropped their thin veils of lectures and were presented by authority." 10

3.2.2 The American Drama and the Process of Imitation

The history of drama begins very late in American literature and this is due to the youthfulness of the American nation as compared with other nations. According to James E. Miller, the newness of the American literary career made the Americans feel they are "too young to rival in literature the old nations of Europe." 11 Thereupon, because of their inability to rival their predecessors in drama, they started the process of imitation.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the American drama passed through the imitation phase, and it is believed that this is an ordinary stage which precedes the innovation phase. Literature, at that time was plainly superficial, derivative, inferior, and lacked profundity; it was not an expression of the American people. Like the people who created it, American drama had its beginnings in Europe and was strongly influenced by European models.

Although the American theatre remained a copy of the European and makes use of its themes and subjects, the American dramatist tries to adapt and adjust these themes according to the satisfaction of the American audience. 12 The nineteenth century witnessed the appearance of three distinctive writers in America, namely Irving, Poe, and Bryant. Although their works won high esteem and large readership among Europeans, yet the process of imitation can be clearly seen in their works, as James E. Miller states:

Irving's *Rip Van Winkle* and *Ichabod Crane* were direct borrowings from German legend, and many of Poe's short
stories, including *The Cask of Amontillado*, were based on European gothic romances, while Bryant's *Thanatopsis* was originally considered a British forgery.\(^{13}\)

### 3.2.3 The Radical Changes and Literary Originality

The second decade of the nineteenth century witnessed tremendous changes; these changes were political and intellectual. They played a vital role in shaping and forming American literature especially in raising the spirit of nationalism and the spirit of perfection. From the political point of view, the war of 1812-1818, which America fought against Great Britain, was very influential in making the American people conscious of their own literature. Intellectually, we can find the great and permanent impact that the Reformation Movement and the Transcendental Philosophy played in developing the spirit of perfection. These two movements have changed the literary world of America radically. They pushed the American literary heritage to the phase of originality, discarding the imitation phase that the earlier authors had initiated.

On December 24, 1818 the treaty of Ghent formally ended the war in which neither side could claim victory. After the war, the Americans became more independent in their literary pursuits because after this war an extraordinary spirit of nationalism has been raised and the Americans began to look closely at their own society and their own affairs. The American authors and playwrights, inspired by this spirit, began to develop and create a new American literature and culture. They used settings, characters and themes that were typically American. About the war of 1812, Thomas H. O'Connor says: "In the years after the war of 1812, the Americans gained confidence in their own
abilities and in the future of their country. The war was a turning point after which the American people began to establish a separate identity. The attention of the nation turned from Europe toward America."14

As for the Reformation and the Transcendentalist movements, these two movements with their intellectual ideas helped in forming the spirit of perfection which went hand in hand with the spirit of nationalism in promoting the original American art and culture. Thomas H. O'Connor believes that one of the greatest periods for American literature came during the Reform years because writers of this time were often influenced by the democratic spirit and the spirit of perfection, as they wrote about America and its people. To speak about the Reform movement, is to speak about the Transcendentalist movement because both of them tried different forms, new ideas, and themes; both of them have contributed to the flowering of the American art and literature.

There were certain ideas, concepts, and philosophies that formed the basis of both of these movements, one of which is that, during the 1700s, some churches had taught that only a certain number of people were chosen by God to be saved and to go to heaven. But as the country became more democratic, many churches began to teach that all people could be saved if they improved themselves and the world around them. These ideas encouraged people to make changes for the better. Ralph Waldo Emerson was influenced by these ideas; he developed a new philosophy or set of ideas which was called Transcendentalism. Emerson believed that people could go beyond their limitations and perfect themselves and their society.
As a matter of fact, Emerson continued shaping American literature significantly, adding things and deleting others; adding originality to art literature and deleting dependence on ‘outsider’ themes and techniques.

The ideology of the war of 1812 and the philosophy of the Reform movement were crystallized in the American mind in the period that followed 1820 because it was only at that time that the American people became conscious of themselves and their own society; they became fond of national subjects and national themes. They no longer wanted to imitate European art and culture. They recognized the need for a uniquely American literature in theme and setting, characterized by the nation's mood of youthful optimism.

Day after day and year after year the greatest classics of American art and literature began to appear. So many of them crowded into the 1850s, and accordingly that period has been variously called "American's Golden Day, The Flowering of New England, and The American Renaissance." 15 During a brief five-year period, 1850-1855, many of the most prominent American works appeared: Emerson's Representative Man (1850); Melville's Moby Dick (1851); Hawthorne's The House of the Seven Gables (1851); Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852); Hawthorne's The Blithedale Romance (1852); Melville's Pierre (1852); Thoreau's Walden (1854); and Whitman's Leaves of Grass (1855). With very little borrowing and significant originality, the result was a sort of national literature; a literature that witnessed the shaking off of traditional restraint and the beginning of a sort of intellectual renaissance. But the majority of the dramatists, at that time, took their matters and themes from reality; they made use of it, without realizing that art does not portray life in all its aspects and merits but recreates it and
moulds it in an artistic way. So, the American literary men, instead of producing artistic reality, pictured naked reality and the result was that, as dramatists, they failed in their first national Renaissance.  

3.2.4 The Theatrical Syndicate

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, to be precise in 1896, the formation of a well-intentioned but disruptive enterprise known as the Syndicate came into being. It started out as a sound business arrangement conceived in order to facilitate the movements of important road shows throughout the country. About this theatrical Syndicate, Jordan Miller states: "Its founders decided there would be more efficiency in sending the shows, through the agency of a central booking office, into theatres all over the country on a carefully predetermined timetable."  

On paper, the plan sounded good. In practice, under the leadership of Marc Klaw and A.L. Erlanger, who gave the Syndicate its name, it became a terrifying powerful monopoly. What it eventually succeeded in doing was to seize control of virtually every important theatre from coast to coast. Soon no production without Klaw and Erlanger's contract could enter certain cities under any conditions. Second rate plays, losing ground in New York, could be sent on tour and forced into any theatre where the managers would have to show them or would run out of business. The prosperous shows would remain in New York, depriving the road of the good theater it was supposed to be paying for. Eager new actors had to satisfy Charles Frohman, a syndicate member, or face little chance of getting a start. Writers of course, were almost completely at the group's mercy.
In 1906, the Syndicate controlled about 700 theatres. The best way to fight such an organization was with an equally strong trust. This was supplied by Lee J.J., and Sam Shubert. By 1905 Shubert was managing three New York playhouses and eight out of town. After his tragic death in a train wreck that year, his brothers erected a Sam S. Shubert Memorial Theatre in every city they could enter and began to give the Syndicate a big fight.

In the end, challenged everywhere, Klaw and Erlanger gave up. The Shuberts never achieved the same absolute monopoly although they opened a majority of the legitimate theatres in the country well into the 1950s. Among the others who resisted the syndicate was David Belasco, who successfully built his own theatres. Anyhow, in 1915 the monopoly ended.

With the dissolution of the theatrical Syndicate of 1896, we end our look at the nineteenth century and prepare ourselves to discuss the major incidents that happened in the twentieth century, showing their influence upon the Second American Renaissance.

3.2.5 The Twentieth Century

In the history of America since the beginning of the twentieth century, several distinct periods can be distinguished, each of which has had more or less direct influence on the kind of literature produced in America. The more important of these periods may be designated as the First World War (1914-18), the period of the Great Depression (1930s), and the period of the Second World War (1939-45). We will not focus on the last, as it happened after the period in which Eugene O'Neill presented most of his tragic
plays. Nevertheless, the war left great impact on the literary mind of the American playwrights who lived and witnessed its days and after.

3.2.5.1 The First World War

The First World War was one of the prominent events that changed the modern world drastically. From the humanitarian side, the influence of this disastrous war was tremendous. The literature of the First World War too reflected dark and gloomy reality. It pictured the sense of frustration, despair, oppression, and the social injustices which were the characteristics of the age. Although it made literature dark and gloomy, yet the war brought profundity to the literary mind and literary subject matter especially in the field of tragedy, as our study of O'Neill's selected plays will show. As a matter of fact, up to the time of the First World War, the playhouses of the United States did not produce any theatrical literature of importance; it was the generation that came after World War I who gave us the first American theatre of distinction. So, the war played a vital role in the process of maturation of the American literary mind though the United States government did not participate in this war.

3.2.5.2 The Pioneers of the New Theatre Movement

Now, it is time to move away from the desperate atmosphere of the war and start shedding light on the Second American Renaissance. Although the horror of World War I was astounding, yet the American Renaissance went on in its way to universality, and the theatrical companies in the United States did extraordinary work to make the American theatre gain internationalism. The major theatrical companies at that time were
The Washington Square players and The Provincetown Players. They were the pioneers of the new theatre movement in the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly during the same period of World War I.

The story of these two theatrical companies and other pioneering groups between 1915 and 1929 holds a great interest for anyone who wants to observe the American theatre in a proper perspective. The slightly older of the two groups, the Washington Square Players, was formally established in 1914. It presented its first production in the following year in Midtown Manhattan in a small theatre called the Bandbox. The group consisted of intellectuals, social rebels, and artists. One of the leaders was the scene designer Lee Simonson, "who was steeped in the European avant-garde movement and helped to revolutionize American scenic art." 18 The Washington Square players revealed a characteristic partiality for one-act plays, but later on, the young company went beyond fashionable intellectualism and enriched its one-act repertory with effectively realistic productions. These included O'Neill's early sea play *In the Zone*, but the ambitions of this theatrical group reached out rapidly to the production of full-length drama.

The Washington Square players managed to present sixty-two one-act plays and six full length ones in New York during a brief career. The company was closed in May 1918. About this company John Gassner states that "after the cessation of hostilities, it reestablished itself as a producing company … it started gathering around itself a growing number of subscribers calling itself the Theatre Guild." 19 The reconstructed group forged ahead to become America's outstanding producing company.

On the other hand, the other acting group which is the Provincetown players maintained its amateur or semi-amateur status to the end of its career in 1929; while the
original Washington Square players disbanded in 1918. Moreover, the Provincetown group was primarily interested in producing the work of new American playwrights; and it rapidly attained prominence with O'Neill's most advanced experiments in dramatic technique. As a matter of fact, the Provincetown Company came to be regarded as essentially a playwright's theatre and this is, as John Gassner points out, chiefly because it excelled in the task of developing modern playwriting in the United States.

The company acquired new talented members, famous writers, and artists. Those writers soon provided the company with their plays to be performed. Especial contributions were made by O'Neill's one-act plays, among which were the little sea plays *Ile* and *The Long Voyage Home*. Other new one-act plays were supplied by Susan Glaspell.

After many successful seasons, the Provincetown players reached their highest creativity with a moving presentation of four of O'Neill's best one-act plays under the collective title of *S. S. Glencairn*, as well as a sparkling production of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *Patience*. Nevertheless, after a series of unsuccessful and disappointing attempts and the decline of its production effectiveness, nothing could prevent the dissolution of the Provincetown players. According to Gassner, the Provincetown remained a playwright's theatre to the very end. It ended its career, just as it began, with the work of a new American playwright, namely Virgil Gedde's bleak Midwestern tragedy *The Earth Between*.

The Washington Square players and the Provincetown players attempted to create a vital modern theatre in the United States. They were part of a widespread movement to establish little experimental theatres in the other large cities such as Chicago, Boston,
Cleveland, and Detroit. Even before the establishment of the Provincetown Players, as early as 1912, the so-called little theatres devoted themselves to produce plays without regard for the practical considerations of the commercial theatre.

### 3.2.5.3 The Jazz Age

In our journey through the American literature during the twentieth century, we reached an era that is worth studying because the young Americans, who once failed in their first Renaissance, now become great scholars who lead American literature into its unforgettable phase. This era is called the 1920s, the Roaring Twenties, or the Jazz Age. As a matter of fact, both the excitement and the problems of the changing times could be seen in the literature of the 1920s. Many writers wrote about the sadness of the modern life, and among them was Ernest Hemingway who portrayed characters searching for values and struggling to find meaning in life besides F. Scott Fitzgerald who wrote about the carefree lives of the young and the wealthy people. His works *The Side of Paradise*, and *The Great Gatsby*, made him a spokesman of the Jazz Age and a group of scholars who called themselves the lost generation. In describing this age, critics believe that American drama did not become completely American until it attained full maturity in the plays of Eugene O'Neill, of the 1920s.

The decade of the 1920s came to be known as the Jazz Age because a new kind of music called jazz became popular at that time. It had accented rhythms and developed from ragtime and blue music. The Jazz music originated in the black culture of New Orleans, but in the 1920s and 1930s, its syncopated rhythms captivated people in
Chicago and New York. Hence jazz became a symbol for some Americans who welcomed the change to a less ordered life.

3.2.5.4 The Great Depression

The third decade of the twentieth century witnessed one of the severest economic crises in the history of the United States, a crisis that was to shake American society, crash many fortunes, and cause many suicides. This crisis was the Great Depression. The depression ushered in a period of high unemployment, bankruptcies, and mortgage foreclosures. The Great Depression of the 1930s came in part because the Americans had not yet learned to master their machines and to distribute what their machinery so generously produced. According to G. J. Barstowe "the primary cause of the depression was underconsumption, not overproduction, as many people think." People could not afford to buy the surpluses because they did not have the purchasing power to buy what the machinery was producing efficiently.

From 1927 to 1929 there was an almost uninterrupted inflation in stock prices. On October 29, 1929 stock prices began to fall catastrophically. Hundreds of thousands of small investors were wiped out. By 1931 the value of all stocks in the New York Stock Exchange had fallen from $87 billion to $19 billion; business activity fell off 50 percent. In 1931 alone 2300 banks failed and wage cutting began. Hundreds of thousands of farms and homes were lost by mortgage foreclosure. Unemployment estimates varied between twelve and fifteen million.

It was inevitable that the theatre, and consequently the drama, should suffer deeply during the depression. The drama is the most costly of all arts; it requires for its
full existence a theatre, actors, a box-office and advertising staff. The cost of all these commodities had soared during the boom period after World War I. With the coming of the Depression, the economic pressure on the theatre became tremendous. Large numbers of the theatre-going audiences in America were driven to seek less expensive or free forms of entertainment. In New York, there was a sensational slump in theatrical enterprise, and in cities like Chicago and San Francisco, the theatrical fare became so scarce as almost to threaten the drama with extinction.

The series of terrible social disasters that followed the onset of the depression impressed on the younger playwrights the need for expressing dramatically the more violent phases of the class struggle; and "this led to the emergence of a radical or proletarian drama" which took the European drama as its distinguished model. Of most of the proletarian dramas of the depression years, the defects are more conspicuous than the virtues. The defects are in the main excessive violence and the tendency to represent the class struggle in the elementary terms of traditional melodrama. Their virtues are those of vitality and impassioned conviction, of acute social consciousness, and the determination to see that drama shall not continue to be merely an expensive form of bourgeoisie and a profitable form of economic exploitation for the commercial producer. At their least, these plays picture for after times, the darker aspects of the worst years of the depression.

### 3.3 Modernism and the New Literary Trends

As we mentioned, the twentieth century witnessed the most controversial and rapid change of thoughts in history and social upheaval without parallel. The political
movements of the 'proletariat' (social class comprised of manual laborers) were manifested in theatre by such movements as realism, naturalism and impressionism particularly in the early twentieth century as society battled to determine the ultimate goals and meaning of political philosophy in the life of the average person.

American people and the playwrights among them were left disillusioned by the effects that wars and new technology had on their society. People needed a literature that would explain what had happened and what was happening to their society. American playwrights and specifically O'Neill, as a forerunner, turned to what is now known as modernism as a domain for literary interpretations according to the criteria of the realists, naturalists and the impressionists as well.

3.3.1 Realism

Realism as an experiment appeared in France in the last half of the nineteenth century. It is broadly defined as the faithful representation of reality. It aims to make theatre more useful to society. As a technique of writing, realism denotes a particular kind of subject (middle-class life) to present "truth" as fixed, stable and knowable. In general, the realists are influenced by three prominent figures: The first one is August Comte (1798-1857) who is considered the father of Sociology and the originator of the theory of Positivism in Sociology. Among Comte's ideas was an encouragement for understanding the cause and effect of nature through precise observation. The second one is Charles Darwin (1809-1882) who has two theories, "The Survival of the Fittest" and "Evolution." In 1859 Darwin presented his famous work *The Origin of the Species* in which he emphasized that people were controlled by heredity and environment and
behaviours were beyond our control. The third influential figure on realism is Karl Marx (1818-1883) who in the late 1840s espoused a political philosophy arguing against urbanization and in favor of a more equal distribution of wealth.

Realism came to be heavily loaded against romanticism, melodrama and comic operas. Undistorted by personal bias, realism believed in the ideology of objective reality and revolted against exaggerated emotionalism and spontaneity of feeling and faith in the visionary imagination. Truth and accuracy became the goals of many realists. Henrik Ibsen is considered to be the father of modern realistic drama. His plays attacked society's values and dealt with unconventional subjects within the form of the well-made play (causally related). He became a model for later realistic writers. Eugene O'Neill too, was dissatisfied with the romantic and melodramatic plays presented on the American stage and under the impact of realism started his dramatic career as a realist. He strove hard to introduce realism on the American stage and to accomplish this; he had to stand up against the genteel tradition that abounded in sentimentality. He wrote four one-act plays, *Bound East for Cardiff, Long Voyage Home, The Moon of the Caribees* and *In the Zone* which dealt with a realistic picture of sea-life.

O'Neill is a realist in his choice of theme, settings, characters, situations, and dialogues. Earlier dramatists chose themes that had little relation to the facts of life as experienced by ordinary man; they did not cultivate that minute observation of men in the ordinary and eternal conflicts of every-day living. O’Neill delved deep beneath the surface apparent to all observers. He created a realistic picture of life. His first full-length realistic play *Beyond the Horizon*, which is also a good example of psychological realism, is a tragedy exposing the destructive power of the romantic ideal. The play
rehearses the tragedy of a man whose body and mind need the open road and far spaces, but who, by force of wanton circumstances and the bondage of a romance that soon burns itself out, is imprisoned within the hill-walled boundaries of a few unyielding acres, chained to a task for which he is not fitted.

### 3.3.2 Naturalism

Naturalism as the name implies, is an approach that looks upon nature as the one original and fundamental source of all that exists, and attempts to explain everything in terms of nature. A commonly interchangeable term with realism, naturalism assumes that humans are controlled by their environment, fate, psychology, chance or coincidence. As such it seeks to replicate a believable reality, as opposed to such movements as Romanticism or Surrealism in which subjects may receive highly symbolic, idealistic, or even supernatural treatment. It originated in France in the nineteenth century but its high period was during the twentieth century.

Essentially, the literary concept of naturalism grew out of the concept of realism during the nineteenth century and the naturalistic writers considered themselves second generation realists. The realist had wanted to hold up a mirror to life and render a very accurate picture of life. The naturalist wanted to go a step further and examine life as a scientist would. Thus, the technique of the naturalist involves viewing life with scientific objectivity. For the naturalist, man is controlled by basic urges and can do nothing to determine his own destiny. Environmental, hereditary, and biological forces combine to control man's life. These basic and elemental urges place man in a position similar to that of animals. Naturalistic situations are generally pessimistic and deterministic. When man
is trapped and controlled, his behaviour becomes instinctual and animalistic. If there is
heroism, it is in a human's desire to survive against insurmountable odds.

In fact, both naturalism and realism aim at reproducing real life in an objective
manner, and both of them are defined by their subject matter: the depiction of stark
reality, the interest in ordinary and lower class people instead of those who come from a
high station in life; and obscene or unpleasant subjects are tackled instead of pleasant
ones; but it is worthy to mention that the naturalistic writers are franker or more extremist
than the realists in handing matters of sex, poverty, disease, prostitution, and the ugly
aspects of the society.23

Emile Zola (1840-1902), the novelist and French art critic, is considered as the
chief figure of the naturalistic school and his novel Therese Raquin (1867), is widely
regarded as the first milestone of the movement.24 It talks about Therese’s adulterous love
and her final suicide. The plot of this novel revolves around Therese who is married to a
man who cannot satisfy her sexually; therefore, she seeks another man to satisfy her.
Therese and her lover decide to kill her husband in order to get married to each other. The
two lovers succeed in drowning the sickly husband but on the night of their wedding,
they commit suicide by poisoning themselves because they are burdened with guilt and to
atone for their wrong doing they decide to take their own lives. As a matter of fact, the
novel focuses on the conflict between feelings, instincts, and conscience.

Eugene O'Neill was one of the most famous exponents of naturalism in drama.
This involved both a technique and a way of viewing life. He also accepted the
psychological urges as a part of man's basic driving force. In his plays, O'Neill shows
characters being driven by forces which they cannot understand or conquer. A man born
in one type of environment is influenced by concomitant forces to the point that his basic actions in life are governed by these environmental forces. Carried to an extreme, the view leads to determinism, that is, the idea that man can do nothing for himself and is constantly at the mercy of forces outside him.

A typical image used by the naturalists is that of a person being trapped or imprisoned in a cage. In his earlier works, O'Neill often used the physical image of the cage as in *The Hairy Ape* to suggest the position of man caught or trapped in an alien and hostile universe. In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill depicts man as the victim of his elemental drives, which are motivated by the environment, the biological need to survive, and the hereditary traits of the characters. Later, O'Neill accepted the findings of Sigmund Freud and utilized psychological forces as a part of man's inherent drives. Thus, in *Mourning Becomes Electra* O'Neill attempts to show how certain characters are dominated by their sexual drives, which cause them to commit crimes that repulse the ordinary person.

Naturalism as a dramatic form has some serious limitations. In the true sense of tragedy where man has the potential to control his destiny, the character becomes tragic in relation to how much he is in control of his fate. But in naturalism, man is incapable of controlling his destiny and so becomes the victim of greater forces. The tragedy occurs when we consider the implications of these external forces and the realization that man is trapped. We watch with a horrified sense of pathos man struggling against insurmountable obstacles. Consequently, the tragedy lies in man's awareness and in his consciousness of the futility of struggling against a blind fate. This is completely applicable on O'Neill's *Anna Christie* as the next chapter will show.
3.3.3 Expressionism

Expressionism is an artistic literary movement which began in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century and reached its height in the decade 1915-1925. In literature, expressionism is often considered a revolt against realism and naturalism, seeking to achieve a psychological or spiritual reality rather than merely recording external events in logical sequence. i.e. it strives to express subjective feelings and emotions rather than to depict reality or nature with objectivity. In drama, the Swedish dramatist Strindberg (1849-1912) is considered the forefather of the expressionists, though the term is specifically applied to a group of early twentieth German dramatists, including George Kaiser, Karl Capek and Ernst Toller. Strindberg has laid down the main features and the chief principles of expressionism in his trilogy *The Road to Damascus* (1898-1901). These principles have been summed up by Garten: firstly, the reduction of the characters to mere types named by general terms such as the stranger, the beggar, the Doctor; secondly, the unfolding of the action in a succession of scenes, denoting stages of the central character's development towards a spiritual goal; thirdly, the identification of the author with his central figure. 25

Expressionism as a dramatic technique has undoubtedly widened the possibilities of drama and to a large extent it has succeeded in making the twentieth century audience aware of the inner drama that is more interesting than the drama that our external life is. The interest is no longer in the development of the plot or character but in the expression of a soul swollen with tragedy. It uses symbolism in portraying crude violence and emotional intensity. Often there is a rejection of the strong individualistic character in favour of the more abstract symbol. There is seldom an interest in cause and effect
because the dramatist wants to convey his ideas through abstractions. But like any other technique, when it becomes the sole concern of a dramatist, it is bound to cause embarrassment. One great danger of extreme expressionism is the possibility that the writer may subordinate the human element to an "abracadabra of meaningless symbols". It is possible that it may subordinate the role of man to stage equipments. Gassner was right when he said, "The disappearance of man from theatre, this alone constitutes the decadence in theatre." Depersonalization is a great threat to art whether it is used for social reform or the creation of pure art. It should not be presumed that expressionism in itself is always a better technique than realism or other modes of expression. What ultimately matters is the vision of the playwright and his capability of creating a suitable medium for its communication rather than his interest with various techniques without anything to communicate. Other writers should not necessarily be condemned if they did not use expressionistic technique. Without imagination no writer can be an artist in the true sense because art requires talent for transmutation of life into something acceptable to all in matters of content, and interesting enough in matters of style. O'Neill himself discarded the expressionistic technique after a period of time when he made the last effort to combine it with realistic technique. However, it can be said without doubt that O'Neill created in *The Hairy Ape* the most impressive and exemplary expressionistic play. He made use of symbolism, expressionism, and Freudian psychology. Thus, *The Hairy Ape* is considered one of the best examples of this trend. As the plot developed, it grows more and more fantastic, leaving realism behind and adopting the expressionism of distortion. Everything is presented, not as it is, but as it would seem to the disordered mind of Yank. This time O'Neill's interest was not the external reality or the universality of romantic
attachment to illusions that sustain life; it was his desire to explore the various unconscion motivations of man and to explain some of the behavioural mysteries. Under the influence of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Carl Jung (1875-1961) and his own experiences, he had learnt to see unknown interests clashing and shaping the behaviour and language of man.

Ultimately, the expressionist movement declined after the late 1920s because of its vagueness, its use of highly poetic language and the personal and inaccessible nature of its mode of presentation; but the main reason behind the movement's decline were the Nazis who came to power in 1933. 27 They declared that all expressionist works were corrupt, and they forbade exhibition, publication or production of all these works.

3.4 The Concept of Modern American Tragedy

In general, the American tragedians show a seeming lack of regard for the Aristotelian imperatives that are concerned with the unity of plot, nobility of character, refinement of language, and control of violence. Their indifference to the Aristotelian principles of writing tragedy reflects their attempt to create a form which is true to the realities of modern life in America. 28 This is in agreement with the declaration of some critics that modern American plays will be free in form. They point out that the Greeks obeyed their own conventions that were all parts of the religious rituals from which drama springs. They also believe that the dialogue would grow more condensed and seek less to imitate the rambling uncertainties of natural speech. Prose rather than verse will be the main means of expression in the tragic plays. Furthermore, commenting on the content of the modern American tragic play, MacGowan points out that this genre will
attempt to transfer to dramatic art the illumination of those deep and vigorous and eternal processes of the human soul which the psychology of Freud and Jung have given us through the study of the unconscious, striking the heart of emotion and linking our life today with the emanations of the primitive racial mind.  

Of all the psychoanalytic themes that appear in twentieth century American drama, the Oedipus complex is the most prominent. Next to it are the themes of sexual suppression, frustration, and aggressiveness. In fact, the tragic plays to varying degree, serve as capital illustrations of father and mother figures, sexual frustration, guilt feelings, death wishes and incestuous drives. Accordingly, psychoanalysis provides the American tragedians with “illumination, suggestion and direction.” However as W. David Sievers states, the flesh and blood of their characters and their emotional agonies are the dramatists’ own.

As a representative of the age, O’Neill’s plays revolve around the revolt of son against father, the love for a mother and most important of all, the terrible hold that the past has on the present. His characters, in general, are haunted by their sins, mistakes, wrong choices and betrayals. Their sense of guilt forges a chain that binds them forever to terrible things they have done. As a result, they continually relieve the agonies of their past experience so that memory becomes a kind of avenging Furies that torture the human conscience.

In fulfilling his intention to write modern psychological dramas modelled on the legendary plots of Greek tragedy, O’Neill draws heavily upon the theories of Freud and Jung, hoping to get “a psychological approximation of the Greek sense of fate into such a
play, which an intelligent audience of today possessed of no belief in gods or supernatural retribution could accept and be moved by.”

Fate assumes various forms in O’Neill’s characters’ lives. In a letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn, O’Neill states that he is always acutely conscious of the force behind fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it, and of the one eternal tragedy of man in his glorious self-destructive struggle to maintain his own integrity and to carry out his ‘hopeless dreams’. O’Neill’s experiment with masks comes as part of his attempts to recreate Greek tragedy and an expression of his dissatisfaction with the theatre which he inherited. He expresses his conviction that:

the use of masks will be discovered eventually to be the freest solution to the modern dramatist’s problem as to how with the greatest possible dramatic clarity and economy of means, he can express those profound hidden conflicts of the mind which the probing of psychology continues to disclose to us.

Another notable American playwright, Arthur Miller (1915-2005) believes that tragedy is the most appropriate medium for expressing the dilemma of modern ‘low man’ who is crushed by various destructive forces beyond his control. This results in the emergence of the tragic hero as a victim in Miller’s plays. In “Tragedy and the Common Man”, Miller describes the nature of modern tragedy as he understands it. He states his belief that “paucity of heroes, skepticism of science, and the adoption by modern literature of the purely psychiatric or sociological view of life, account in no small measure for the rarity of tragedies in the modern age.” He also questions the validity of the classical concept of the tragic hero as postulated by Aristotle. “It matters not at all,”
he states, "whether a modern play concerns itself with a grocer or a president, whether the hero falls from a great height or a small one, whether he is highly conscious or only dimly aware of what is happening, whether his pride brings the fall or an unseen pattern written behind the cloud." 34

What matters, in Miller’s opinion, is “the intensity of the human passions to surpass his given bounds; the fanatic insistence upon his self-conceived role. If these are not present, there can be only an outline of tragedy but no living thing.”35 Accordingly, insistence upon the rank of the tragic hero or the nobility of the character, Miller believes, is really "but a clinging to the outward forms of tragedy."36 In fact, the presentation of the common man as a hero is a widespread phenomenon in American drama. Downer points out that the typical American hero has always been “the common or little man; shrewd peddler, honest farmer, patriotic foot-soldier and energetic tradesman.” He adds that each day, this hero is growing ‘smaller and more common, physically and intellectually.’”37

O’Neill and Tennessee Williams have the same attitude towards this subject matter. Man appears to O’Neill as a “puny little creature surrounded by forces much beyond his control, roaming alone in a godless universe” 38 As for Williams, it seems that “little people” are the only sort of people whom he is interested in dramatizing. He often writes of people “with no magnitude.” His desperate heroines often live lives of their own in which they can enjoy the glories of a lost splendid past. They are alienated and separated from their society for they are incapable of confronting its standards and values. However, O’Neill’s concept of tragic character is essentially Greek. He does not present his characters in a normal social milieu, as is the case in the plays of Miller and
Williams. Rather, his characters are lonely figures that are blindly and hopelessly driven by forces they do not have the power to withstand. They are alone in their confrontation with Fate in whatever shape it may appear. Psychological and biological impulses rather than social factors bring their tragic ends. Their tragedy comes from within and the society around them is no more than a media who can do nothing and get nothing of the tragedy of that hero. As such the tragic hero of the old Greek and the Elizabethan is changed into an anti-hero who simply does not measure up to Aristotelian criteria.

Talking about the tragic hero entails a discussion of the factors that lead to his downfall. Again, Miller disapproves of the classical notion of ‘the tragic flaw’. “The flaw or crack in the character”, Miller states, “is really nothing and needs to be nothing but inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity and his image of his rightful status in the society.” The tragic feeling, Miller adds, is invoked in the audience upon watching a character who is ready to lay down his life and to throw all he has into the contest to secure one thing: his sense of personal dignity. The tragic action springs from the failure of a character to maintain this sense of personal dignity. This may bring him/her into violent opposition with his/her society. Tragic antagonism arises because the unchangeable social environment, as Miller states, often “suppresses man, perverts the flowing out of his own love and creative instinct.” Society, however, is not the sole tragic villain in Miller’s plays. His discussion of the dangers of social “unrelatedness” and insistence upon the importance of collective responsibility are clear indication of his belief that social evils can be changed and cured if the members of society have the will to do so.
On the other side, an atmosphere of violence, terror, and blood-shedding dominates the American tragic plays. The American dramatists have their own opinion of the classical notion of ‘pity and fear’ and its resultant feeling: catharsis. Miller believes that the feelings of terror and fear that are classically associated with tragedy take place when a character reacts often violently against the scheme of things that degrades him. In the process of the tragic action, he states, everything we have accepted out of fear or insensitivity or ignorance is shaken and re-examined. This total onslaught by the character against the seemingly stable cosmos surrounding him and his re-examination of his unchangeable environment is what makes his life worthwhile.

Tennessee Williams regards the violence in his plays as a sort of catharsis, in order to purge the feelings of bitterness and frustration which have tortured him all his life.\textsuperscript{40} As an explanation for his preference to present violent actions in his plays, Williams says, “…having to contend with this adversary of fear, [and] sometimes terror, gave me a certain tendency toward an atmosphere of hysteria and violence in my writing, an atmosphere that has existed in it since the beginning.”\textsuperscript{41}

As for the structure, the American dramatists do not invent something new of their own; as Nicoll remarks, "They employ in constructing their plays the techniques inherited from the classical and European theatrical practices."\textsuperscript{42}

\textbf{3.5 Conclusion}

O'Neill's concept of tragedy comes out of certain circumstances: his special upbringing in an artistic but poor family, his reading and interpretation of the Greek and Elizabethan tragedy, as well as the period he lived in. O'Neill lived in a very controversial
and fluid era, that is, the beginning of the twentieth century which witnessed diversity in the philosophy of life and the changing patterns of man's thinking and belief due to the radical changes taking place in British and American societies.

The appearance of the new trends of the realists, the naturalists and the expressionists and the impact of materialism and the violence due to wars, all contributed to a fertile background to formulate O'Neill's tragic vision. These factors, undoubtedly, widened the possibilities of drama and succeeded in making twentieth century audience aware of the inner drama of human life through O'Neill's tragedies.
End Notes


8- Ibid. p. 201.


12. Elia Hawi, *Eugene O'Neill and the Contemporary American Theatre*, (Beirut:


17. Jordan Miller, p. 46.


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27. Farad Yeganeh, p. 39.


35. Ibid. p.33.


41. Tennessee Williams, The Sweet Bird of Young and Other Plays, (London: