ABSTRACT

Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) was a modern American dramatist who created works of tragedy that have won international recognition. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936. We can describe him as one of the most ambitious playwrights since the period of the Greek tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides on one hand and the Elizabethan dramatist Shakespeare on the other.

In his intentional efforts to revive tragedy on the modern stage O'Neill introduced the new trends and techniques of realism, naturalism and expressionism to the American stage as modern devices to express his comprehensive interest in serious drama and to present the type of plays capable of drawing our attention as modern tragedies.

On the other hand, O'Neill also revived and reworked a few Greek tragedies but with a modern psychological attitude and flavor, trying to dig deep into the essence of the human mystery of behaviour. That behaviour leads man to a wretched struggle with external and sometimes internal forces to find a way out of his crisis.

Tragedy, as a genre of drama, is a term that has a variety of meanings and applications in criticism and literary history. The start was made with Aristotle who defines it as an attempt to recount an important and causally related series of events in the life of a highly ranked person. These events are usually treated with great seriousness and culminate in catastrophe. Aristotle’s definition remains among the best and is often used as a background for later tragedies. After the time of the Greeks and Aristotle, tragedy did not conform completely to his definition and application on
stage in terms of form and content due to the change in certain religious beliefs and secular circumstances.

In modern time and especially with Eugene O'Neill tragedy is no longer a depiction of ordeals of kings or princes. It is concerned with those simple people who can reflect the chaos, moral perplexity and alienation in which modern man exists. This type of life is a result of the dangerous sense of deterioration of morals under the impact of the pressure of materialism and the change in one's beliefs and philosophies in almost all fields of life.

The purpose of this study is to trace the changes that the concept of tragedy has undergone – firstly from its beginnings as a literary genre in Greek theatre, and secondly in Europe during the Elizabethan age and then lately in America during the first half of the twentieth century through selected plays of O'Neill.

It also tries to answer certain questions about the differences that the concept of tragedy has undergone in each period and to what extent can O'Neill's plays be labeled as modern tragedies. Modern tragedy no longer portrays the supernatural hero who defied gods and monsters and struggled to assert his exploits. These codes are replaced by the new codes of the modern hero who is caught in a struggle to assert his being.

Reader response theory of criticism is used to present this study. The theory is based on the reader's knowledge and experience of the literary work. It emphasizes upon the reader who can give a text its meaning and interpretation. The text cannot mean without a reader who can discuss, argue and ultimately appreciate it.
The study falls in six chapters:

**Chapter one** comes as an introduction in which sections about the hypothesis, the significance of the study, the objectives of the study and the techniques used will provide the reader with a scope of information so as to approach the study. Moreover, this chapter presents information about Eugene O'Neill as an answer to a question: why is Eugene O'Neill the choice of our study?

**Chapter two** deals with some of the Greek and Elizabethan tragic plays in terms of structural and thematic approaches. The chapter is intended to serve as a background for the birth and development of the concept of tragedy on stage.

**Chapter three** shows the literary, social and the political milieu for O'Neill's concept of tragedy. Moreover, the chapter aims to help the reader understand the literary works of the period and further to be able to appreciate our selected plays as well.

**Chapter four** deals with three different tragedies of O'Neill: *Beyond the Horizon*, *Anna Christie* and *The Hairy Ape* as reflections of the philosophies of the realists, naturalists and the impressionists respectively.

**Chapter five** presents O'Neill's interest and experimentation with the classical tragedies but with a psychological approach. The chapter studies two of O'Neill's recognized plays: *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

**Chapter six** comes as a conclusion to recapitulate the findings of the study and points out the conclusions of the study with further topics for future studies.