CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Rationale and Significance of the Study

Tragedy is a term that has been described as perennially debatable and perennially flexible. It has a variety of meanings and applications in criticism and literary history. In drama, it refers to a particular kind of play, in which the main character is brought to ruin or suffers extreme sorrow, especially as a consequence of a tragic flaw, moral weakness, or inability to cope with unfavorable circumstances. According to Aristotle, a tragic play often recounts an important and causally related series of events in the life of a king, leader or an eminent person. Such events are usually treated with great seriousness and often culminate in catastrophe.

Aristotle's definition remains among the best and is often used as background for later tragedies. However, many plays which have been written after Aristotle do not conform completely to his definition in terms of form and content. Moreover, tragedy is no longer a depiction of the ordeals of kings or princes. It is now mainly concerned with the lives of those who are “like us”, that is, ordinary and simple, and can reflect the type of perplexity and chaos in which modern man lives. This type of life is a result of the dangerous deterioration of manners and morals among people under the impact of the fundamental changes of beliefs and ideology in almost all fields of life.

Historically, critics and scholars believe that tragedy of a high order has been created and developed throughout certain periods: 1) the Attic Age in Greece during the fifth century BC; 2) the reigns of Elizabeth and James I (1558–1625) in England; and 3)
twentieth century Europe when the genre developed new dimensions due to the social, political and philosophical speculations prevailing during this period.

Our study will focus on another period -- America during the first half of the twentieth century -- and throw light on the characteristics of modern American tragedy.

Nevertheless, we may ask certain questions to enrich our discussion in the following chapters: what do we mean by the word tragedy — not just in terms of lexical meaning but as a concept throughout ages? What conceptual differences apply to tragedy during the different ages? And then in what sense are O'Neill's plays tragic?

Aristotle defines tragedy as "The imitation of an action that is serious…with incidents arousing pity and fear." As centuries passed, the word tragic becomes more complex because it not only refers to certain sorts of characters and actions, but also, in scholarly or critical usage, often means that the play in question is of exceptional quality. It means not only that things probably turn out badly for the main character in a play but also that the events of the play seem in some way momentous, that somehow the experience of seeing or reading the play has caused us to feel we have seen something about the world that we had not noticed before; or, that we have discovered something that has caused a shift in our sense of the world. We may notice as readers at the end of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, a play widely accepted as one of the greatest tragedies ever written, that our day to day belief that through thinking and planning we can control the future of our lives, has been shaken or disturbed. I think it is not wrong, and not too great a claim, to compare the change in the way we think about the world after learning about Oedipus to other major changes in our perception, or major shifts in the way we understand the world in which we live. The individual experience is not unlike that which
followed the general publication of the scientific claims of Newton or Darwin or Freud that the world is nothing like we have previously believed it to be. A great tragedy changes our perception radically.

In modern attempts to define tragedy, there is a notion which recurs continually, that is of 'mystery.' According to Richard Sewell, tragedy "sees man as a questioner, naked, alone, facing mysterious, demonic forces in his own nature and outside."¹ George Steiner locates the uniqueness of the form in the "inexplicable" nature of the forces that destroy the protagonist, forces "which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence"² while Richmond Y. Hathorn defines tragedy as "a work of literature which has as its chief emphasis the revelation of a mystery."³

The admission of an irreducible core of mystery at the centre of the human experience runs counter to the prevailing intellectual current of the past two centuries, the rationalism of the enlightenment followed by the reductive positivism of its successors. And just as Nietzsche traced the decline of Attic tragedy to the advent of Socratic rationalism, so George Steiner attributes the eclipse of the form after the French classical period to the modern notion that reason and science can reveal all truth and resolve every human dilemma.

In his deliberate and sustained effort to revive tragedy on the modern stage, Eugene O'Neill, while paying attention to the modern science of psychology, repeatedly insisted on ‘mystery’ as the essence of his vision of human destiny. In 1919, he wrote to Barrett Clark, "Perhaps I can explain the nature of my feeling for the impelling, inscrutable forces behind life which it is my ambition to at least faintly shadow at their work in my plays."⁴ In most of his tragedies, especially the plays selected in this study,
O'Neill attempts to reveal man's struggle against the mysterious force that shapes his existence and limits him.

This study will trace the changes that the concept of tragedy has undergone from the early beginnings as a literary genre in Greek theater up to the twentieth century where the modern, sophisticated spirit of life, and the changing attitudes and experiences of people shape a new type of tragedy. Tragedy no longer portrays the supernatural hero who defies gods and monsters and struggles to assert his exploits. These codes are replaced by the codes of the modern anti-hero who is caught in a struggle to assert his being and to find his identity among a people or a family with whom he cannot live peacefully as a man.

1.2 The Objectives of the Study

The study aims to provide the reader with an overview of the characteristics of tragedy from the time of the Greek plays up to the modern time where it assumes new interpretations and reasons of being, with heavy emphasis upon this new concept of tragedy in selected plays of Eugene O'Neill as a forerunner in modern American drama. It also tries to answer certain questions about the differences that tragedy shows in each period and to what extent can O'Neill's plays be labeled as modern tragedies.

The study also tries to identify the reasons why O’Neill presents such a new type of tragedy. Emphasis will be on the protagonist in each play, our aim being the study of his plight in depth. O'Neill presents heroes who can achieve nothing in life and sometimes, they come face to face with death in order to draw the attention of people to their being.
Moreover, the study attempts to help the reader understand and appreciate the focus of Eugene O’Neill tragic plays which are concerned with people we can find among us. Being modern, the tragedy lies in man's awareness and in his consciousness of the futility of struggling against a blind fate.

The study also attempts to uncover the influence of new trends such as realism, naturalism and expressionism besides the new interpretation of psychology for human behaviour on O'Neill's concept of tragedy.

### 1.3 The Underlying Assumptions of the Study

* Tragedy as a concept has evolved through different phases, in each of which it has acquired certain features and characteristics.

* Eugene O'Neill is considered to be the first writer who aims to revive tragedy on the modern American stage. O'Neill's contemporary playwrights, especially American, follow the same way he takes goes to deal with tragedies that are concerned with secular, social problems.

* The modern tragic hero has different features from the ancient one. These features distinguished the modern hero who came to be called as anti hero, especially in O'Neill's tragedies.

* Modern theatre was the field where new trends and philosophies of literature (realism, naturalism and expressionism) find new scope for the application of their beliefs and ideas, which actually help the audience and readers understand their real crisis and problems in the light of the rapid change in beliefs and behaviours.
1.4 The Organization and Techniques of the Study

The overall scheme of the study will be as follows:

**Chapter one** will provide the general rationale of the term tragedy as an approach to the study. The aims and objectives of the study are also presented. This is followed by the underlying assumptions of the study, the methodology and techniques that are used to present the study in terms of chapters. The chapter also presents selected biographical information about Eugene O'Neill to justify the choice of O'Neill as the main focus of this study.

In **Chapter two**, the Classic or Greek tragedy and Elizabethan tragedy will be dealt with in terms of structural and thematic approaches. This chapter will also serve as a background for the birth and development of tragedy.

In **chapter three**, we attempt to show the literary, social, economic and political milieu as a background for O'Neill's concept of tragedy. This milieu plays a major role in shaping the tragic vision of our artist. It also helps the reader relate the literary works of the period to the milieu. This, in turn, helps the reader to appreciate the works and to read between the lines. As for the plays subjected to our study and analysis, they are dealt with in two different chapters.

In **chapter four**, we deal with O'Neill's *Beyond the Horizon*, *Anna Christie* and *The Hairy Ape* as reflections of the modern literary philosophies of realism, naturalism and expressionism respectively. It is noteworthy that these plays established O'Neill's reputation by winning three Pulitzer Prizes for him.

In **chapter five**, we deal with O'Neill's other major plays: *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* in which O'Neill presents classical stories woven out of
his interest in Greek tragedies but with the new modern spirit and flavor of psychology in the portrayal of his anti-heroes. These two plays are chosen as they support O'Neill's claim to be regarded as a serious playwright. Soon after he wrote these plays, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1936.

Chapter six presents the conclusions, after a quick recapitulation of the foregoing discussion and outlines the findings of the study. It will also try to identify areas for further study and research.

The approach adopted in this study will be based on the reader response theory of criticism. It is a literary critical theory that focuses on the reader and his or her experience of literary works and the circumstances surrounding the act of reading, in contrast to other schools and theories that focus primarily on the author or the content and form of the work according to established criteria. It suggests that a text gains meaning by the purposeful act of a reader reading and interpreting it. The relationship between the reader and the text is highly valued; a text does not exist without a reader; and meaning emerges from the interaction between reader and text, and therefore any single text is open to multiple interpretations, depending on the reader and what he or she brings to the understanding and interpretation of the text.

Modern reader-response criticism began in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in America and Germany, with the works of Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, and others. Important predecessors were I.A. Richard and C.S. Lewis. This approach is based on the following theoretical assumptions:
1- Literature is a performative art and each reading is a performance, analogous to playing/singing a musical work, enacting a drama, etc. Literature exists only when it is read; meaning is an event.

2- The literary text possesses no fixed and final meaning or value; there is no one correct meaning. Literary meaning and value are transactional, dialogic, created by the interpretation of the reader and the text.

Reader-response theory recognizes the reader as an active agent who imparts real existence to the work and completes its meaning through interpretation. It argues that literature should be viewed as a performing art in which each reader creates his or her own, possibly unique, text-related performance.

It is noteworthy that reader-response criticism relates to psychology, both experimental psychology for those attempting to find principles of response, and psychoanalysis for those studying individual responses. Post-behaviourist psychologists of reading and of perception support the idea that it is the reader who makes meaning. Increasingly, cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics have given reader-response critics powerful and detailed models for the aesthetic process. Because it rests on psychological principles, a reader-response approach readily generalizes to other arts: cinema or visual art, and even to history. In stressing the activity of the scholar, reader-response theory justifies such upsetting of traditional interpretations as, for example, deconstruction or cultural criticism. Moreover, reader-response critics focus on the strategies readers are taught to use, so they address the teaching of reading and literature.
**1.5 Eugene O'Neill: A Brief Introduction**

Eugene O'Neill was the first American playwright to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936 and the first of his countrymen to be so honoured. He started a revolution in the American theatre and put the American drama on a firm footing. He was awarded three Pulitzer Prizes (the highest American prize for literature) for his great service to American drama and particularly tragedy. There is no doubt that O'Neill combined great theatrical talent with an intuitive understanding of the human psyche. His forty seven plays have an intensity of passion and a sense of theatrical action. His courage and endless experimentation with various methods of the naturalists, realists, and expressionists created a new theatre in America. He presented a series of plays which represent American society and culture between the two World Wars.

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was born in a hotel room on October 16, 1888, on Broadway, New York. He was the son of an Irish emigrant James O'Neill who was a promising actor of that day. O'Neill's mother Ella, who had to accompany her husband in the wings of the theatre, did not welcome Eugene's birth for she had already experienced the pain of raising two other sons in hotel rooms. O'Neill spent the first seven years of his life on tour with his father in large towns all over the United States. He also spent six years in residence at a Catholic Boarding School and four years at Betts Academy, Stamford, Connecticut, and then spent one year at Princeton University with the class of 1910. He was suspended for an infraction of college discipline and did not return after the period had expired.

O'Neill joined his father and played a minor part in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, touring the far west. Then, he worked as a reporter on *The Telegraph* in New England.
Incipient tuberculosis sent him in December, 1912 to a sanitarium, Gaylord Farm, at Wallingford, Connecticut. This illness proved to be a turning point in his career. In the sanitarium he began to take account of his varied experiences and to decide what he wished to do with his future. Encouraged by his chief on *The Telegraph*, he wrote eight one-act plays and two long plays. He was reading many plays while he was rebuilding his health. Though the plays he wrote during this period were of no significance, he gained encouragement for the future.

In 1914-1915, O'Neill attended Professor Baker's class at Harvard. In 1916, he went to Provincetown, Massachusetts, and there became associated with the Provincetown players. It was a fortunate combination for both playwright and actors. At this point, O'Neill cut himself off from friends and family. He had lived with the knowledge that his mother was a morphine addict and that his father and his brother were failures both in their art and lives. He had married Kathleen Jenkins in 1909 but the marriage ended with a divorce in 1912. In 1918 he married Agnes Boulton. He had two children, a boy and a girl. In 1928 after divorcing her, he married, Carlotta Monterey, an actress with whom he lived happily till his death.

Nietzsche, Strindberg and Ibsen were already O'Neill's intellectual mainstays. Accompanied by Terry Carlin, his Irish mentor, he reached Provincetown where he found congenial companions among the radicals of the day. Subsequently, Provincetowners staged many of his short plays. In 1920, O'Neill's reputation as the leading dramatist of America became established and he became sure of himself. He decided to earn his living by writing plays. He looked around him to see what was happening and picked up his materials. Pre-twentieth century American drama had dealt with superficial theatricality
which was stifling of any creative stimulus. Producers were feeding the audience with light comedy and sentimental drama far removed from the realities of life. The historical perspective of the drama of the twenties was made up of European forces rich with intellectual and artistic challenges. The fertilizing contact with European artistic life in the twenties quickened the creative imagination of the American mind. The First World War put an end to the decades of American insularism and isolation from European culture.

O'Neill's play *Bound East for Cardiff* marks a major breakthrough in the history of American drama as the audience could for the first time see a native drama based upon the life of the native soil. The twenties was a period of exploration of new thoughts and ideas. O'Neill was, therefore, exposed to all the cross-currents of historical and contemporary ideas in the domain of literature and philosophy. The thoughts of Freud and Jung accelerated the artistic and intellectual movement of the time. O'Neill found himself among the radical thinkers like John Reed and anarchists like Terry Carlin. At Provincetown, he was to find recognition for his talent, as this New England town, known as “America’s oldest Art colony” was already beginning to play a significant role in the foundation of American drama. Followers of realistic tradition in drama presented arguments on the stage about states of mind or social systems. O'Neill burst upon the world of drama with fights, drunkenness and violent language with an emphatically American accent. He captured the psychological and emotional roots of real people in his plays like *Beyond the Horizon* and *Anna Christie*.

O'Neill became the symbol of that Provincetown group which represented the growing rebellion of the American intellectual against a commercial civilization. He had
behind him a rich tradition of tragic literature in the works of the Greeks, the
Elizabethans and of course the great moderns, like Ibsen and Strindberg, who were the
new interpreters in the theatre of the characteristic spiritual conflicts which constitute the
drama of that day.

Greek elements in O'Neill's plays are conscious borrowings from the ancient
myths. He did aim at an approximation of the Greek sense of fate in modern terms.
O'Neill’s conscious use of Greek myth in the plot structures of two of his finest tragedies
Desire Under the Elms and Mourning Becomes Electra, are proof of the fact that he was
indebted to Greek tragedy which inspired him in his use of symbols and myths from the
modern psychological perspective. His professed intention was to recreate a modern
tragic equivalent of the Greek sense of fate (without the inclusion of God) in the
twentieth century. He begins writing realistic sea-plays and ends with tragedies of gloom.
The autobiographical elements grew in the plays written in his last years. O'Neill chose
for his plays subjects like social injustice and conflict of races. The conflict of capital and
labour and the problem of man versus machine also attracted his attention. He was
preoccupied with the theme of fate in a society which suffers from spiritual sterility.

O'Neill passed through a number of phases and attitudes which led to the shaping
of his particular tragic vision of life which encompasses the life of the acquisitive middle
class. He proved himself a master of psychological conflict. Most of his characters are
simply not heroic. They are haunted by their own psychological and biological impulses.

O'Neill's creativity declined after 1936 when the depression and its attendant
ideologies made an onrush in the theatre. Consequently, no strong impulse did strike the
vision of the playwrights. Commercialism had deadened all invention. The little theatres
were not able to emulate the Provincetowners who produced O'Neill’s plays in 1920s. At that time, no play came out until *The Iceman Cometh* appeared as a realistic study of the fragility of illusions. Years later, he wrote *A Long Day’s Journey into Night*, a portrait of a tormented and self-destructive family. However, he was faced by serious illness. Doctors found that there was in him no will to live. He was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and it culminated in his death in 1953, leaving behind a memory of the first American playwright who was able to win a solid international reputation.

O’Neill will not be outdated, for his concern was with almost all techniques of modern drama. He dealt with tragedy which is outside time. Whatever his faults are, O'Neill will always be remembered for his contribution to the field of tragedy. John Gassner sums up O'Neill's contributions to the world of drama saying: "Find fault with O'Neill and find fault with the entire American stage: find merit in him and you find worth in its striving or straining toward significant drama." On his side, Bloom emphasizes that "early in the twentieth century, O'Neill set the stage for a tradition of serious American drama that has grown and flourished into the twenty first century."

1.6 Why Eugene O'Neill?

The choice of Eugene O'Neill as a subject for our study comes from a consideration that he is recognized as a great American artist whose vision of life was essentially tragic. He appears to have had an instinctive perception of what a modern tragedy should be. Most of O'Neill’s plays are powerful tragedies but they are not tragedies in the Aristotelian sense. Their themes and subject matter may have certain similar features with his predecessors but their forms and interpretations are different.
They are modern tragedies which strike at the roots of contemporary problems that are concerned with human desires and beliefs. O’Neill says: "The playwright must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it, the failure of science and materialism and express those profound hidden conflicts of the mind which the probings of psychology continue to disclose to us."8

On the other hand, tragedy is not often associated with American history. With no tradition of battling royal or courtly intrigues, the American national background has most often been personified in the hero of the Revolution: the dauntless pioneer and the rugged individualist who seek an earthly paradise, the possibility of which had previously been denied and treated as unattainable. Courage, optimism, endurance along with ruthless exploitation, and cruel indifference to others’ wellbeing has been a part of the growth of the American nation.

In fact, the hallmark of American history has been ‘the success story’ and the search for 'Utopia', instead of the tragic sacrifice of the individual for the benefit of others.9 Accordingly, to search for the tragic approach in the works of any important playwright before 1920 is unrewarding. The nearest date one can choose for modern American tragedy is 1920 when Eugene O’Neill’s first full-length play, Beyond the Horizon, was produced. The play represents the first conscious attempt to recreate tragedy as a modern dramatic art in America. Before the production of O’Neill’s first tragic play, it was only melodrama, farce and comedy which dominated the American theatrical scene.10

American tragedy, like other literary genres, was largely a derivation from its European cultural sources. The significant role played by Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, John M. Synge and August Strindberg in inspiring the development of modern
American drama is recognizable. Indeed, Strindberg has been acknowledged as the greatest influence on modern American drama. Moreover, O’Neill considers him the precursor of all modernity in the American stage. When O'Neill received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1936, he paid homage to August Strindberg as he recalled in his acceptance speech: "I was reading his plays when I first started to write back in the winter of 1913-1914 …that above all else gave me the vision of what modern drama could be." The successful plays of the late nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth century, Bloom adds, are designed to reflect an essentially romantic view of life and their happy endings are not so much theatrical conventions as popular conviction. This romantic view was fed on the belief that America was God’s country or the ‘New Eden’ on earth where there are no major problems. Attempts to tackle the actual problems of the American society and to avoid the romantic approach to life are made by a number of American dramatists who begin writing in the second decade of the twentieth century.

The plays of O’Neill usher a new stage in the development of American drama and make it completely American. The works of this playwright reveal the fact that the world is not a pleasant little nest made for our protection, but a vast and largely hostile environment wherein the poor are continuously crushed under the heavy weight of materialism, competitiveness and spiritual bankruptcy. These oppressive conditions which modern American society witnessed, as Downer points out, help to accomplish the long maturing of the American tragedy. The audiences as well as the playwrights realize that they can no longer shut their eyes to the world with its rapid changes and conflicting values. During that time, the theatre was under the impact of continuous experimentation
with new themes and techniques. Employment of the theatrical conventions of Realism, naturalism and Expressionism and the adoption of the psychological theories in motivating the action of the characters are in vogue during this period. As such, the American tragic plays can be considered a detailed miniature of the American life in the twentieth century. Arthur Miller says “American drama has been a steady year by year documentation of the suffering and frustration of man.”\textsuperscript{12} This statement shows how conscious the dramatists were of the problems that uprooted American society during that period. It also reflects the conviction about the collapse of social continuity and the increasing anxiety in modern American society.

Accordingly, the duty of the dramatist is to dig deep into the roots of ‘the sickness of the day’ which O’Neill ascribes to the collapse of spiritual values and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying answers to the dilemmas of modern American man. This results in the dominance of the feelings of insecurity, alienation and dislocation in modern American man’s life. Alienation, which is a major theme in modern American tragedy, assumes many forms: "Man from spiritual values, from his environment, and sometimes from himself."\textsuperscript{13} Thus, the American individual is living in a world where the laws of market and materialistic competition reign supreme.

In general, the tragic plays condemn the spiritual poverty that has resulted from the growing materialism in the American society. The characters, like their creators, cannot feel at home in a society dominated by monetary values. So, they remain detached and alienated from the rest of the complacent and passive individuals who believe in the idea of the possibility of progress and prosperity. As a result, dreamers and idealists usually
populate most of the American tragic plays. Unfortunately, almost all their dreams are false and misleading.

The phenomenon of the American dream is unique in American history. The early settlers believed that they had made a new beginning in a new “Garden of Eden”. However, the subsequent history demolished this glimmering image of America. The Industrial Revolution, the successive wars, the economic depression and the present electronic revolution have caused actual nightmares that only illusory dreams have softened. Williams and Miller view the American dream as "precarious, a problematic mythology that relied on superficial appearance and exclusion rather than the freedom, diversity and opportunity it advertised."¹⁴

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the American felt a sense of haunting insecurity in a world where destructive powers could be unleashed at any moment. This feeling led to a sense of bewilderment, hesitation, apathy, loss of confidence, a sense of inner defeat and a mood of lost self-esteem and bitterness towards life in general. All these feelings are reflected in almost all the American tragic plays and especially in Eugene O’Neill’s. O’Neill sheds light, in his tragic plays, on the dilemmas of modern man, for he believes that the responsibility of the dramatist is to be a sort of demoniac social critic to present the world as he sees it. “He hopes that the audience will get rid of their complacency and mental lethargy. He calls for a change in behaviour that will save modern man from the stifling pressures that frustrate him and to live in the absence of what we need fully to be and to know.”¹⁵
End Notes


8. Ibid. p. 29.


11. Steven F. Bloom, p. 31.

