"Not at you, Papa. At Life. It's so damned crazy." That is Edmund's explanation for his "burst of strained ironical laughter," when his father mechanically turns out the third bulb while talking about the paradox of his artistic failure because of his commercial success.

(Long Day's Journey Into Night, London: Jonathan Cape, 1966, 32-33)

That is, in fact, O'Neill himself, the essential O'Neill on the eve of his admittance to the Gaylord Farm Sanatorium where he took decision to turn a playwright. For a proper understanding of his plays, it is absolutely necessary to grasp the true nature of this O'Neill, because in his long career, with change in his vision and aims as he assumed one glossy mask after another, the only thing that remained constant was this real though hidden self—the personality with the core of irony.

To trace the topography of the playwright's mind then, besides Journey, we could get help from The Straw and the poems published as the "Lacanics" in The Telegraph, because they either cover the events preceding or during the fateful sojourn at the sanatorium, or express the ideas and attitudes during that period. First and foremost, O'Neill emerges in these works not as a gloomy introvert but as a man with keen sense of humour. Stephen Murray is a born kidder with "mocking careless humour" and "cheerful grin of cynical good nature." (Plays of Eugene O'Neill, III, New York: Random House, 1954, p.348) Edmund, too, is as capable of kidding and affection as of
jeering and bitter aggressiveness. In fact, far from wearing the
dark blinkers of tragedy, he is keen-eyed enough never to miss an
amusing irony. Majority of the poems, too, are humorous verses,
parodies, or mock-serious love lyrics; what is more, often O'Neill
laughs at himself or at his own column!

Another aspect that all these works highlight is that, having
seen depths and lived to the fullest, the writer's mind is brimming
with ideas; but nowhere is there any indication of his employing
drama as the medium of self-expression. Indeed, his preference was
instead for poetry and comic fiction, for, as one of the poems has
it, if his dreams ever came true,

I'll be sitting in the office here with nothing else to do,
But to write a comic story or to spin a little rhyme.

In fact, all the three works show that the writer's mind is ripe for
literary creativity but in spite of the man himself: he has not been
preparing for it. When Eileen suggests the idea of writing stories,
Stephen Murray exclaims, "That is an idea! Thank you! I'd never
have had sense enough to have thought of that myself." (Plays, III,
361) Indeed, but for the chance discovery of Strindberg, O'Neill
too might have never thought of writing plays.

More importantly, it is clear from the poems that though his
rich experiences are yielding variety in themes—adolescent love,
radical politics, sea-life, seamy existence, etc.—yet these have not
crystallized into any organic view of life. Not that he had no
curiosity to see deeper than the surface; rather, in fact, as a
reporter, of the five W's sacred to journalism—Who? What? Where? When? and Why?—he was interested more often only in the last. The fact is that O'Neill was unable to resolve the baffling ironies of life. That is why, like his creator's, Edmund's high spots are those epiphanic moments when feeling dissolved in sea, sun or sand, he perceives some meaning in existence. Else, normally, the polarities of life are so teasing to his mind that he feels at home in the fog because it facilitates the shutting out of the hard realities. Indeed, like this alter ego, O'Neill too was aware that his personality could not possibly be integrated.

I will always be a stranger who never feels at home, who does not really want and is not really wanted, who can never belong, who must always be a little in love with death! (Journey, 135)

Edmund's lyrical description of the fog and the high spots highlights what is confirmed by the poems—O'Neill's having a touch of the poet. But, then, at the same time, he is aware that as a poet he may just stammer but can do no more. Of course, he has read a lot of poetry but then his choice having been determined by his rebellions nature, his tastes are questionable: at least Tyrone labels Edmund's favourite poets and philosophers as filthy and morbid.

Since even after seeing so much of life and after reading so much of literature, O'Neill could not resolve his doubts, naturally he was not sure where his true strength lay—as a rebel, as a poet, or as an explorer of life's mystery. Then fate took things in its own hands and forced this man of action to lead a life of inaction. The decision to take to playwriting did not mean the end of his
problem through the death of the rebel, the poet, or the explorer in him; it only meant their joining hands in a common venture. The external violence turned inward and the destroyer became a creator. But the contrary pulls persisted not only in his life but also in his works.

To understand the source of these contrary pulls which forged almost permanent core of O'Neill's ironic temper, one has only to glance at his formative years. His Irish heredity, clashing with the soulless environment of the late nineteenth century America, led to a characterological schism which was accentuated by the polarized parental images (a romantic nun and a materialistic artist), and made his mind a battleground of the opposed tensions and paradoxical forces. No wonder, he grew to be a person at once vain and pathetic, egotistic and helpless, shyly sentimental and hard as nail, cruel and sympathetic. At a tender age he learnt to look at life as "hostile necessity thrust on man on the inevitable ambivalence of things." Perhaps the affection and guidance of a kind teacher could undo all this; but the tutor that influenced him most was his bohemian brother, Jamie, whose dashing pose of Mephistophelian cynicism fascinated the young Eugene and made a rebel of him. In this cynical and rebellious mood, his turning precociously to Ibsen, Marx, Engel, and Nietzsche.

*Max Wylie on the opening page of his Trouble in the Flesh (New York, 1959), sums up the trouble in the flesh of Seton Perrier, a fictional name for O'Neill, as follows: /he/ "lived in the clenched anxiety of a man pursued by demons! Within this dark-faced young Irishman, there lay all the bewildering paradox of genius—a compulsive cruelty, a monstrous egotism, a morbid self-pity and a touching dependence on anyone who could sustain his wilful, childish fancies."
bred in his mind a permanent incapacity to adjust in life or even to affirm it. The resultant craving to escape from the world of commerce and machine led him to the Honduras and later to the sea, where contact with the primitives and the sailors opened before him a new vista of life. He not only felt a spiritual kinship with them, but also listening greedily to their stories of maudlin dreams and shattered hopes, he learnt not to sit in judgement on the people. Of course, this could neither end his revolt nor teach him to accept life; on the contrary, it enabled him to see ironically counterpointed the ugly, sinful, soulless, hypocritical and mechanical life of the civilized humanity on the land on the one hand, and purifying, healthy, rapturous, spiritual and beautiful life of the unsophisticated children of the sea on the other.

Since it was to reconcile the antithetical images of man and to discover some meaning in his own experience, that O'Neill usually turned to books, choice of his authors was determined by his own psychological needs. Thus it is possible to see some relationship between his revolt against Christianity and Nietzsche's tirades against it, between his experiences regarding the seamy side of life at sea and on beaches and Zola's naturalistic creed, between his growing sense of rootlessness and Schopenhauer's cosmic pessimism, between his inner conflicts and Strindbergian ambivalent forces. But it should be naive to conclude that O'Neill embraced at once Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, Zola, Strindberg, etc. and that his vision was an amalgam of their ideas. Instead, these diverse attitudes only helped to enhance the initial tensions and, O'Neill unable to evolve an organic view of life, continued to view life
Ironically from many angles.

Only when the above facts and factors are borne in mind can we see in proper perspective O'Neill's career in general and the earliest works in particular—especially, the "whole trunk full of plays" that O'Neill had written before he met Terry Carlin and Jig Cook. Failure to view things in the right context has resulted in perversely wishful criticism. For example, before the "lost plays were rediscovered, viewing only the plays of the post-Carlinean period, O'Neill's critics had so convinced themselves regarding O'Neill's tragic genius that they would be baffled to see an occasional touch of the comic in his "tragedies" or even spasmodic attempts at comedy proper so much so that even on their rediscovery, these "early sins" came to be studied in the light of later O'Neill and were either lauded as incipient tragedies of much promise or else damned for their juvenile ineptitude, maudlin melodrama and crude sentimentality. On the whole, despite their strange fascination, the general tendency has been to treat them at best as curiosities or as apprentice-exercises, and to dismiss them summarily. Of course, in themselves these plays are not great works, but they are significant for the promise if not for the achievement. Anyway, they deserve greater attention because they offer key to O'Neill's real genius before he acquired the ambitions with respect to the revival of tragedy and its being yoked to the modern temper

Taken together, these plays deal with diverse fields of human life—life of the peasants and the miners, the prostitutes and the poets, the yeggs and the businessmen, the artistes and the sportsmen,
the Negroes and the warriors—a clear outcome of the fact that O'Neill had varied experiences to his credit. Again, as should be expected, in these plays, there is no common view of life; that is why, there have been discerned echoes of Zola in "The Web" and "Thirst," the influence of Marx in "Warning," and a parody of Nietzsche in Servitude. Anyway, at this stage, he does not seem to follow any one particular writer as his mentor, and thus with echoes of Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, Conrad etc., we have a variety of styles as well. Above all, we have here variety in respect of genres, too, for these dramas invite severally such labels as comedy, romance, melodrama, tragedy, revenge or war plays, and so on. It is to be noted that this diversity of themes, variety of life-attitudes and styles, and multiplicity of genres are conspicuous only in this phase of O'Neill's career. Maybe, since the mind of the novice playwright was full of experiences and ideas which he had not yet assimilated into a view of life, he was trying the genres one by one. However, one thing is common to all the plays, viz. irony. Obviously, having seen the varied and almost contradictory aspects of life in the cities and on the sea, having been at once shocked and amused by the inexplicable polarities; and knowing not whether to prefer the spiritual and yet bestial primitives, or the soulless men of civilization, O'Neill could not help seeing life in the ironic perspective. There certainly is at work an inexorable and malevolent destiny which asserts itself in the ironies of all kinds. Now, as Bogard suggests, such a spectacle becomes tragic only when it is viewed from a philosophical position; but since O'Neill lacked that kind of basis, we have, instead, trivial and crudely designed plays in which either irony is born of melodrama, or pathos and horror are generated from the shock of irony.
Since O'Neill hated his father's theatre and had come to this field as a radical bent on shattering the old traditions, instead of presenting romantic life and glamorous characters, he wanted to shock the audience by dramatizing the stirring, vigorous and even ugly aspects of life. Shattering of sensibility being his aim, he stripped the traditional heroes of their glory, showed their naked selves, and contrasted their real nature with the humanity of those who are usually damned as villains. Disgusted with stock responses that the popular plays evoked, he so reworked the old genres as to evoke a new kind of response. Thus, he appears to have argued to himself that though he could not dispense with the melodramatic, he must impregnate it with something normally not associated with it in his father's theatre. No wonder the melodrama here is not melodramatic in fact: it is invariably transmuted into the ironic. Not only the melodramatic, even comic, tragic, sentimental—all are shifted to the ironic level. Thus, on this level of irony, horror is counterpoised against sentiment, comic against tragic, and so on.

The fact that his very first play, "A Wife for a Life" was a vaudeville sketch is argument enough against supposing that O'Neill was a born tragedian. But, then, what sort of comedy is this? The outline of the plot would remind one of the sentimental comedy of the eighteenth century—a young wife, married to an old rake, attracted towards a noble lover but patiently suffering because of her unwillingness to be unfaithful to her husband who eventually realises his mistake thus paving the way for a happy close. Significantly enough, the last line of the play, with a Biblical construction, is a sentiment in the
eighteenth century sense:

'Greater love hath no man than this, that he giveth his wife for his friend.'

(Ten Lost Plays, New York, 1964, p. 223)

Again, true to the philosophy of the eighteenth century sentimentalists, the play assumes man's basic goodness and thus all the characters in the play are lovable. But, then, what the wife gets by way of reward is not a reclaimed husband but the younger lover who is sent to her by the husband himself—an act of sacrifice which lends to the play an almost tragic touch. In the sentimental comedy, since the situation was always viewed from the woman's angle, her sufferings moved the audience to tears and her reunion with her husband led to the final moments of unalloyed joy. Here, viewing things from the other end of the telescope, our joy at the prospects of the lovers' union is mixed with a vague sense of melancholy induced by the husband's self-effacive gesture. The comic and the sentimental, instead of blending as in a sentimental comedy, here pull against each other and thus, at the close, we know not whether to exult at the lovers' fate and treat the husband's exit as a good riddance, or to sympathize with the husband and sigh, "poor, good fellow!" On the one hand, we sense in the act of sacrifice a tragic transcendence of the revenge-seeking animal, whereas, on the other, we are only too conscious of the fact that he is renouncing what is no longer his—a woman whom he has lost already, and for whom he does not care any more. The sacrifice would have been more genuinely touching if we had seen a true 'lover' in the husband, or if his renunciation had been accompanied by a poignant sense of loss or repentance. Had O'Neill intended a tragic note, he should have either evoked sympathy for the Older Man,
or let Jack make the sacrifice for his friend's sake. O'Neill's keeping Jack blissfully ignorant even till the end, but taking the audience into confidence, shows beyond doubt that O'Neill's aim was ironic perception. No wonder it is not made clear as to what prompted the sacrifice—friendship as the closing line suggests, or gratitude as the title would have it?

The fact is that the close is neither tragic nor comic; it is cynical. After all, O'Neill came to the theatre as an iconoclast, and he simply would not be just another writer of sentimental comedies. Since he wanted to keep the audience from indulging in the stock responses, therefore, instead of laughing away the situation, or being moved by the pathos, we are expected to view things in ironic perspective.

If in "A Wife for a Life" irony relieves sentimentality, it impregnates the melodrama in "The web". That is why, notwithstanding all the usual paraphernalia of a melodrama—complete with guns, revolvers, bank-lifting bandits, etc.—the play has a deeper appeal. It brings home the realisation that in league with society, the Life Force works ironically. It makes victims of good people while its favorites are those despicably wanting in goodness and spirituality. Here is "Tim", a man damned by society as a hardened criminal but in fact so very human as to risk his life just to rescue a consumptive streetwalker. She too is a real white kid although she is dubbed a sinner by the society. Since against these we have "cadet" Steve, a soulless social prop, the entire play gets pervaded by ironic touches. Happiness
beckons Rose but as she moves towards it, the doors slam shut and, instead of finding herself on salubrious mountains, she lands in the dungeon of a jail! Tim, too, intercedes with the best of intentions only to get killed and thus to become instrumental in causing untold misery to the woman he had grown to love. Haunted by the twin hounds of society and the ironic Life Force, he had become a "crook" (of all the places) in the reform-house!

If we are not melodramatically stirred, we are not tragically exalted either. Viewing man as a pathetic victim, we come to share, as it were, the radicalism of early O'Neill and so when Tim cries "They made a yegg outa me! Let 'em look out," (Ten Lost Plays, 47), we tend to nod approvingly.

If the ironic tricks of fate are merely referred to in "A Wife for a Life," and if ironic Life Force is addressed in "Web", in "Thirst" it assumes a concrete symbolic form as the sun, the great angry eye of God. In fact, we are so blinded by the glare of this ironic force that we know not what to think of man and his life. We are too shocked and benumbed by what happens to decide whether to admire the animal strength of the primitive or to hate his bestiality, whether to laugh at the glitter of civilization symbolized in the necklace or feel pity for the men who vanish in the water, whether to sudder at the horrid beast in man or to applaud his efforts at surviving at every cost. O'Neill so yokes together the primitive, the civilized and the cultured as to create the illusion of the whole human
Creditably enough, this miniature of the human world is created on the limited area of a floating raft. What is more, though the play has so little action, it has the flavour of a melodrama. Indeed, compared with the sugar candies of the other playwrights, O'Neill's "Thirst" plays are raw meat. In fact, revolting against his father's theatre iconoclastically, O'Neill was trying to reverse everything that was valued by the traditional theatre and so, as against the sweet ladies and suave gentlemen that dominated the old theatre, O'Neill shows where the beast in man. In a fit of theatrical radicalism, he presents on the one hand a mocking spectre of a once-beautiful dancer stripping her bodice to reveal her withered breasts, and on the other the terrible spectacle of a Negro dancing merrily and sharpening his knife to eat and drink of the woman's body!

Presenting man at the level of animal existence is common in tragedy but O'Neill leaves us at the "boundary situation" to view the futility of human existence, especially the trite, even the absurd, nature of civilization. The Gentleman and the Dancer's talking about their past, their arguing, rationalizing and quarrelling, and their crazy efforts at making things clear irritate us until we realise that on the land these are the very activities so highly prized as the hallmark of culture and civilization. The contrast

*The primitive, the civilized and the cultured aspects of human microcosm continued to be represented in O'Neill's later plays by Negro, Businessman and Poet. In the later plays, he would show neurosis resulting from a primitive's being placed in a civilized society, or the civilized person amidst nature (on sea or in jungle), or a cultured person in clash with the selfish man of the world. Here, there is only contrast and not a clash of interests.
between the rich contents of the menu and the present thirstiness, a mere Negro's spurning a duke's paramour, the Gentleman's clapping when the Dancer drops dead, the Sailor's getting eaten up by sharks as he gets up to eat the Dancer—all are ironies that form the warp of the plot. Thus when the curtain comes down on the glittering necklace, we have learnt to perceive the irony implicit in the glitter of civilization.

Having reworked a sentimental comedy, a melodrama, and a tragedy in the ironic vein, O'Neill next tried his hand at the ironic rehandling of a romantic revenge play. Indeed, "Recklessness" has all that is typical of a commercial romance thriller—a romantic wife, a servant-lover, a spying maid, a revenge-seeking husband, a stolen letter, a suicidal shot—but O'Neill creates out of these melodramatic ingredients a play which, in its spirit and impact, is almost the reverse of a typical romance. In Mrs. Baldwin-Fred relationship, instead of tender sentimentality, we have a trite case of lustful adultery involving more of glandular activity than the passionate working of love-lorn hearts. In Mrs. Baldwin's confession, there is not the slightest hint of tragic courage, for she owns up only when the game is over. Fred, too, is no Romeo; since his is an ambitious, self-promoting game, on his death we shudder but shed no tears. The cuckolded husband, does win our sympathy to begin with, but later he turns out to be an unscrupulous murderer rather than an agent of nemesis. His cool and calculated utterances, rank with morbid humour, make a chill pass through the spine and make us wonder how a man can be so inhuman in his revenge. His exulting at Fred's
death and his coolness on hearing the suicidal shot clearly show that
he is a soulless creature, incapable of both love and sorrow. A
typical businessman who would go to any extent in a competition, in
rivalry with Fred he sacrifices both the precious belongings he is
proud of—his car and his wife. Thus viewing the sensuality of
Mildred, the intellectual cunning of the husband, the petty jealousy
of the maid-servant, and the opportunistic ambitions of the chauffeur,
we have nothing worth affirmation in this picture of life. Possibly,
O'Neill intended to taunt the audience for applauding such lovers and
such heroes.

How unusual is O'Neill's approach would become clear if we ask
ourselves why Mrs. Baldwin commits suicide. In a typical romance
she would act so because she can no longer live without the lover;
but we know that their love was not deep enough. In a typical
melodrama it should be the result of a feeling that she cannot sleep
again with such a cruel and revengeful husband; but of her husband's
role in Fred's death, she has not the slightest knowledge. Nor is it
the case of divine nemesis, for the general tone is too amoral to
allow such a deduction. Besides, in that case, why should the cruel
husband continue to live? The fact is that O'Neill is putting the
whole thing in an ironic framework. The irony of irony is that
ignorant of his inhuman nature she dies with a conviction that her
wonderful, angelic and forgiving husband is too noble for a sinful
wife like her! The main thing in this play is not tender romance or
cruel revenge but the ironic contrast between our knowledge of reality
and what the characters are deluded enough to believe. After the
initial scene between the lovers, twice we see Mildred and Baldwin
together and both times we are placed in a position when our superior knowledge makes us discern ironic meaning in their utterances, as each time one of the couple is ignorant about what the other has been doing. In the first meeting, when the husband calls himself "prodigal bridegroom," we have touches of comic irony; but in the later meeting, ignorant of Fred's fate when the wife praises the husband's liberality, the scene bristles with irony of all sorts—at once comic, grim and sombre!

If Mrs. Baldwin's suicide is untragic, Mr. Knapp's in the "Warnings" is unheroic. The cowardice that earlier prompted him to neglect his duty by society asserts itself again and now he seeks a coward's end to escape his failure as head of the family. Of course, some critics read in his suicide a realisation that even while the others may forgive him, he must punish himself; but if that was O'Neill's intention, he should have allowed us a peep into Knapp's conscience.

True, his behaviour during the voyage is reported to be abnormal, but from the little that we do see, that abnormality appears to be rooted in his effort to conceal his deafness rather than in any spiritual conflict. Indeed, soul is not yet O'Neill's concern; his business here is more mundane—to show the helplessness of man when he is a victim of the economic forces. That is to say, the play highlights the misery of life and not the existential mystery. Thus it is by turns comic, sentimental, pathetic and melodramatic, but never tragic!

Nor is "Fog" a tragedy unless we were to judge it only by the number of deaths in it. The child died a day earlier, he is lucky to escape
"poverty—the most deadly and prevalent of all diseases" (Ten Lost Plays, p.89), viz. poverty. The mother is found dead, and her grief and despair being so awful, we may exclaim with the poet, "Poor happy woman!" The poet, deciding to stay with the dead, chooses to die—an authentic choice prompted not by some tragic knowledge but by his disgust with the ironic Life Force which patronizes the soulless businessman. The poet was content to sink with the ship; but attempting to save the child and his mother from imminent death, he himself was saved. Eventually all the three die. Why this longer lease: why the miracle? During the interim, they have only helped to rescue the businessman. Thus, Life Force has employed all its dirty tricks just to save a patently callous, vulgar, selfish and inhuman person! Here is perhaps a repudiation of the Nietzschean concept of Life Force: the truly human souls welcome death and only the vulgar hanker after life.

And yet the poet was so very keen to save the ship from hitting the ice-berg. If death is so welcome a thing, why not let all of mankind escape from the tyranny of life? Perhaps, the answer lies in the title. Indeed, Fog symbolizes man's situation, for never shall everything be clear to the befogged minds of the puny man. Never shall he know what is good and what is bad, whether to follow the poet or the businessman. The note of inexplicable mysteriousness on which the play ends is in consonance with this vision. It leaves us mystified rather than enlightened. A tragedy makes one wiser; this play only thickens the fog.
That at this Pre-Carllnean stage, O'Neill saw the diverse aspects of life too ironically contrasted to admit affirmation in the Nietzschean vein is also borne out by "Abortion." Here, a Nietzschean superman, the favourite of Life Force, is satirized as if to bring home to the audience the fact that those who treat sex as a purely biological urge are brutes and, without the spiritual or cultural touch, these supermen are subhuman. O'Neill thus first presents a popular idol at the height of his glory and then points to his clay feet—a gradual process of denudation in which, through the mosaic of ironies, we see the protagonist stripped of all that is supposed to be heroic about him. Here we have, therefore, unsportsmanlike conduct of a sportsman who at last, like a coward, commits suicide! In the eyes of the world he may still be a hero, but we know better. He might be a good baseball player, but he has been a base player in the game of life and love. We have his popular image epitomized when his beloved, Evelyn, says:

You were so cool, so brave. It struck me as symbolic of the way you would play, in the game of life—fairly, squarely, strengthening those around you, refusing to weaken at critical moments, advancing others by sacrifices, fighting the good fight for the cause, the team, and always, always, whether vanquished or victor, reserving a hearty, honest cheer for the other side. *(Ten Lost Plays, pp.149-50)*

But soon we learn that this hero of hers had played a most inglorious innings in the game of love. It was the other party that had been really sporting:

"Not a word! (Proudly) she died game; she wasn't no coward. . . . Not a word outa her against you. (Choking with angry sobs) And you—and you—yuh dirty coward!—playin' ball! *(Ten Lost Plays, p.160)*
Jack's shooting himself at the end is by no means a heroic gesture born of the despair of an anguished conscience; it is a cowardly act prompted by the terror of a tarnished image when no alternative is left. The news of Nellie's death does not shock him; rather, he has the cheek to offer a bribe to purchase Murray's silence. Only when Murray runs away to report against him, just by chance Jack lands on the revolver and lets the trigger go. This is not self-punishment but evasion of responsibility. Instead of a genuine repentance, O'Neill wants to show the face behind the mask, the cowardice beneath the heroic pose, the reality against the illusion. Since O'Neill's real concern is with the irony implicit in the contrasting of these opposites, in the final moments of the play, every effort is concentrated on highlighting the contrast between the glory of the present and the shame of the past which are symbolized in the twin aural devices—cheering outside and the shot within.

In Servitude is repudiated not only Nietzsche but also Ibsen. To begin with, it appears a sequel to A Doll's House—what might befall an individualistic woman who insists on being true to herself. But as things turn out, it is a rebuttal of Ibsen's premises. Bogard suggests that it is like Nora slamming the door on her husband and running straight to her creator, Ibsen, only to discover that he is no more emancipated than Pastor Manders. Contrary to the Ibsenian canon, the play seeks to show that true love lies in service, which is the root of happiness. If the whole world were full of Davids and Ethels, each living in his or her own island, life would be
utterly devoid of happiness. Obviously, this is an indirect rebuttal of the Nietzschean concept of superman who is mentioned as "an egotist whose hands are bloody with the human sacrifices he has made--to himself!" (Ten Lost Plays, p.281). The implication is that the cultivation of ego, in the name of individualism, is like glorifying pure animalism. We become human only when we learn to sacrifice ego. Alice is the symbol of such humanity and she sums up the moral of the play when she asks:

"How many of you would be willing to give him up to another woman because your love was so great?"  
(Ten Lost Plays, p.270)

Here once again, O'Neill employs the technique of stripping an idol. Roylston is put on a high pedestal only to be exposed bit by bit until, at the end, the whole image lies shattered. And the one who comes as the taught turns a tutor! The perfect model of the previous evening, so composed and exuding confidence, starts retorting most peevishly. The mask is off and we see the face. Such contrasting of the self and the image and the breaking of illusions served as tragic business in O'Neill's later plays, but here it is the source of the comic, because in Roylston we have not a shamming, hypocritical villain but a self-ignorant man who, in his conceit, becomes unwittingly a source of misery for the two Phasers as well as for his own wife.

But, as should be expected, Servitude is not a comedy with gay abandon and exuberant laughter. On the other hand, it has somber moments too. In fact, had O'Neill so chosen, he could give the play an unhappy ending and then the critics would have lauded it as yet
another early tragedy. For that alternative, one has only to imagine Mr. Frazer shooting Roylston dead only to learn from his dying lips how he had spent the night at the inn—a piece of information kept from the audience until the end. Now it comes as a stroke of comic irony; then it could have been one of tragic irony. After all, irony works both ways. In other words, although O'Neill has chosen the comic ending, the general tenor is typically O'Neillian, i.e., ironic.

That for such ironic artists moving from the comic to the tragic within the same theme is a natural transition is evident from the fact that O'Neill's early works tend to suggest themselves as one another's counterpoints. For example, in *Now I Ask You*, he seems to have satirized his own melodramatic situations in plays like *Recklessness* and ridiculed the concept of free love among the bohemian artists. To this counterpoint came yet another in *Bread and Butter* in which marriage is not a game but a war in a society in which bread and butter are more important than the soul—a theme that was to recur frequently in later O'Neill. However, he chose to destroy this full-length play along with many others possibly because he found it redundant after he had reworked the idea into a more experimental one-act play for which "Bread and Butter" could have been as apt a title as the present, "Before Breakfast."

In this dramatic monologue, the only visible character talks volubly about herself, her suffering, her invisible husband's philandering habits, etc., but, most characteristically, O'Neill so
manoeuvres the action as to lead to a response contrary to the normal reactions. The more Mrs. Rowland speaks in self-praise or about her troubles, the more disgusted we grow with her. Our sympathy, instead, goes to the invisible man whom she is trying to paint in the blackest colours. At the very outset, when she furtively takes wine and steals the letter, we know her for what she is. Later when she calls her husband a tramp but we see his trembling sensitive hand with slender fingers, our heart goes out to him for we know that, being an artist, he is more sinned against than sinning. That he broke away from his millionaire father to marry this woman out of a sense of honour is a piece of news that takes away every sting from her sarcasm. Rather, viewing things from his angle, we visualise the shock, indignation and torture through which he must be passing as she launches her tirade. Suddenly when she stands transfixed with horror, we realise that while this monster was cursing outside, the poor artist inside was slicing his throat!

To convey the deeper meaning as well as to communicate through the physical action on the stage the action in the mind of the invisible artist, O'Neill strikes symbolic notes. When Mrs. Rowland starts with a yawn, she suggests the dullness of her life. Her thumping, taunting, contemptuous laughter, angry outbursts—-all represent the cracking of a microcosm. Her sweeping is symbolic raising of the settled dust of the past. And when he is reported bleeding while shaving, we understand that the poor fellow is having too close a shave on this day. Her cutting the bread outside is symbolic representation of a similar cut received within; likewise, her sipping coffee, too, symbolizes her sipping his blood. She had
him as her breakfast—the cannibal! In this experiment of suggesting the spiritual through the physical lies the importance of this play, because it underlines O'Neill's growing maturity with respect to both craftsmanship and thematic concerns.

One of the reasons for this maturity can be that "Before Breakfast" was written after O'Neill had had the benefit of training at George Pierce Baker's "47 Workshop." That the semester at Harvard helped him only with respect to methodology without making him any clearer about the nature of tragedy is borne out by the fact that in its tragic ending this experimental piece is no more affirmative than the other early plays. The artist's suicide may not be a cowardly escape from reality, but it is by no means a heroic gesture to punish himself for his guilt. Of course, we do not see him, but the speeches and behaviour of his wife reflect his reactions. He appears to stare at her bullyingly, and later mad-like, as if thinking of throttling her to death. In these unseen reactions we perceive neither self-loathing nor guilt; instead, these indicate disgust with civilisation of which she is a symbol. In this mood, an accidental cut possibly suggests to him the mode of suicide and thus, out of disgust, he chooses to cut his own throat. We neither admire him nor fear him; nor are we left marvelling at life in general and man in particular. The play fails to elevate us as a tragedy. No wonder O'Neill's own father exclaimed, "My boy, why don't you write pleasanter plays?"

That Baker failed to bring about any fundamental change in O'Neill's approach to drama and that the talented pupil, burning with
a zeal to be an "artist or nothing," continued to have a shockingly immature view of human nature are facts that need not surprise one too much because, after all, despite his sincerity to the cause of theatre education, the great professor was only too traditional, too commercial and too mechanical in his concept of successful playwriting. That for him the summit of dramatic art was A.W. Pinero and that most of his illustrations came from Pinero, Edward Knoblotch, Bulwer-Lytton, Shakespeare, and Tennyson's Becket are facts highlighted by Travis Bogard in his analysis of Baker's Dramatic Technique.

When all this is kept in mind, it is no longer surprising that "Bound East for Cardiff," which thrilled Jig Cook and launched O'Neill's triumphant career in practical theatre, fell completely flat on the tradition-bound don! No wonder, O'Neill, who had already written some plays and who thus found the classroom work too elementary, used to listen with quiet indifference and uncomfortable attentiveness, as his less-famous batch-mates recalled later. No wonder, too, he opted not to return after the first semester!

In the only surviving class-exercise, "The Sniper," it is clear that O'Neill learnt from Baker nothing about the true character of tragedy, for despite its power and pathos, it ends on an essentially untragic note. Whereas in a tragedy suffering brings out the best in man, here we have an ironic reversal of the tragic process. Thus when the god-fearing man, who was until now a picture of faith and forbearance, is driven to the extremity of suffering, the beast in him comes to the fore. Not for him something like Maurya's consolation against the tyranny of the sea. Of course, for this we do not hate him;
rather we understand him so well that, instead of sharing the priest's compassionate outcry, "Alas, the laws of men!" we feel like retorting, "How about the laws of your God?" This is not the tragic affirmation of the beast in man; instead, we are indignant at the ways of God as well as of man.

The fact is that whatever O'Neill tried, thanks to his genius, got coloured with all-pervading irony. This is as true of the tragedy in "The Sniper" as of the comedy in the other "war-play," "The Movie Man" which he completed just before he went to Baker's Workshop. That the training there did not help him discover his strong points is clear from the fact that plays written at Harvard or immediately thereafter continue to be exercises in different genres. Thus "The G.A.M.," was a farce, "A Knock at the Door" and "The Trumpet" were comedies, "Atrocity" was a pantomime, "Dear Doctor" a twice-removed reworking of a vaudeville, "Balshazzar" a Biblical drama in six scenes, The Personal Equation a four-act tragedy with I.W.W. theme and a Strindbergian finale. Since these plays are not available in print, it would be presumptuous to generalize about them, but from the now all-too-familiar outlines it is safe to deduce that at Baker's O'Neill's gain was methodological rather than conceptual and that it only reinforced O'Neill's faith in strong narrative line, sudden disclosures, surprising turns, exciting curtains, and, above all, situational ironies.

Thus in the earliest phase of O'Neill's career, he was by no means hankering after tragedy exclusively and he wrote comedies, farces,
melodramas as well, but of course in a manner that showed a rebellious mood to pervert the traditional. Also, at this stage, he is keen to show man as a mere victim of Life Force in the indifferent working of which O'Neill saw existential irony. Again, in these plays, O'Neill's concern was human relationship rather than human soul, much less human psyche. What is more, the later theatricality and idea-mongering were conspicuous by their absence and the playwright was content to dramatize life as he had seen it. In other words, tragicality, theatricality and modernism came only later and by no means represented the essential O'Neill. If later, for a long time, he wrote nothing but tragedies, it was not necessarily the only thing his genius was capable of; rather, as these plays show, far from being alien to his temper, the comic was an integral part of the playwright's essentially ironic mind.

Indeed, irony pervades the "lost'' plays. We feel it in the telling closes, in the reversal of the initial situations, in the stripping of the hero on the pedestal, in contrasting the image of the hero with the reality, in the various types of contrasts, in the taunts and verbal retorts, in the situations where our superior knowledge places us at an advantage over the ignorant characters, and so on. Indeed, whatever devices O'Neill might be employing, the ironicality of his vision looms large alike in serious, light and melodramatic plays. It is implicit in his iconoclasm in general, in his naturalistic highlighting of the beast in man, in his ridiculing Life Force and Superman on the one hand and civilization on the other, in his balancing life and death and even preferring the latter in Schopenhauerian vein, and in his inability to decide whether men are essentially blameless or evil to the core!
Of course, full of shooting, stabbing, accidents, luridity, sentimentality, cannibalism, contrived situations as they are, these plays do little credit to O'Neill's genius as an artist; but, then, after all, he was only beginning to pick up things. And yet, even in these plays, it is possible to see that with every next attempt, he was maturing as a craftsman with respect to language, plot construction, characterisation, etc. Surely, but for the fateful meetings with Terry Carlin and Jøg Cook, O'Neill might have perfected his characteristic genre of ironic plays. True, the diversion in aim and vision also yielded great experiments but they stalled the development of the ironic genre. Had he continued with the ironic vein, where he could have landed himself and the American drama would always remain a matter of conjecture. What is certain, however, is that since irony represented the core of his genius, his turning towards tragedy was like going out of his humour. And since ironic is in many respects antithesis of the tragic, O'Neill's efforts were tantamount to imposing tragic affirmation on the experiences that were basically anti-tragic.