CHAPTER VII
CONCLUSION

The socio-economic and industrial developments had incalculable influence on American life and literature. The regional and ethnic varieties dominated the mode of expression and the world of experience. The New Orleans, Kentucky, Southern and Northern regions influenced the process of literacy creation. The international position held by the nation simultaneously got reflected in the American literature. Drama as a genre of literature was to flourish in the decades between the two wars. It became a prominently realized force in the twilight period of the two wars. It bore influence of the modernistic attitude, of the rapidly changing American society and hazards created by industrialization. American drama was mostly tragic in vision and somber in presentation perhaps because it dealt primarily with an individual seized by severe changes in the outside world and his inability to protect his world. In its early period Eugene O’Neill was certainly the ablest young playwright.

Eugene O’Neill figures the first and foremost among the American dramatists. Eugene, the third son of James O’Neill was one of the best known American actors and for years he acted in tours to the country. O’Neill accompanied his father on his long acting tours and this further increased his sense of instability. This sense of instability and insecurity is reflected in his plays and in his restless search for a permanent place of residence in his later years. Even his formal education was conducted against a frequently changing background.

O’Neill is one of the greatest American dramatists, the pioneer of American tragic drama. He was mainly instrumental in securing
international honour and recognition for American drama. He was a prolific writer and the range and vision of his plays placed him in the forefront of twentieth-century dramatists. He occupies an unforgettable place in any discussion of American theatre today. Eugene O’Neill brought a sea change in American drama in roughly twelve years of time from a false world of neat and competent trickery to a world of spender, fear and greatness. His experience of life was not something to be neatly arranged in a study, but as terrifying, magnificent and often quite horrible, a thing akin to a tornado, an earthquake or a devastating fire. He rendered such terrifying and tragic life in his plays. He depicted the surrounding environment scrupulously. He was virtually the first serious American dramatist of any standing to pick characters from different layers of society and present their origins of race and background with sympathy and understanding. O’Neill began his career by writing materialistic plays mixed with symbolism and melodrama. Melodrama in his plays is of two kinds, one resulting from the improbability of character and situation, and the other resulting from some overpowering obsession that destroys surface reality as well as truth of character. His early plays show that O’Neill began as a writer of naturalistic melodrama. He soon developed a talent for characterization and the evocation of atmosphere and in two or three plays got rid of the shackles of melodrama. In his later work the element of naturalism tended to diminish though it never quite disappeared. The element of symbolism tended to increase, though very irregularly and the
element of melodrama remained approximately constant. O’Neill displays a strong sense of form both in his realistic and non-realistic plays. His plays are strictly patterned. The structure of the play, the action and even the shaping of the dialogue follow a strict design. O’Neill’s vision of life was essentially tragic. Man besieged by cruel and diminishing forces becomes the theme of his plays. He is a great tragedian from this point of view. But he is not the tragedian in the classical sense of the term. He writes tragedies of modern life that do not follow the traditional, Aristotelian norms. There are no tragic heroes, exceptional individuals with tragic flaw. His tragic protagonists are all drawn from the humblest layers of society. Each of them has his own pipedream, his own romantic illusion that brings about his doom. His tragedies are studies in the destructive possibilities of “the romantic ideal”. They demonstrate that any kind of escape from the reality of life is self-destroying. They assert at every step the beauty and joy of life that must be accepted with all its joys and grief.

One important point about the critical evaluation of O’Neil’ work by Winthers is that she has defended his dabbling with some of the complex problems of the present day world and also with some of the eternal problems. The “big subject” of man’s relation to the apparently meaningless world that modern science has revealed has always been O’Neil’s problem. He realizes that “long fed on boundless hopes, o race of man, how angrily though spurn’s all simpler fair” and his work has made a powerful gesture in the direction of a solution.
There are those who hold that this is O’Neil’s fault as a dramatist, that he is worrying too much about the destiny of man and not about entertainment in the theatre. No one can say where the truth lies, but if a map be held with some degree of certainty and if O’Neil is to have a life beyond that of entertaining his audience of today, it will partially be due to the fact that he was at least as much concerned about the universal problem of man and his universe as he was about the dramatization of a particular situation. He has had something to say that was worth saying, worth preserving.

In the plays selected for the present studies, the treatment of human predicament is evident. In *Beyond the Horizon* (written 1918, produced 1920) Ruth Mayo is a Strindbergian character who ruins the lives of two brothers as well as her own by her selfish romanticism. She wants to possess both Robert and Andrew Mayo, the romantic and the stolid farmer. Finally she is left alone, incapable of saving herself. For O’Neill, the life of the farmer was confining, found elsewhere. When at the conclusion the sun rises over the delimiting hills, and Robert Mayo follows into eternity that road not taken, one recalls the conclusion of Ibsen’s *Ghosts* and looks ahead to the end of *Desire Under the Elms*. With this play O’Neill single handedly started an intellectual and emotional revolution in Broadway theatre, to which he continued to contribute throughout his writing career. He has a romantic mind and frail
body. He longs for the open sea near East. He is destined for a wanderer’s life. But cruel fate has confined him to this little hill enclosed farm, and he watches coolly the misery and delayed this means for all who live there. He decides to take a voyage around the world. But the night before he is to set sail for a three year’s voyage comes to love in the form of a neighbour’s daughter. Lost in the love he forgets all about the voyage and plans to settle at once on the farm with his jubilant bride. This girl first was meant to be his brother Andrew’s beloved. But Andrew is heart-broken and decides to go on the voyage instead of his brother Robert Mayo.

Then follow years of decay for that household, the tragedy of the misfit. “You see the warning of love, the birth of disappointment, the corrosion of poverty and spite and disease. You watch the romance burn itself out to an ugly cinder. You see the woman grow drab and dull and sullen, and you see the man, wasted by the consumption that in another life might have been avoided, crawl at last out of the hated house to die on the road he should have travelled, straining his eyes towards the hills he never crossed.”

*Beyond the Horizon* established once for all reputation of O’Neill as the greatest American dramatist. This play is written in the tradition of realism, for it not only deals grimly with the life of a farmer but ends on note of complete and unrelieved frustration. O’Neill received the Pulitzer, the highest American price for literature.
In *Desire Under the Elms* the playwright returns in a measure to the material of *Beyond the Horizon*. The scene is a New England farm, and the theme is the gradual disintegration of hope and strength in a family which to long has lived a sternly repressive, laborious, home-keeping life. All the industry and virtue in the world cannot save the old man who is the protagonist of the piece from an eventual despair which makes him shake his fist at God the ill-contriver arch-blunderer.

*Desire Under the Elms* (1924), established him as a dramatist of true genius and is the culmination of his first period of composition. The modern world is often thought hostile to tragedy, but in this play O’Neill discomfits the naysayers. He manipulates into an astonishingly successful tragic whole such different elements between duty and joy, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the dysfunctional family, and a combination of Greek myth with the then current philosophical-psychological ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud.

These disparate ideas are melded together in a thoroughly American New England setting which carries with it the mythico-religious tradition of Puritanism, along with the dream of monetary success, the pioneering spirit of breaking new land and the world of gold in the far west. In effect, within a single play O’Neill prefigures Mourning Becomes Electra and the totality of his uncompleted saga “A Tale of Possessors, Self-Dispossessed.”
demonstrating the dour and acquisitive quality of the great American Myth, which he was to examine not only in the Mannon family but also in the Hartford and Melody families of A Touch of the Poet and the unfinished More Stately mansions.

Desire also recalls the hard scrabble misery of Beyond the Horizon (1920) and the Rope (1918). Particularly important in The Rope is the second marriage of the old farmer Abraham Bentley to a much younger woman (now dead), by whom he had a son, Luke. Bentley also has a secret hoard of gold pieces, keeping it for the son of his passionate old age. Also, like the later Ephraim Cabot of Desire, Bentley speaks in a biblical manner especially when his prodigal son returns.

In Desire Under the Alms, everything falls into place. The gloomy farmhouse was presented in a much praised set, superbly executed by Robert Edmond Jones from O’Neill’s descriptions and drawings, its brooding trees referencing the sense of doom that pervades the play. In addition, O’Neill also solves the problem of the inarticulate central figure, which had been problematic in The Hairy Ape, by giving Ephraim Cabot the incantatory cadences of the Bible, particularly the Song of Solomon. But equally effective is Ephraim’s long dialect-based monologue where he insists that “God’s hard, not easy” (II.ii), in telling his new young wife of his
earlier decision to return to his rocky farm rather than remain in the fertile Midwest.

By the time Desire Under the Elms closed in the fall of 1925, Eugene O’Neill was firmly established as the leading artistic playwright of the American theatre. The “Triumvirate” of O’Neill, Kenneth McGowan and Robert Edmond Jones had successfully reorganized the Provincetown Players into The Experimental Theatre, an off-Broadway company ready to stage virtually anything which O’Neill could conceive. Guided by the tenets of the Art Theartre movement which McGowan promoted, O’Neill indulged his imagination, composing the historical extravaganzas “Marco Millions” and Lazarus Laughed and the allegorical The Great God Brown, and sketching out two studies of modern bourgeois America, Strange Interlude and Dynamo as well.

The Guild also premiered O’Neill’s Civil War trilogy Mourning Becomes Electra, and the autobiographical dramas Wilderness! (A domestic comedy) and Days Without End (a dogmatic miracle play). The artistic and commercial failure of the latter in early 1934 combined with the Great Depression to motivate O’Neill to compose an epic Cycle of historical plays exploring his country’s greedy self-dispossession. No Cycle plays were to be staged until the series was complete. But he never
finished it; so no new O’Neill play appeared until *The Iceman Cometh* in 1946, ten years after his receipt of the Noble Prize for Literature made official the worldwide recognition of his genius.

The international award seemed particularly appropriate for a playwright openly indebted to major European dramatists and thinkers, including Aeschylus, Sophocles, Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. During the middle period these foreign currents ebbed and flowed through his work, their influence sometimes challenged and sometimes fortified by mystical philosophy from Asia, and by techniques from medieval and Elizabethan theatre and the modern European novel. O’Neill thus continued to expose his audiences, critics and fellow playwrights to unfamiliar ideas and forms from abroad. But his emphasis on strong narratives and powerful feelings carried on an older American tradition of melodrama, as amended by more recent conventions of naturalism and realism that O’Neill himself had helped plant and nurture.

This combing of ancient and modern, foreign and native, pervades *Desire Under the Elms*, the 1924 play that foreshadows the works of O’Neill middle decade. Its plot (like that of Electra) enacts ancient Greek myths in nineteenth-century New England; its characters, native folk drama rustics, are viewed (like those of
Interlude) through the filter of modern depth psychology; its vision betrays debts to Eastern mysticism (Macro), American Gothicism (Electra), and Dionysus via Nietzsche (Lazarus and Brown).

Like Strange Interlude, Dynamo, Mourning Becomes Electra and Wilderness, Desire Under the Alms pictures overt interfamilial conflicts; the more covert struggle within Eben Cabot between Jungian male and female principles assumes transcultural form in Macro, becomes theological in Interlude and Finally, the 1924 play’s identification of transcendent forces in the land and in love reveals O’Neill’s religious sensibility, his desire to penetrate like his master, Strindberg, to a realm “behind life” where “our souls, maddened by loneliness and the ignoble inarticulateness of flesh, are slowly evolving their new language of kinship.”

In the exalted speeches of Brown and Lazarus, the mysterious larger force controlling human destiny in Interlude and Electra, and the design for Dynamo and Days to compose two parts of a trilogy exploring the death of God, we witness O’Neill’s consistent ambition during this phase for the restoration of theatre to its formerly sacred place in Western culture.

In 1931 he had produced his matured drama, Mourning Becomes Electra. It is a trilogy that translates the Greek story of
Agamemnon’s family into 19th century American terms and is perhaps Eugene O’Neill’s masterpiece.

In the first play, *Homecoming* General Ezra Menon returns from the Civil War to be murdered in his New England house by his wife Christine, who in his absence has fallen in love with Captain Adam Brand.

In the second play *The Hunted* his daughter Lavinia and his son Orin avenge him by killing Adam Brand and driving Christine to suicide.

In the third play, *The Haunted* Lavinia and Orin return from a tour of the world to settle down and marry two old friends of the neighborhood, but they cannot do so because the past thrust itself into their lives and warps them; Orin commits suicide and Lavinia is left alone in the great house when the time comes.

This is clearly the story of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Electra and Orestes, with Brant playing the part of Aeigisthus. But the handling is modern and American and in O’Neil psychology is equivalent to fate and the punishment of the children is more than what is ordinarily called conscience. Orin’s hallucinations tell him among other things that Lavinia is his mother, at other times his
feeling towards her is that of a lover and she is elaborately analyzed as a case. The success of the play however, does not depend upon such a interpretation. Its action in itself is simple and ordered; its outline is large, its humanity is impressive. Eugene O’Neil experimenting with much known device had hit upon the best of them all and had produced a classic.

John Henry Raleigh has remarked:

Although the Proust and O’Neill are the clearest cases of great modern writers for whom art and autobiography are one, they are not the only ones. It could be argued that the most serious imaginative writers in the past-1800era who did anything on a large scale and in a dramatic fashion, i.e. created characters and social works have tended to write about their own past, or that of their family and friend or that of their culture, or all three.[1979:15]

In *Long Days Journey Into Night* O’Neill parents, his brother and his own farmer self are the prototypes of the four main characters whose complicated relationships have been depicted in the fanatical passion for truth. Since many characters of O’Neill and are near projections of his ownself they are not allowed to become great powerful figures. It is however impossible to forget
O’Neill himself is speaking through them, it is largeness of tragic feeling that constitutes their magnitude.

Eugene O’Neill’s own remarks on his plays containing autobiographical material deserve quotation:

All the most dramatic episodes of my life I have so far kept out my plays and most of the things I have seen happen to other people. I’ve hardly begun to work up all this material, but I am saving up a lot of it for one thing in particular, a cycle of plays I hope to do some day. [1947:14]

It remains to point out that it is not right to suppose that the artistic appeal of a work of art, much less a play, depends upon autobiographical element. *Samson Agonistes* is a powerful and moving tragedy but it does not appeal primarily because it is autobiographical in nature. Some of the last plays of O’Neill have autobiographical element. But they need not constitute the chief source of appeal they have for the audience and reader of today.

Those who responded to *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* solely as a naturalistic slice-of-life was well entitled to their reservations. But there is more to *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*. 
The dramatic line of development in it includes O’Neill’s introduction to a tragic view of life through youthful disenchantment.

The family is the microcosm through which the artist his first hard look at the macrocosm. This first look is also romantic, recalling the doldrums of the lost generation of the 1890’s; the young O’Neill broods on the lachrymose poetry of Ernest Dowson. But we know that the look grew harder in the course of O’Neill’s career. The acute sense of human contradiction and division expressed in this play (and actually expressed in most of the plays that preceded it far more than two decades) is the final clue to O’Neill’s course name as a dramatist.

But his work possesses the power and drive of a fine mind and a burning sincerity. The author’s creative consciousness and will are in conflict with the sterile thinking which destroys both art and life. This inner struggle is evident in his repeated efforts to dramatize the subconscious. This has led to his interest in the problem of dual personality; he tries to use the physical man as a means of showing us the subconscious man in whom he is chiefly interested.

O’Neill’s question, which in the late plays became sharper and more accurately perceived, was simply how man, bereft of faith
in God, might confront the inevitability of death. That was hardly a new question, far too commonplace to please those who put a premium on originality. Moreover, O’Neill’s answer to the question was an ancient one, although it has a modern appeal. The mood of the late O’Neill combines Romanticism and Stoicism.

We may trace that mood in the late plays (those written after *Days Without End*) by looking first at the treatment of time in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, then the Freudian echoes in *The Iceman Cometh*, and finally the question of illusion in that play and in *A Touch of the Poet*.

It would be interesting to discover whether Eugene O’Neill knew that in his treatment of time he was closer than in any other respect to the Greek drama. He was not successful in finding a modern equivalent for the Greek Fates or for Nemesis. The attempt to make the Oedipus complex perform this service in *Mourning Becomes Electra* succeeded only in reducing the Greek story to the level of rationalistic psychology. Where O’Neill did succeed, however, and for his purposes it was probably the only place necessary for him to succeed, was in his representation of a world in which, as in most Greek tragedy, there is no future.
O’Neill, whose affinities with Strindberg are well known, may be said to respect the secularized man of Christendom living at a time when the built-in optimism of Western society is being exhausted. He is unable with the old latent assumptions to cope with the disruptions of an age of violence; and he is even less able to return to religious life, out of which a belief in the future has originally sprung. It was but natural, therefore, to turn to the kind of skeptical reassurance-in-chaos which had sustained the late Classical age, in other words to a new stoicism. But we will see this more clearly if we look at the resemblance of the late O’Neill to the late Freud.

O’Neill thus affords us a clear example of the close, if usually unacknowledged, connection between art and religious or philosophical assertion. To be concerned about the creation of a work of art is to be able to back off far enough from the existential battles to adopt a standing place, on the basis of which the form of the work of art may be established. Those who say, therefore, that O’Neill lacked only the ability to write well miss the point.

To be concerned about well would have been to deny the very obsession which impelled him to write in the first place. It would have assumed a stasis, a sense of completion of wholeness which his radical pessimism had completely over thrown. In a situation in which the only reality is death and the only question how to meet it, necessarily a tormented question, there are no
values, proportions, relationships, traditions, or ultimates according to which the artistic work might be fashioned and judged. The particular existential power of O’Neill’s work and its aesthetics ruggedness go hand in hand.

One of the primary values of the late plays of O’Neill is that they draw some issues very, very clearly. Their combination of neo-Stoicism and Thanatos-romanticism forms almost a diametric opposition to religious faith. Their mythical qualities make it clear where the battle takes place. St. Paul writes, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers.” Almost more than any other modern author, O’Neill makes it clear what these principalities and powers are. They are the forces that play upon his stage, the elemental claims that fall upon his “haunted heroes”. When we read the Pauline declaration that “the last enemy that shall be overcome is death,” O’Neill enables us to recognize the visage and the strength of the enemy.

As a playwright O’Neill had at least two careers. The first career, by which he gained his fame, was played under the shadow of the Chateau d’if; the second – the one that incorporates The Iceman Cometh, Long Day’s Journey, and the other late masterpieces – represents, among other things, his final escape from the dungeon in which he father lay.
O’Neill was regarded as a great innovator, or a renovator or Elizabethan stage device, when he introduced asides and soliloquies, but, of course, this device were integral to the structure of Monte Cristo, and in trying to account for O’Neill’s use of them for psychological information rather than for melodramatic effects, there is no need to look any further than the Fetcher play. O’Neill’s varies experiments with disguises, usually in the forms of masks and once again convey the effects of psychological complexity, also have their genesis in the old melodrama in which disguises play a key role in the plot.

Towards the end of an O’Neill play there almost always comes a moment when the principal character are for the first time fully revealed to the audience, and often it is only then that they fully understand themselves or their relationship to each other and to the world they live in. these recognition scenes are O’Neill’s high points in his best plays they are very moving.

However, there are major differences to observe between this recognition. In some of them there is a final heroic confrontation with the forces of life or destiny; in others, the hero in retreat reaches the final devastating acknowledgement of despair. O’Neill seems to have thought of his characters coming to terms with life as moment forward or back. In the early versions of Days
Without End an antithesis is set up between “going back” – refusing in some way to accept the challenge of life and going on to Her Hercules,” curious phrase, intended at one time to be the title of the play, and meaning acceptance of life, even if life itself is meaningless, determination to create goals for oneself a heroic gesture with overtones of romantic grandeur. Hercules here is the constellation, but suggests also the great hero’s final transcendence of a faith which he accepts.

In Days Without End the choice between two opposite direction is expect: in other plays it is implied. The backward movement of O’Neill character is always flight from the problems posed by existence: forward movement is the heroic, sometime ecstatic, acceptance of them. Both moments may be towards death, by death in significantly in different forms.

The characteristic of an O’Neill play, then, is determined by a movement toward unmasking, which is often also a monument of the principal character toward discovery of the stance they must take toward the fundamental problems of existence.

A far more convincing example of acceptance occurs in a far better play, Desire Under The Elms, in which the two principal characters, Eben and Abbie, move through a sequence of false attitudes towards each other to thorough understanding and love.
This is O’Neill at his best. In these last plays he gave up his reliance on elaborate theatrical contrivance and attempted no forcing of the muse to rhapsodic heights. As a result his genuine gifts are seen to the best advantage. These plays are kind of unmasking of their author.