CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Various social, political and literary movements paved the way for the 20th century Modern American Drama. Thomas Godfrey, the writer of the first American drama, *The Prince of Parthia* and Hallem’s Company’s contribution are referred to at the very beginning. There are various key figures from different fields who have made great contributions and shaped American Drama, some of whom are Captain Marcos Farfan, Joseph Leacock, Robert Munford, William Dunlop, James Nelson Barker, John Howard Payne, Eugene O’Neill, Clifford Odder, Lillian Hellman, Tennesse Williams and Arthur Miller.

The colonial period in American history extends from 1607 to 1765. This period saw very scanty literary output in America. A group of people who had their cultural lineage in Europe should have given so little thought to literary composition, seems rather strange till we look into the factors that conditioned life in these early American settlements.

To the early settlers survival was the first and foremost consideration. They had to fight against the wilderness, to convert a rugged forest into a cultivable land, to hold out against adverse forces, elemental and otherwise were some of their gripping problems which were responsible for closing their mind towards any literary composition.
Moreover, as shares of the cultural tradition of England, the colonialists did not feel the urge to create a literature of their own that could vie with that of England and of Europe. Their feeling of belonging culturally to their own world and could derive sustenance from their parent country. It was only much later after winning political independence that America realized the need for maintaining a cultural distance from England and from here on the foundation stone of American literature is laid.

Great Literature is often the result of a sense of unity, of a spirit of nationality which the heterogeneous settlers of America were yet to feel. This sense of nationality was absent in the colonialists who regarded themselves as a part of England and Europe. The fusion in the melting pot took place later.

It was the nature of the colonial period that gave very little time for the writer to write simultaneously, the public found very little time to read. It is a universal truth that no writer can thrive in an indifferent medium. Good Literature requires a good taste from the public to its disadvantage in colonial America people were preoccupied in reading the Bible and the Prayer book and any other books bought and written in England. Printing facilities were lacking and thus one can see there was hardly any inducement for an American writer to produce any originality of thought. If ever he wrote it was for the Englishmen and his writings were also to be published in England.
Although, it must be mentioned here that there were three instances which prompted the American writers to write. Firstly, the necessity to record important events and to provide their family and friends with an account of personal experiences. Secondly, the desire of propaganda wherein glowing accounts of the land were written so that the English people might be lured in large numbers to America as it offered huge gains of material prosperity. The third factor that induced writing was the Puritans lack of appetite for religious writings. The result of all these factors was voluminous literature composed of sermons, diaries and biographies and poems of religious nature. Though, literature appealing to the aesthetic delight was hardly produced.

The year 1767 which saw the end of the colonial period also witnessed the performance of the first play written by a native American for the stage of The South Wark Theatre. A literary prejudice against American Theatre and dependence upon mother country delayed the growth and the spread of American Drama.

Permission was granted to Hallam’s Company to act in 1754 provided that nothing ‘indecent or immoral’ was to be performed. Thomas Godfrey, the writer of the first American drama, *The Prince of Parthia* derived his inspiration from old English dramatists. He was well versed with Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, Dryden, Ambrose, Philips and Nicolas Rowe thoroughly. The play, *The Prince of Prince*, rests heavily on Elizabethan poetic drama, both in its
employment of blank verse and its use of passion and violence on the stage. Some of the dramatists and their creations in the colonial period are remarkable. These are Captain Marcos Farfan’s *Spanish Comedia* (1598), William Darby’s *YeBare and YeCubb* (1666), Addison’s *Cato* (1737) Roberts Roger’s *Paxton Bay* (1764) and *The Savages of America* (1764).

Hutchinson and Godfrey were immensely interested in drama and they attended the performances of Hallam’s company. They inspiration derived from these performances yielded fruits. They produced *The Masque of Alfred*, a dramatic piece at the college of Philadelphia. It was written by Thompson and revised by Mallet. Thompson Godfrey’s *The Prince of Parthia* owes its inspiration to the performance of Hallam’s and *The Masque of Alfred*. The scene of this romantic tragedy is laid in Parthia, in a time about the beginning of the Christian Era. The tragedy has nothing to do with the historical events and facts and is purely Godfrey’s invention. It is based on human emotion. The tragedy should not be judged by modern standards. It throws light on what was being done in the sphere of dramatic art in Contemporary England. Godfrey is remarkable for his belief in literature as an end in itself.

*The Prince of Parthia* was the only play of American origin performed on the native stage before the revolution.
It is fortunate that none of these dramas disputes with the *Prince of Parthia* has the honour of being first American play. It is not only the relative superiority of Godfrey’s play both as a piece of literature and an acting drama that makes it fitting the honour of priority should belong to it.

The period 1765 to 1829 is remarkable in American history as the settlers of different colonies who had migrated from different parts of Europe, were now beginning to think of themselves as one people. The fusion of “melting pot” took place during the period leading on to that sentiment which found expression in the phrases like, ‘We the people of United States’. The united political power of the Americas was first made manifest with the Stamp Act Congress of 1769, and went on right up to the year 1829 in which the common man of America was vindicated with Andrew Jackson’s becoming the president of United States simultaneously the colonies were resisting together the tyrannical imposition of taxes by the British government, an internal revolution was going on against the autocracy. Both these trends had a great bearing on literature especially American Drama.

It must be kept in mind that rights of the individual for his fullest possible development within a free society, providing justice and equality for all, was an integral part of American character thus the literature of this period is of great importance. Books written and speeches made also covered these themes.
The feeling of inferiority complex to England and the growing criticism of the Americans gave birth to a spirit that made them aspire to the creation of distinctive literature of their own with both an aesthetic and utilitarian interest. Literature about Politics or religious literature was not sufficient and the nationalists felt the desire to establish a tradition of belle-letters. If poetry, fiction and drama were regarded as marks of great culture, then America did want to stay behind in any country in the possession of these. This was the true spirit behind any literary attempts. It was this very attitude that prompted Washington Irving and Cooper to look diligently for material of romance and legends in the annals of American History.

The writers of this period were more self-conscious and the spread of education created an enlightened public who were ready for finer literature. The sermons written during the period helped develop the art of oratory and had considerable influence on political oratory.

In Elizabethan England the spirit of nationalism gave rise to a great interest in national history so did it in America. This nationalistic temperament had a great impact upon history and biography. The political crisis that engulfed America produced a flood of polemical writings. It was natural that a literature of persuasion should have flourished in the same age. Before the war of independence the writings were of the nature of literary debates, between the Tories and the Whigs, speeches, sermons and State papers appeared in profusion. Samuel Adams, James Olis, John Dickenson, Hamilton and Jerrefson
represented the Whig side whereas the Tory position was expounded by Jonathan Bondour, Martin Howard, Samuel Seabury etc. The patriots made their legal position clear by a well-worked out political philosophy which they drew from the writings of Thomas Hobbes, Sir Robert Filmer, John Locke and many other English and European thinkers. The literature that was presented was remarkable for its favor of revolution also for its clarity of thought and expression.

At the same time there was also a growing trend for propagandist literature and the best among them was Thomas Paine. This time there were plays which were satirical in their contents published anonymously for reasons obvious. The earliest of the satires were written in New England simply because the revolution began here. The most eminent of the writers of satires were Mrs. Mercy Otis Warren, She penned many satires which shows she was well verse with all important events and happenings that took place during the revolution. Some of her satires include The Adulater, The Group, The Sack of Rome, The Ladies of Castle, The Block Heads and The Affrighted Officers. The Block Head which was put in stage in Boston I the winter of 1775-1776 directed its attack against the patriot army which was responsible for the blockheads of the city.

Joseph Leacock’s play The Fall of British Tyranny or American Liberty Triumphant holds a position of considerable significance in the sphere of patriotic plays. The characters are well drawn and do not talk alike. Another famous name in the history of American Drama is H.H.Brackenridge (1748-
1816). In his play *The Battle of Bunker’s Hills* the dramatist gives expression to his sentiment of love for the country. His plays are much better than other revolutionary dramas from the point of view of structure and expression. Robert Munford is another dramatist who represented the more neutral attitude in his plays *The Candidates* and *The Patriots*. The former play is a satire on the methods of conducting elections for the assembly. The next Tory satire that saw the light of the day is *The Americans Roused in a Cure for Spleen* or *Amusements for a Writer’s Evening* (1775).

All the dramas represent the of the time in its most intense mood and the hopes, fears, agonies of that great period are mirrored in a glass that is most interesting when it reflects the nature of human beings who are emotionally under stress.

During the last decade of the 18th century and the first of the 19th century, the dominating force in the American Drama was William Dunlop. He had a pleasant time with the background of Shakespeare’s acting plays and contemporary comedies. He wrote *The Modern Soldier* or *Love in New York* a comedy. *The Father* was the second comedy and it was received with a great applause from the audience. It had a combination to amuse and to instruct. Dunlop wrote an interlude *Darby Return* 1789. Next, Dunlop turned to gothic melodrama and after that probably under the influence of French revolution he turned to the theme of liberty. Dunlop was a versatile genius and he
experimented with romantic tragedy and the gothic drama that helped him rise to the pinnacle of success in his lifetime.

The first quarter of the 19th century witnessed a number of changes in the American Literary scene. By this time Literature finally emerged. Unlike the Literature of the 17th century that was primarily religious and that of the 18th century political it was only the 19th century that saw the emergence of a kind of writing that could be truly called Belle-letters. This spirit of romanticism though was discernable in the earlier writing now was clearly visible.

Taking the literary merit of the period from 1805 to 1825 into consideration it is observed that the romantic plays with a tragic impulse are most significant. The earliest of these romantic plays is *The Widow of Malabar* by David Humpreys. *The Yankey in England* by the same author is of special interest. William Charlie White who wrote *Orlando or Parental Persecution, The Clergymen’s Daughter* and *The Poor Lodger*. His plays are full of comic and serious scenes produce that variety, which is universally appealing.

Among the writers who wrote tragedy was an important figure John Daly Burk. He wrote *Bunker Hill, Female Patriotism* or *Death of John D’Arc, Bethelum Gabar*. Susana Horswall Rowson, was one of those early playwrights who dealt with national themes in her plays like *The Slaves in Alguirs* or A

Two important figures who dominate the scene in the towards the end of the first quarter of the 19th century are James Nelson Barker and John Howard Payne who represent two diametrically opposite forces and around whom are grouped writers of lesser significance. Barker's work is acknowledged for his quality rather than his quantity. His choice of American theme was neither accidental nor parochial. Barker’s *The Indian Princes* is the first surviving play that became very popular and was also produced at Drury Lane, London in 1820.

As representative of the plays with national and historical themes an important playwright was Mordecai Manuel Noah. His first play *Palil and Alexis* or *The orphan of the Rhine* was written in 1812. *The hero of the Lake George* is a drama of revolution. Towards the end of this period many revolutionary plays were written some of which were Samuel Woodworth’s *The Widson Son, Andre, Blue Laws* are the best of the revolutionary plays of this period.

John Payne represents himself as the actor, the playwright, and the man of the theatre of the time. The themes he selected were mostly foreign. Payne was a precocious child and as a boy who wrote *Charles –II* under the joint authorship
of Washington Irving. He also wrote *The Thespian Mirror* at about the same period, thereby attracting the attention of Coleman. Editor of ‘The Evening Post’ and Payne soon became a well known figure in the social life of New York. For years Payne performed with success in America. His themes were universal rather than parochial.

At the beginning of the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the nature of drama began to change. A change that became self evident after 1830. They were based partly on the condition of the theatres, partly on the advent of certain actors like Edvid Forrest and they were due partly due to the general social political and economic condition of the country. A typical playwright was Richard Penn Smith. Smith was a keen student of the English Drama. The best of his play owes its inspiration to Thomas Dekker. His play *The Divorce* or *The Mock Cavater* revised as *The Deformed* or *Woman’s Trial* was performed on several occasions.

Robert Bird, the dramatist of the period, abandoned medical profession to write plays. A keen student of Elizabethan and Restoration dramatists he wrote *It was All for the Best* a comedy imitative of Congreve. *The Gladiator* was a great success having the virtues of the shortcomings of the romantic tragedy. It was widely appreciated by dramatic critics.
After mentioning in detail the simultaneity of O’Neil’s work with that of such writers as Eliot, Ezra Pound, Hemmingway, Fitzgerald, Lewis, Faulkener, Stevens and the other eminent writers of American literature belonging to the first part of the 20th century, Henry Raleigh has explained how in some respects he occupies a central position amongst all theses. In the confident years Van Wyck Brooks observed about O’Neil that there was scarcely a literary current of the time that had not flowed through his mind. One after another he had taken up the themes that had filled the lives of other writers and had often developed them better than anyone else.

Eugene O’Neill was a progenitor of avant-garde modern drama in America. By endowing his plays with a new urgency and seriousness almost equal to the European dramatists of the early Twentieth century he gave a new impetus to American drama enlarging its scope for its thematic content and theatrical innovations. Before his the American stage was awash with genteel, sentimental comedies of inane merit based on standardized, flamboyant and familiar themes. He pioneered the drama of serious realism with uncompromising honestly.

His chief concern in this drama was to depict the tragic predicament of man wrestling against self and society for some reaching out his fellow beings to finding for him a niche in a hostile and mysterious universe.

The plays of O’Neill were cardiograms of the impatient heart in which he charted the thwarted dreams and elusive hopes of his characters, the defeated lives and tormented loves whom Fated rendered unrealized. Writing plays of personal psychology and bitter domestic tragedy he unveiled the secrets of human heart by portraying his perplexed characters as social derelicts who are
quivering on the edge of society—the sailors, alcoholics, fugitives, spiritual dwarfs and men and woman trapped in obsessive relationships—whom the world callously passed by.

He opened up the American stage to a range of lives and occupations outside the familiar middle class quotidian experience. He was highly influenced by the classical drama not only in his choice of powerful and universal themes but also in his sense of drama as religious rituals, something that remained beyond the pale of representational realism.

He dislodged the contemporary American dramatic practices with rigor. Rebelling against these shibboleths he provided new substance to the theatre by his audacious experiments and demines. He exposed drama to new vistas of freedom with his use of natural symbols, chorus, crowds and their choreographic movements, asides, masks and interior monologues in his plays, and even ended *Marco Millions* outside the theatre on the street. He, further, used classical, Biblical and contemporary myths in the structure of his plays. He created the myth of the Harfords in *The Cycle Plays*; and forged his own myth in *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*.

However, the uncritical adulation eluded his for a good measure initially. He was offered bouquets of critical encomiums and accolades as well as lashed with vituperative tirades. Notwithstanding the untenable objections of untidiness of plot, crudeness of style, unexalted language and morose vision there is emotional honesty and sincerity of effort pervading his works which belittles these charges. This is achieved by the sweep o sympathy, over brimming compassion and richness and intensity of the themes of his plays through a fusion of myths and symbols.
However, the use of myths, archetypal patterns, and symbols in the themes of O’Neill’s plays has not been given an unbiased, balanced and comprehensive assessment, though there have been a few fragmental attempts to study myths in his plays. By and large the entire corpus of his plays has not been subjected to such a magnified treatment. His plays echo with mythical patterns and allusions, for he saw life in terms of myths; nevertheless, he imbued his plays with myths. Like the romantics he used archetypal symbol, ritual patterns of myths to express the elemental appetites, passion and such forces as affect man’s behavior in given circumstances. He used myths to describe basic urges and inexplicable forces at work in a particular social milieu. The myths operate at various experimental levels in the plays even though there is no conscious effort made by the playwright to provide the myths to play their specific roles in the interpretation of subterranean human cravings.

The present endeavor is directed to the study of myths and symbols in the play of O’Neill. We hope that it would contribute to a better understanding of the intricacies of his dramatic art in explaining the vital motives that govern human actions. The myths in the plays are studied in the larger perspective of the universal import conveying specific human experience. Ostensibly, the stress is on the study of myths from earlier times—the ancient, classical, Christian—the Biblical and archetypal patterns, and the contemporary American myths and legends which had a greater bearings upon O’Neill’s plays. It is an attempt to explore his mythological ability in his plays which gave him a pre-eminent position as the most significant contemporary American playwright of international renown to emerge between the Wars. It is our endeavor to establish his supremacy as a dramatic artist who gave new dimensions to
modern tragedy with his adroit use of myths and symbols, and, thus, served as a link between the ancient classical and the modern tragedy by providing continuity, vitality and perspicacity which the twentieth century tragic drama lamentably lacked.

The earlier American drama dwelt on two extremes of melodrama and farce. The subsequent years till almost to the end of the first two decades of the 20th century saw the beginning of a unique efflorescence of literary climate which bought in a whiff of fresh air through an unparallel reportorial of O’Neill’s plays possessing permanent theatrical efficacy and literary.

American plays preceding 1915 lacked in dramatic integrity, although Clyde Fitch’s The Truth and Mitchell’s New York Idea had enjoyed popularity because of their subtle satire and witty dialogues. William Vaughan Moody’s plays like The Great Divide and The Faith Healer embraced themes of contemporary with flashes of richness of the Americans scene, and a promise of a mature theater which followed in its wake. Edward Sheldon’s The Boss dramatized the antagonized cleft between labor and capital class, and The Nigger focused on the racial tensions.

The Scandinavian dramatists Ibsen and Strindberg between them brought on new tendencies in European drama, while Shaw straddled the British stage. In comparison American drama lagged way behind and any sign of cognizable dramatic activity were the isolated performance of the plays of Ibsen and Shaw on the Broadway.
The establishment of the Washington Square players in 1915, known later as the Provincetown Players, revolutionized the American Theater. The first of the play let’s to appear on its bill was O’Neill’s experimental sea adventure *Bound East for Cardiff*. The moving spirit behind it was Allan Lewis who opined:

True drama is born only of one feeling animating all the members of a clan—a spirit shared by all and expressed by the few for the all. If there is nothing to take place of the common religious purpose and passion of the primitive group out of which the Dionysian dance was born, no vital drama can arise in any people. [1970:24]

He inspired the group to transcend mediocrity and create a viable native drama based on American experience.

With his fascination for the Athenian tragic drama he endeavored to fuse the Greek idea into the American stage. His close associate, Clive Bloom had summed up his ideal:

Back to Greece! –that was Jig’s solution for every modern ill. Back, rather, to the spirit of Greece for its lesson, and then a return to re-evolve the group spirit from modern life.[1995:3]

Their stage production was as varied as though of Washington Square players. They remain conscious of a mission, set forth by Cook, and gave a new lease of life towards new experimentation in drama.
With the expectation of a few plays with some dramatic impact, the American contribution on the Broadway bordered on the absurd melodramatic and sentimental romance and flimsy farces. With such a small beginning on the Broadway, O’Neill proved to be the most promising dramatists to have emerged and bloomed into the title of American drama.

With an untiring spirit O’Neill experimented with various dramatic forms that transformed the American drama into a viable theatrical production. After exploring the liberating possibility of brief but compact one act plays he penned some of the most sprawling works of the American stage history. If his early plays had overtones of realism, his later plays were marked by extensive experimentation in symbolic techniques, acting styles, production methods which were further enriched by the imaginative experimentation of realistic modes.

His knowledge of the European stage specially the plays of Strindberg made his aware of the limitation of the American stage, and enabled him to introduce the continental modes like expressionism into the treatment of the American dramatic staple. His reading of Karl Marx’s Das capital, Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and birth of tragedy, Freud and Jung among others added to his native material and intellectual and psychological dimension. A fairly large bulk of his output bears testimony to it.

Before staging O’Neill’s one act plays by the Provincetown Players in the mid – 20’s some American playwright had tried realism in theirs plays. Charles Kelin, Clyde Fitch and Edward Sheldon projected the class conflicts, political corruption and racial themes in their plays. But such plays were pseudo—realistic in manner and so were labeled unmodern. Further, early
American realistic drama suffered from colloquial informality and was generally associated with local and temporal modes of jocularity.

The early American drama suffered from ‘forced optimism’—a characteristics of American society. It included happy endings. The love of (either a pure or married) woman was an instrumental of solving problems. Thus, early American realism proved intellectually confined, inconsistent dramatically and lighter in critical vein.

The post—War American playwright exhibited a zeal for characteristically American blunt—edged realism in the art of high comedy. What Price Glory by Laurance Stallings and Maxwell Anderson and They Knew What They Wanted by Howard Lindsay are the best of these type foibles of political and social corruption.

It was O’Neill who fathered modern American drama. His plays depict the tension between illusion and reality. He dealt with reality on three levels—the social, the psychological and autobiographical reality. He put sincere efforts in experimenting to depict inherent foibles and conflicts in society in his early minor plays. He dramatized sea – people and their lives realistically. His own experiences as a sea – man helped him in his portrayal of characters that appeared to be real people and are trapped in the tragic universe by their fate.

O’Neill provided realistic setting and detailed stage directions to his themes. Beyond the Horizon, Anna Christie, The Straw, The Web and Thirst has setting with symbolic overtones. The distinct innovations, physical features and the peculiar ways of expression of the character are described realistically.
The dialogues with their gutter flavor enliven the plays with their keen edge which makes them more credible. In the sea plays O’Neill used to talk of the sailors, their slang clichés with force and ingenuity.

His life—like characters are drawn from his observation of life, his personal knowledge and extensive reading. It may be seen in minute details of the physical appearance, visage and dresses of the people he dramatized.

His experience and his acquaintance with people provided his plays with realistic touches. Most of his plays have their moorings in autobiographical roots. He showed catastrophic repercussions of such illusory romantic ideals that proved to be disastrous both in his personal life as well as his artistic creations.

Instead of concentrating on the external reality or on the universality of the catastrophic consequences of romantic illusion he essayed to explore unconscious motivations of men and to explain some of the behavioral mysteries of the working of ‘The Force Behind’. His personal psycho—analysis in 1927 and the influence of Freud and Jung familiarized him with unknown patterns of human behavior. He became a kind of psycho—analyst of souls. He projected psychological inhibitions and repressions in *Strange Interlude, Desire Under The Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Even without the Freudian implications and psychological complexities these plays tend to be realistic projection of mysterious motivations which control our reactions through an undercurrent of obscure and dormant forces which become operative in unguarded moments.
His realism was rejection of American society’s contemporary practices. He appraised critically the contemporary illusions, fears and social mores. He portrayed the ace of modern age, the dilemmas of men living under perils, problems and pressures of existence in a commercial and mechanized society as faithfully as was realistically possible. His social criticism may be called direct descendant of psycho—realism.

Naturalism had been distinct characteristics of American fiction in the first half of the twentieth century. But the American drama was faced among others with the dilemma of assimilating the European influence and of maintaining and creating typically American traits. Clyde Fitch was the first to experiment radically. Further, George Pierce Baker’s coaching in playwriting (1905-1925) fostered native talent. The dramatic renaissance of the Twenties and Thirties was marked by iconoclasm ushering in change which seems both original and imaginatively viable. Like other arts, realism and naturalism became secondary to the experimental modes like expressionism, futurism, impressionism and surrealism and drama.

There had been no continuing tradition in American drama in which O’Neill could function totally in American dramatic conventions. Therefore, he had to lean heavily on European dramatic traditions specially those of Maeterlinck and the Scandinavian dramatists. The best of O’Neill writings describes ‘soul—state’, yet are pieces of naturalistic play righting with its teeth drawn. He retained the life – like traits in his plays, and gauged the obscure meaning of human existence in the language of symbolism.

O’Neill started a realist in his sea plays, and rendered life and speech with authenticity. He maintained colloquial dialogue till the Twenties,
and resorted to its use again in *The Iceman Cometh*, and *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*. He provided a careful depiction of environment, and created credible situation and characters belonging to different races, backgrounds and stratas.

O’Neill reacted sharply against the fact that art was merely transcription of life. He fused naturalism and symbolism with other techniques. His importance as a naturalist lies in the fact that he was the first American dramatist to use naturalisms in the dramatic creations. With fastidious stage craftsmanship he attempted a rhythmic creation of beauty.