CHAPTER II
LIFE AND WORKS OF EUGENE O’NEILL

Eugene O’Neill is considered to be one of the greatest American playwrights. He is the only American dramatist to have been awarded the noble prize, an honor not bestowed upon either Arthur Miller or Tennessee Williams, two other great American playwrights. O’Neill has been assimilative of the prevailing tendencies and responsive to the different influences. He succeeded in bringing new features in the field of dramatic writing and his experiments made him a notable figure not only in the American theatre but also a dramatist of international importance.

O’Neill made incessant experiment in the field of dramatic art and he experimented in realism, expressionism, naturalism, symbolism and fantasy. All his experiments were inspired by a serious purpose- to find an idiom in which to express human tragedy.

To quote John Gassner

“His plays embodied the ideas and conflicts of the first half of the twentieth century, assimilated his advances in dramatic art and theatrical technique, and expressed its uneasy aspirations toward tragic insight and dramatic vision.”[1965:52]
Eugene O’Neill was born in a Broadway hotel on October 16, 1888. He was the son of James O’Neill, a popular actor of romantic melodrama, and he spent his childhood partly with his father on tours and partly in boarding schools. As the result of a prank, he was suspended from Princeton at the end of his freshman year. He worked briefly in a mail-order house, and then possibly influenced by Jack ‘London Joseph’ Conrad, as well as by his own restless rebellious spirit, he left in 1909 for a gold prospecting voyage in Honduras.

Another voyage took him as an ordinary seaman to Buenos Aires, where he worked at odd jobs for a time before returning to play a small part in one of his father’s productions in New York and worked for about a year as reporter and columnist on a New London newspaper. In 1912 an attack of tuberculosis sent him for five months to a sanatorium, and it seems reasonable to suppose that the enforced idleness there brought him face to face with the self from which he had been trying to run away.

The most important event in O’Neill’s early life or youth, marked by large events, was the discovery when he was not quite fourteen that his mother had become morphine addict at his birth, he himself being the unwitting cause of her addiction. He learnt that the birth of his eleven pound natal self had caused his mother prolonged pain and depression for which morphine was prescribed. Ella O’Neill rapidly became addicted. The addiction plagued her and her family for the next quarter century. In late summer, 1902, Ella O’Neill ran out of morphine and tried to drown herself. Eugene was told about her addiction by his
father James and brother Jamie. They could not conceal that they held his birth to be its cause. Eugene grew up sharing the family assumption that they would all have been better off had he not been born.

Given his birth into a theatrical family and his remarkable creative drive, Eugene had little more choice in the matter of becoming a tragic playwright than he had in carrying his mother’s affliction. The shameful secret and blame gave Eugene leverage in an old argument with his father, to let him escape catholic school. Eugene transferred the secular Betts Academy in Stanford, Connecticut.

At Betts he made a good academic record and acquired a solid education by constant wide reading, by writing poems, by writing daily letters to parents, brother, nanny and others. He had learnt as early as primary school that through letter writing he could escape the immediate and create a world more pleasant than the world of nuns surrounding him. Fellow students remembered him at Betts, as at his previous schools, as very determined, somewhat more decadent in rebellion than was typical for the time.

The discovery of his mother’s addiction caused his adolescence to set off a decade long binge of self destructive behavior. He started drinking heavily and was probably a full blown alcoholic before he was fifteen. His father’s fame made it easy for Eugene, guided by Jamie, to wander casually
through New York theatre dressing rooms. Tall and lean, exceptionally handsome, son of a prominent father, Eugene fell easily into affairs with show girls, prostitutes, married women and women of affairs. In 1909, he became involved with Kathleen Jenkins, daughter of a prominent, troubled family, who soon became pregnant.

Fearing he would be sued by Kathleen’s family, James arranged for Eugene to leave the country on a gold-prospecting expedition to Honduras. Before he left, however, Eugene secretly married Kathleen, apparently out of a sense of guilt or honor, a sense which did not extend to attempting to be husband or father. He saw Kathleen and his son only once more before the boy was eleven. The trip to Honduras gave Eugene a taste for adventure and over the next two years he made at least three more voyages as a sailor, attaining on his last the rating “able bodied”.

Although Eugene never lived with Kathleen, the marriage had an important consequence beside the birth of Eugene junior. Late in 1911, Kathleen filed for divorce asking for neither support nor alimony. The petition seemed to bring home to Eugene the reality of the marriage and touched the enormous guilt he carried for his mother’s addiction. His guilt led him to procure from several druggists enough of the opiate vernal to kill himself.
In a Fulton street flophouse where he was staying, he went to his room, hooked to the doors, and injected the lot. By chance a friend found him several hours later and, unable to rouse him, got help. The proprietor, afraid of having a death on the premises, called for a cab. Eugene was taken to Bellevue Hospital where his stomach was pumped and he was held several days for observation.

The psycho analyst Erik Erikson once wrote that certain wayward young people need to “touch rock-bottom” before they can begin to find themselves. The nearly successful suicide attempt had such an effect on Eugene. He made a partial détente with his father (who had thanklessly supported Eugene since he left Princeton), and got a job writing features and occasional reportage for a New London newspaper (his father secretly underwrote his salary).

He also fell romantically in love with a local girl whom he tried to educate, by foisting on her his favorite authors: Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Wilde, Whitman, Swinburne, Baudelaire, Dowson and the like. He would have other such romantic affairs over the next five years, each time begging his beloved to marry him, addressing letters to “own little wife” whether or not she would entertain his proposals.
Meanwhile Eugene O’Neill developed tuberculosis. The case was diagnosed in November 1912 and he entered a sanatorium where he co-operated fully with his treatment and was discharged the following June. While in the sanatorium he began thinking about writing plays. Within a year he had finished at least ten, one of them *Bound East for Cardiff*, a play still frequently revived. He persuaded his father to send him to Harvard where he attended George Pierce Baker’s play-writing course. From Baker he learnt to write detailed scenarios before beginning composition and to work methodically. He intended to take a second year with Baker, but some dispute led his father to cancel the plan.

Eugene returned to New York where he lived on a dollar a day from his father and whatever he could beg from drinking friends and earn a few day’s work on the docks. When he was sober he wrote. Once again he was living rough, hanging out with artists, philosophers, journalists and radicals. In six years at least five close friends died, three by suicide. In 1916, a friend introduced him to people who had begun an anti-commercial theatre group the previous summer, The Provincetown players.

O’Neill became intimate with the journalists John Reed and Louise Bryant, members of the group who were living together and would soon marry. O’Neill had met them the previous winter and during the summer he and Bryant became lovers. The affair continued off and on for over a year, before and after Bryant married Reed.
On 28th July 1916, the first performance of an O’Neill play took place. Bound East for Cardiff” was produced by the players in a makeshift theatre on the end of pier in Provincetown. For the next ten years O’ Neill worked with the players in their several forms; they would produce several of his best known early plays including *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*.

In fall, when the players and O’ Neill returned to New York, “Cardiff” opened the groups’ first New York bill in Greenwich Village. Over the next two seasons the players produced several more O’ Neill plays, including “Before Breakfast”, “In The Zone”, and “The Long Voyage Home”. Reed and Bryant went to Russia to witness the revolution, which ended her affair with O’ Neill.

Late in 1917, Eugene met Agnes Boulton and two months later, the two eloped to Provincetown where they married on 12th April. As a wedding gift, James O’ Neill bought for Eugene and Agnes a former life-saving station near the outer tip of Cape Cod, elegantly remodeled by Mabel Dodge. The couple used it as a summer home for the next several years. On 13th October 1919 there son Shane was born. Shortly after came the premier of “Beyond The Horizon”. Then his father died.
James’ death changed everything among the O’ Neills. After his father stopped touring, Jamie always lived near his parents in a different hotel, drinking and carrying on with women at night but spending an hour or two with his mother most mornings. If James was present Jamie would irritate and provoke his father, drink James’ whiskey, and win his mother’s approval for small victories over the family tyrant.

After he married, Eugene grew particularly close to his father, tended to side with him in quarrels, and was uncomfortable with his mother. Ella, for her part, never got over feeling guilty toward Eugene, partly for being unable to care for him in his childhood, partly for flaming him for her affliction, and partly because simply seeing him reminded her of the addiction which she had escaped in 1914 and hated to remember.

With James dead, Ella and Jamie began spending much of everyday with each other. For the first time since adolescence, simply because Ella asked him to, Jamie stopped drinking. He developed a successful system for betting on horses, and he and his mother often went to watch them run.

Ella would take her bath in the late morning after she and Jamie finish having breakfast in the hotel room, then would dress up. While her bath water drained, Jamie would go to the tub and would enjoy the bliss of odor of his mother's. He seemed happy and contended for the first time in his life,
having his mother to himself. He became her secretary as she tried to straighten out James' complicated real estate and her other holdings, writing lawyers, brokers and agents and the like.

Jamie and Ella went to Los Angeles where a property in Glendale had become valuable. While they arranged to sell it, Ella had a stroke caused by a brain tumor. All Jamie's reformation was instant undone. He again started drinking heavily. Jamie tried to persuade his mother to give him the most valuable property in estate rather than sharing it with Eugene. Ella resisted the pressure.

An old friend who was present during Ella's last days and who witnessed her will, described all the sordid events in a letter which was posted on to Eugene. Under any circumstances Eugene's mourning for his mother would have been difficult. On both sides their relations had always been overburdened with irrational guilt. Although in part, Eugene adored his mother he also feared and mistrusted her, and on the whole, negative feelings outweighed the positive. The extremes of his feelings about her are evident in portraits in many plays of women who are mad, incapable of growing to adulthood, destructive to their husbands or seductive with their children.

Eugene's attraction to his mother and his fear of her are also evident in the extremes of romantic passion he attached to his many love affairs and his ideals for marriage. Troubles in his marriage to Agnes that emerged after his father died led him to consult a psychoanalyst in the fall of 1921. When word
came that Ella was dying in California, he returned to the analyst. For the next several years he would consult several psychiatrists to try to resolve the depression that engulfed him.

Eugene gradually realized that Jamie had tried to cheat him out of his share of the estate, he increasingly avoided his brother. Jamie now told everyone he wanted to drink himself to death, and often provoked his friends to rage.

Sixteen months after his mother died, he fell into an alcoholic psychosis and was taken to a sanatorium. His once athletic body was bloated, his hair was white, and he told people that he was impotent. In the sanatorium he found ways to have liquor brought in and continued to drink. He suffered a stroke in September 1923 and lingered until 8 November when he died, aged forty-five. In the last year Jamie lived, Eugene saw him only once; he refused to see him in the sanatorium, and later refused to go to the funeral or have anything to do with burial arrangements.

After Jamie died, Eugene reverted to drinking so heavily that it affected his writing, something he had seldom done since he married Agnes. When sober, he tried to be writing constantly, since he could isolate himself from the world while writing, but his work in these circumstances was erratic.” *Desire Under The Elms*, written just after Jamie died, was probably his most successful plays from the mid-1920's. Drinking heavily through 1924-25, O’Neill began to feel he must stop drinking or give up writing and die and made
several attempts to stop. Nevertheless, he was drinking heavily in May 1925 when his daughter Oona was born. He spoke several times to psychiatrists and other doctors about his drinking. His melancholia deepened and in early 1926 he saw an analyst frequently over about six weeks and called the experience "My Analysis".

From this point on, except for several isolated episodes, O’Neill drank little or nothing. The psychotherapy was probably too brief to have much effect in itself, but it gave form to O’Neill's own efforts at self analysis. Stuck in his mourning, mostly denying his losses, and when accepting them, so overwhelmed that he soon reverted to denial, O’Neill creates characters like Eben Cobot in” Desire Under The Elms” and Nina leads of Strange Interlude who are overwhelmed by their losses but have so little insight that they can neither go back nor move ahead. Although progress was slow and a long time coming, writing of his own past and his own psychic processes eventually brought the playwright insight.

Together with other changes he was making in his life decisively affected his troubled marriage. He withdrew further from Agnes, who continued to drink and complained that he had become boring. In the summer of 1926 O’Neill met the actress Carlotta Monterey and sometime later began an affair with her. He and Agnes were living in Bermuda at that time, and had just begun to renovate and early eighteenth-century house.
In the winter of 1927, with the greatest ambivalence and guilt, he left Agnes, and in March 1928, eloped with Carlotta to the south of France where he remained until 1931. Bitter divorce negotiations estranged him from his children Shane and Oona, although he remained on good terms with his first son, Eugene Jr., who would become a classics scholar. While his father and Carlotta lived in France, Eugene Jr. Studied classics at Yale where he would later teach. The new marriage and Eugene Jr's early success were important satisfactions to O’Neill in a very troubled time.

While at Princeton, O’Neill was greatly affected by Nietzsche, and over the years an impulse toward what might be called scientific mysticism had become increasingly prominent. As he stopped drinking, his plays show him turning increasingly toward a view of the world influenced by Nietzsche, psychoanalysis and the ancient Greeks. He read about the pre Pythagorean philosophies and ancient cultures and mythologies.

Plays of the late twenties like “Strange Interlude”, “Lazarus Laughed”, and “Dynamo” reflected these interests and simultaneously, O’Neill struggled with his mourning. The Lazarus he imagines has survived death but lost his humanity, which the play seems to see defined by the dread of death. “Interlude” is about the irresolvable mourning of Nina Leeds and Charlie Marsden for parents who died while Charlie and Nina were children. The unresolvable mourning for lost parents inhibits all their relations with the living, and makes every subsequent loss more unbearable.
The title “Strange Interlude” arises from a reflection by Nina Leeds that life is merely an interlude in the grand electrical display of God and the father. Her meditations lead her to contrast God the Father with God the Mother who invokes the ancient earth god Geia. The male “modern science God” of “Interlude” is superseded in the next play “Dynamo”, by a modern female god of the hydro-electric dynamo, worshipped by Reuben Light as his dead mother.

In such a state of mind in 1929, O’Neill began another play “Mourning becomes Electra”, which he finished in 1931. In writing the very end of “Mourning becomes Electra”, O’Neill was able for the first time to imagine a character, Lavinia Memmon, who could accept the permanence of her losses and could imagine surviving. At the end she closed herself in the old house, to remain there until she could forgive them and herself. While writing this play O’Neill’s state of mind was changed. Shortly, after he finished it, he wrote the nostalgic comedy “Ah, Wilderness!”.

The experiment to move away from the tragic sense of life led O’Neill to a failed play “Days without End” (1934). On doctor’s orders he stopped writing for six months, and turned back to the tragic sense of life which was apparently healthier for him. When he resumed writing, he began a vast epic of immigrant Irish life in America that he called “A Tale of Possessors, Self- Dispossessed”, often called the”cycle”. He projected as many as eleven plays in the epic which would begin in the mid-eighteen century and carry on to
1931. Struggling with depression and various illnesses, including nearly fatal complications of appendicitis in 1937, O’neill worked on the “Cycle” between 1935 and 1939. In November 1936 not long after he began this work he was awarded the Noble Prize. The medal had to be brought to his hospital bed. Later O’neill referred to the episode as a crack up. For six months or so he could work very little. Of the “Cycle “ material, he finished only one play to the point of being performable, “ A Touch of the Poet”, which he drafted in 1935-36 and revised in 1942. Most other material from the “cycle” was destroyed, but a draft of “More Stately Mansions” survived and has been published. In “Mansions” it seems that he dwells on his relations with and fantasies of his mother whom he represents as Deborah Harford; he represents himself as her son, Simon. The exploration of the relationship goes so deep into a world of explicit Oedipal fantasies, which O’neill would never have allowed to become public. It appears to be the material of self-analysis, necessary to the working of his old relationships with his parents and brother, and accessible as drama in the age of Freud. On 5th June 1939, O’neill laid the “cycle” aside and wrote about detailed scenarios for two plays that had recently come to him, “The Iceman Cometh” and “Long Day’s Journey into Night”. In these plays all the work of self-analysis and mourning would finally be realized. “The Iceman Cometh” is set in 1912 and takes place in a waterfront saloon. It brings together various people and places of the playwrights’ youth. Jimmy Tomorrow is a representation of the friend who saved O’neill’s life when he tried to kill himself, and who himself committed suicide the next year. The boy Parritt is a version of O’neill’s youthful self, full of guilt, driven by a compulsion to find truth. Parritt’s alter-ego in the play, the salesman, Hickey, represents aspects of Jamie. Between they enact versions of O’neill’s family crimes, guilt and atonement. Through these
identifications with these and other characters, O’neill consolidates and develops the fragments of insight he has accumulated and goes much further than before in understanding his youthful self. Through private and public means O’neill creates tragedy far greater than anything he has written this far. He arranges iceman around the insight of Parritt who acknowledges the hatred of his mother and sentences himself to death. The guilt of Hickey causes him succumbing to madness and his hatred of his wife leads to kill her.

In a certain sense, allowing for condensations and distortion of the unconscious and the poetic mind, the fates of Parritt and Hickey reflect O’neill's understanding of the reactions of himself and Jamie to their mother's life and death. This understanding allows O’neill to go beyond the distorted and unconscious to write his next play in a style and manner that, compared to Iceman, seems in its private meanings clear and undisguised. Writing Iceman brought O’neill to see more clearly than he could have seen before how deeply rooted were the self-destructive impulses that had driven him since 1902. Expressing them now dramatically in the torment of Parritt and Hickey somehow made it possible for O’neill to go even farther, to write with seeming simplicity and directness about his dead and his relations with them. The result was a work so private and personal that for the remaining thirteen years of his life, he re-iterated legal safeguards which he intended to prevent the play from ever being performed and being published untill 25 years after his death.

Whatever O’neill's feeling in the matter, once he died control passed from his hands. He had made Carlotta as the executive of his estate and she had the power to override O’neill's blocks on publication. She arranged for the play to be performed in stockholm where it opened in Sweedish on 2nd Feb 1956. The
first performance in English was in Boston. In the light of O’Neill's lifelong protection of his privacy, it is yet another irony that Long Days Journey Into Night has become one of the celebrated and often performed of 20th century tragedies. Long Days Journey represents the O’Neill's family, called tyrone in the play, on an imagined day in August 1912 when the younger son (called Edmund) discovers that he has tuberculosis and when his mother, Mary, resumes taking morphine after being free of her addiction for sometime. O’Neill seeks a neutral point of view from which to tell the story, but it is not a detached neutrality; like an analyst, and like many a playwright, he seeks to be emphatically neutral. He requires neutrality if he is to escape the habits of the past from his re-immersion in his family. From his neutral standpoint he presents a family in which there is no possibility of neutrality but only of guilt and innocence. Every word spoken in the play accuses or defends in the question of who caused mama's addiction.

The form and substance of the question preclude the tyrones from neutrality. Most audiences find themselves compelled to participate silently in the accusations and defenses, and find it as hard as the tyrones to be neutral. For the common audience it is obvious to question whether O’Neill reaches the deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for all the four haunted thrones that he says he did in the dedication to Carlotta. Apart from his own testimony there is indirect evidence of the forgiveness in the plays O’Neill wrote after *Long Days Journey in to Night. A Moon for the Misbegotten* and Hughie. These are plays of reconciliation written from a sense of life as tragic as ever. O’Neill finally learns how to return to life after writing about death. As before in the past two
decades O’Neill subject is mourning, but in both plays there is a hope that one may recover from grief and return to life somehow enlarged and more coherent as a result of the experience. In Hughie, in the space of an hour, O’neill shows the gambler eerie smith mourning his friend Hughie and passing beyond mourning and tragedy to that strange sort of drama written after a lifetime immersion in tragedy by Sophocles in Oedipus at Colons and by shakespeare in the winter stale and the tempest. Few people who have seen a good performance in Hughie can doubt that erie has known his friend mourned him and has earned his return to life and his new friend.

In *A Moon For The Misbegotten*, 1943, Josie Hogan lets herself fall in love with Jim Tyrone, who has inherited his father's farm and whose mother has just died. Here O’Neill recapitulates from Jamie's point of view the whole sordid story of his behaviour at the time when his mother died and afterwards. By doing so, he, like Josie can learn something about who Jamie really was. After two decades he lets himself understand at last why Jamie had to betray his brother and drink himself to death. Knowing Jamie at last, at last he can mourn him, both in life and in the play in the guise of Josie as well. He and Josie find that Jim could neither love nor tolerate being loved and so hating himself he could stand to live no longer. Josie's act of knowing and loving Jim, and of being able to mourn her lost image of him, effects a noteworthy change. At the end she is more comfortable with herself than before and has abandoned much of her former dependency on her father. This was to be the last play O’Neill would finish.

After the breakdown of 1937, the playwright's health gradually declined. A rare nameless hereditary gradually destroyed Purkinje's cells in his cerebral
cortex, large neurons which control fine motor co-ordination causing the tremor he always had to worsen, so that much of the time he could not feed himself, or light a cigarette, or write or walk well or even speak clearly enough to be understood. The condition, however, did not in the least affect his thinking. It is yet another of his life’s ironies that he spent his last decade, an alert witness to his own disintegration. The marriage with Carlotta, happy much of the time and organized almost entirely around maintaining the conditions he needed to write, began to disintegrate when he could write no longer. Carlotta was herself ill much of the time. There were dreadful quarrels and separations. O’Neill died in a Boston hotel room on 27 November 1953. Shortly before he died, he said to Carlotta, “God damn it, I knew it! Born in a hotel room and dying in a hotel room.”

To throw light on O’Neill’s works, he was, however, by no means content with either poetic or tragic melodrama. Passionately dissatisfied and restlessly seeking, he at times gave way to a sort of strindbergien nihilism and at others sought answers to his questions in the doctrines of the political revolutionists or in those of the newly fashionable Freidians. It is easy to see in successive plays the pre dominant influence of one doctrine or another. Different (1920), though theatrically very effective is unmistakably a fable for Freidians. All 80’s Chillum Got Wings (1924) was, on the surface at least, a sociological problem play. On the other hand, The Emperor Jones (1920) was mystical rather than sociological or scientific and two others, Beyond The Horizon (1920) and Anna Christe (1921), were given their first production in commercial theatres rather than at Provincetown only, because their method was that of straightforward realism, far less baffling to the general public than the poetry, the
mysticism and the preaching to some extent which are the characteristics of his other works.

During this period, O’Neill maybe said to have had styles rather than a style and philosophies rather than a philosophy. He was endeavoring with only partial success adopt to his own uses, available formulas provided by current intellectual movements and he probably did not himself know how unsatisfactory for him each of them was. *The Hairy Ape* produced in 1922 and the next to the last of his plays to have its premier at the Provincetown playhouse is some respects the most interesting because it is the one which most succeeds in fusing discordant elements into a new whole.

*The Early Plays.*

His first two volumes contained one act plays of life in New York or upon the sea. *Thirst* was crude in most of his elements, but any careful reader might have seen in it the promise of a surprising and vigorous talent. *The Moon of the Caribbean* included six brief plays about sailors in southern waters, reveling in their uncouth utterances and striking to the depths of their wayward passions, *Beyond the Horizon (1920)*, a full length play which had a long run in Broadway Theatres, first brought O’Neill to anything like popular attention. It is concerned with the life of two brothers, one of whom, Robert Mayo gives up his dream of exploring the world beyond the horizon which bounds his father’s farm, and the other of whom, Andrew Mayo, leaves the farm where he naturally belongs to embrace the sea-career which had been planned for Robert. The maladjustments incidental to these errors of judgment make up the tragedy of
the piece. The dialogue in many places is over-vivid and the action border on the melodrama at times, but the play as a whole has the supreme quality of being absorbing; the characters, whatever they say or do, are important. *Anna Christie* (1922) O’Neill’s next successful work followed the fortunes in New York of Chris Christopher son, a Scandinavian- American seaman, and his daughter Anna O’Neill here made use of experiences which he had along the water front and the relations between Chris and his unhappy daughter he developed with great understanding mangled with deep sympathy. *Different* took for its theme the abnormal psychology of a woman starved for love when Emma Crosby at forty-seven fell strangely in love with her worthless young nephew, Benny Rogers, she was called upon by her creator to act and speak in a way to strain the credulity of a theatrical audience; but that credulity is never snapped. Emma remains a pitiful figure through her squalid tragedy, and Benny takes his place as the first of O’Neill’s characters to speak with a perfect and terrible naturalness. *The Straw,* had for its setting a tuberculosis sanatorium such as O’Neill had known. In the love of two patients there Eileen Carmody and Stephen Murray, the playwright reached two regions of suffering and passion which made many persons in his audience uncomfortable – so unaccustomed was they to passages as thoroughgoing and uncompromising as these.

*The Expressionistic Plays*

With *The Emperor Jones* (1921) O’Neill strikes the direction of expressionistic technique. The play is expressionistic in form and spirit. In eight brief scenes the audience witnesses the swift disintegration of courage in the heart of Brutus Jones, a Negro who has made himself emperor of an island in West Indies. The nature has risen against him, and in unwanted haste he feels
with his revolver toward the borders of his empire, hoping on the other side of some woods to find means of escape to the United States. Throughout the play the torn-torn of the angry nature beats with a sullen and maddening regularity. Throughout the scenes Jones finds his fright increasing, until at last in a panic he is afflicted with visions of his own past and the past of his race, wastes his ultimate bullet upon a phantom which he sees under a tree only a few paces from the point he had originally left. He has walked in a circle and his fate now awaits him at the hands of his bitterest enemies, his own people. The technique of the play was new and surprising; the atmosphere was rich and terrible. A new chapter in the history of American drama was written in another and even more startling play in eight expressionistic scenes. *The Hairy Ape* (1922) is charged with criticism of modern society. Yank Smith, the vast brutal hero of the piece, is a stoker on an ocean liner. The audience sees him at his work, heaving like some unheard of beast and exhorting his mates to keep the pace that he has set them. It seems to him that he is at the centre of life. His effort makes the ship move; he belongs to the very surrounding, whereas the silly passengers upon deck do not. “everything else dat makes de world move, something makes it move. It can’t move without some pin else, see? Wen yuh get down to me, I’m at de bottom, get me! Dere ain’t nothing farther. I’m de end! I’m de start! I start some pin and de world moves!”

But through a series of circumstances he loses his confidence in his own importance on the ship and when New York is reached he sets out in a pathetic search for “the real thing”. Inspired by his contempt for society to join the industrial workers of the world, he finds upon going to their headquarters that they are not the revolutionaries he has thought them; they do not belong
either. He is thrown in jail, where he is christened the Hairy Ape by other prisoners. He is released, wanders about more and more lost in his mind, and finally lands at the zoo in front of the gorilla’s cage. At least he will be at home here - he and the animal can “belong” together. He forces his way into the cage; the gorilla seizes him and crushes him to death; he ends a mystified failure. The world means nothing. O’Neill was severely criticized by the contemporary press, not only for the ideas in *The Hairy Ape* but for the violent language in which they had been expressed. But the play had its effect; for those spectators without bias, it was evident that a great writer was coming to his maturity; it was certain that the native drama would not be quiet the same again. In two later plays, O’Neill has explored still further fields, furnishing additional data which his view of life may be defined. *All God’s Chillum got Wings* is concerned with the theme of miscegenation, or marriage between two persons of different race. A white woman rejected by her brutal white lover marries a Negro whom she has known since childhood. Her love for him, which flourishes under the ostracism the act brings upon her; is curiously mingled with a fear, only half understood within her own mind. Actually, a superior man, he is ambitious to become a lawyer, but fails at her several examinations. She is both happy and unhappy over these failures, which progressively wreck him; until after the final one both husband and wife are reduced to a stage of hysteria bordering on madness, and the play ends in frustration! 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 too 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.

His Dramatic Experiments

Beginning with The Great God Brown in 1925 O’Neill went through a period of experimentation in dramatic techniques. In his case it was more than experimentation; it was exploration, and the motive was a desire to external dramatic form so that more could be said in it than was being said in the conventional play. There is always an intellectual and moral urge behind O’Neill’s devices, and that is why they are interesting. The Great God Brown was distinguished by the use of masks for all of the leading characters. They were put on and taken off at will, and they changed as the play proceeded. They represented fear or repression in their wearers and either conscious or unconscious deception. The hero, William A Brown wears no mask at first because he is a simple, frank, athletic youth with no need of one; but he assumes one as his life becomes complicated with those of Dion Anthony and his wife Margaret Dion, a cynical and brilliant fellow has worn a mask from the beginning; and the one worn by Margaret increases in strangeness with her husband’s nature. There is only one person in the play, Cybel, who can see behind the masks; so it is she in whom the vision of the playwright resides, and it is she alone, who approaches greatness.

Lazarus Laughed lyrical in form

Lazarus Laughed (1926) was an experiment for O’Neill in that it was lyrical in its form; it is a series of choruses rather than a drama of the familiar
sort and the subject of these choruses is a certain mysticism concerning death. Lazarus laughs upon being raised from the dead because the experiment has taught him that there is no death: the self forgotten, there is neither end nor beginning and hence there is no need to fear death. His laughter, growing contagious, spreads even to the emperor Caligula- who, however, because his power depends upon man’s fear of the death, he can inflict upon them, has has Lazarus killed.

Strange Interlude- Asides and Soliloquies

The most famous of O’Neill’s experiments is Strange Interlude (1927) which has been one of the most successful of modern plays. Its device is the “asides “or the monologue in which an actor, telling to himself, distinguishes for the audience between what he says and what he thinks- or what he would say if he were being candid. Strange Interlude is chiefly the story of Nina Leeds, who accepts her old suitor Charlie Marsden only after a hysterical life the source of which is her shock upon hearing of her first lover Gordon’s death in France. It is a long and involved story, but the most remarkable thing about it is still the method of its interior dialogue; the exclamatory monologues, spoken often at great speed, which only the audience hears.

Plays with a Religious Theme.

Dynamo was interesting in 1928 because it showed O’Neill moving in the direction of the religious theme. Reuben Light, son of the Reverend repudiates his father’s God for the God of Electricity and is rarefied by this new God after he has tried in his name to slay his love for Ada Fife. O’Neill took a still further step in Days without End (1933), whose hero John, struggles against
his formal self until when the struggle seems hopeless. H wins it at last before the cross. O’Neill’s silence after the play might seem to indicate that he found in religion a way of quieting the loud questions which hitherto had disturbed him, and for which he had written plays in a vain attempt to answer. A year before, however, he had written in *Ah, Wilderness!*, his only free hearted comedy, dealing affectionately with memories of high school days and puppy love.

*Mourning becomes Electra - A play based on Greek Trilogy*

In 1931, he had produced his matures drama *Mourning Becomes Electra*. It is a trilogy translating the Greek story of Agamemnon’s family into 19th century American terms; and it is perhaps 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 Brant. In the second play “The Hunted”, his daughter Lavinia and son Orin avenge him by killing Brant and driving Christine to commit suicide. In the third play “The Haunted”, Lavinia and Orin return from the tour of the world to settle down and marry two old friends of the neighborhood, but they cannot do so because the past thrusts itself into their lives and warps them. Orin commits suicide and Lavinia is left alone in the great house to die when time comes. This is clearly the story of Agamemnon, Clytemenestra, Electra and Orestes, with Brant taking the part of Aegis thus. But the handling is modern, American and O’Neill psychology is its equivalent for 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 an interpretation. Its action in itself is simple and ordered; its outline is large, its humanity is impressive. O’Neill, experimenting with every known device had hit upon the best of them all, he had imitated a classic

*The Autobiographical Elements in O’Neill’s Plays*

Though drama is the least subjective of literary forms, O’Neill based many of his later plays on his own personal experiences or reminiscence. Henry Raleigh points out that in this respect O’Neill was not alone and that many great writings of the 19th and 20th centuries have been of autobiographical nature. Most of the novels of the 19th century were based on the personal experiences of the writer and the characters were drawn from people in real life. Though there is no photographic representation of life in the autobiographical novels and plays, the personal experiences of the novelist provide the raw material for their imaginative writings. *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* is directly autobiographical, but is blonde with fact and fiction. O’Neill told Clark that he had decided to make the events of his own life the subject matter of at least some of his plays. There are a number of discrepancies between the biographical facts of the family of O’Neill and the details given in *Long Days Journey in to Night*. O’Neill telescoped events, suppressed some facts, distorted some others, invented some more and transferred some others. He seemed to have both simplified and heightened characters. In *Long Days Journey in to Night*, O’Neill’s parents, his brother and his own formal 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 are near projections of his own self they are not allowed to become great powerful figures. It is, however, impossible to forget that O’Neill himself is speaking
through them. It is largeness of tragic feeling that constitutes their magnitude. The central appeal of a work of art does not depend necessarily on the autobiographical elements. Even the most frankly autobiographical drama must not be approached as a record of the O’Neill family, what is most important of the play is not the autobiographical but the tragic element. The acute sense of human contradictions and divisions expressed in this play is the final clue to O’Neill’s course as a dramatist.

O’Neill’s own remarks on his plays containing autobiographical material deserve quotation. These remarks are part of his conversations with Barret H Clark. O’Neill once told Clark;

All the most dramatic episodes of my life I have so far kept out of my plays, and most of the things I have seen happened to other people. I have 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. There will be nine separate plays to be acted on nine successive nights; together they form a sort of a dramatic autobiography. Something in the style of “War and Peace” or “Jean-Christophe”. O’Neill was disappointed, when, in 1926, he read the biographical sketch that opened the first version of Clark’s book on him. He wrote to Clark “When all is said and done- and this is naturally no conceivable fault of yours- the result of this first part is legend. It isn’t really true. It isn’t I . and the truth would make a much more interesting- and incredible!- legend. That is what makes
me melancholy. But I see no hope for this except some day to
shame the devil myself if I ever muster the requisite interest-
and nerve- simultaneously![1947:20]

Raleigh has examined in detail the discrepancies between the
biographical fact of the O’Neill family and the details given in Long Days
Journey in to Night. His careful examination leads him to the following
conclusion concerning the autobiographical nature of O’Neil’s play Long Days
Journey “As far as I can tell at this point, then, O’Neill in writing this play
telescoped events, suppressed some facts, distorted some others, invented some
more and transferred some others. He seemed to have both simplified and
heightened characters, Jamie perhaps excepted. He presented Jamie as he is or
was, selected one side of himself and one side of his father and presented them
in a rather exaggerated fashion. He made his mother shadows and insubstantial,
as was only fighting for someone existing in the twilight zone of morpheme
stupor. He picked the year 1912, when his father’s career ended and his own
began or was at least determined upon. Finally he did not ‘blame’ anybody,
neither God. Nor history, nor man and thus the play is in a good sense, morally
relativistic and thus in the play nothing is to blame except everybody”.

In Long Days Journey in to Night, we get even closer to his own
most personal and most painful experience. Here is parents, his brother, and his
own former self are the prototypes of the four main characters, whose
complicated relationships are depicted in a fanatical passion for truth. No
wonder that O’Neill hesitated before he made these plans known to the public
and even wished Long Days Journey in to Night. to remain unpublished until
twenty five years after his death.
There is another sense in which O’Neill can be described as an autobiographical dramatist. Many of his characters reveal his own thoughts and experiences and give expression to his views and ideas. The fact that some of his characters like Yank, Orin, Hickey and Chris Christopherson are O’Neill’s own mouthpiece. This fact prevents them from being promethean figures but on this account they have a tragic dignity of their own. It is impossible to forget that O’Neill himself is speaking through them. It is his largeness of tragic feeling that constitutes their magnitude. The chief source of tragedy in O’Neill’s plays lies in the fact that his characters suffer from a sense of guilt because the memory of their past misdeeds continues to haunt them forever. O’Neill’s characters are haunted by their sins, mistakes, wrongdoings, betrayals. This sense of guilt binds them forever to the terrible things they have done or have not done. It is a fact of human life that it is often more harrowing to relive by memory becomes a kind of avenging fate or a force that drives the characters back on themselves. The play itself cannot end until the agony is complete and total. The sense of having been betrayed by life runs through virtually all the plays.

Though O’Neill believed that man’s life on earth could be improved and made better by means of well directed efforts, the source of tragic vision was rooted in his faith that unhappiness is inherent in existence. Even if all social maladjustments are removed, men would not be able to attain perfect happiness.

From the point of view of characterization, the heroes and villains of O’Neill’s’ plays are very much like those of melodrama. The male protagonist, or rather that male character who has the sympathy of the author is the sympathy
of the author is the same in every play. He is always a sensitive soul with large, dark eyes and a face harrowed by lines of internal struggle. The other male type, the antagonist, is usually a practical man with small blue eyes. In *The Great God Brown* the opposition between the two types is clearly stated. William Brown is first introduced to us as a handsome, tall and athletic boy. He is blue eyed with a likable smile and a frank good humored face. His manner has the easy self assurance of a normal intelligence. A reader who is unfamiliar with O’Neill might draw the conclusion that Brown is the hero of the piece but the same reader will steadily recognize the above description as typical of the O’Neill’s villain. Consider now the hero of the play, Dion Anthony. He is about the same height as young Brown but lean and wiry and continually in restless, nervous movement. His face is masked. The mask is a fixed forcing of his own face- dark, spiritual, poetic, passionately super sensitive, helplessly unprotected, religious faith in life. Thus, there is paradox in O’Neill; the lean, dark, sensitive-to be the hero, and the thick set, fair, normal- to be the villain.

One more noticeable aspect of O’Neill’s play is that almost all the female characters are sexually abnormal. There is rarely any character who is not either a prostitute or a wanton. The female character in *Thirst*, the heroine in *The Web*, the female character in *The Long Voyage Home*, all the women in *Moon Of the Caribbees*, both the female characters in *Anna Christe*, Cybel in *The Great God Brown*, Pomperia in *Lazarus Laughed*- all are prostitutes. Apart from these mentioned there are also a number of wantons. In this class would be included Ada and Mrs. Fife in *Dynamo*, the only character to appear on the stage in *Before Breakfast*, the heroine in *All God’s Chillum got Wings*, the
O’Neill’s plays, in a certain sense are full of violent deeds and insane behavior of his characters. Insanity is to be found in most of his plays and in many cases the entire structure of the play is based on some obsessions of one of the characters. The method of evoking an emotional response from the audience by depicting insanity, death and suicide is characteristic of O’Neill’s plays just as it is the characteristic of the melodrama in general. O’Neill uses all the available devices of a melodrama to reproduce the effect which he cannot do by means of a normal artistic manner. It is by the use of abnormal and insane characters, violent death and suicide that O’Neill evokes emotional response from his audience. The consumption of enormous quantity of alcohol by his heroes is one of the devices used by O’Neill to evoke emotional response from his audience. A man who is drunk is not expected to behave naturally or rationally. It is a device which O’Neill uses for much of the same purposes as the more radical innovation to reveal the conflicts which tear his characters apart and frustrate their potentialities as complete human beings.

O’Neill occupies a high place among the dramatists of the twentieth century not because of the large number of his plays but because of the incessant experiments that he made in the field of dramatic art. Realism, expressionism, neutralism, symbolism, fantasy- there is hardly any kind of dramatic writing in which he did not experiment. The one important point to
keep in mind about O’Neill’s experiments is dramatic art is that these experiments were inspired by a serious purpose- to find an idiom in which to express the human tragic. In all his major works O’Neill traced the course of a modern dramatist in search of an aesthetic and spiritual centre. His plays embodied the ideas and conflicts of the first half of the twentieth century. He did not find any comforting assurances in the world, but he had the integrity to acknowledge his failure and persistence to dramatize it with much penetration into human nature. He succeeded in bringing new features in the field of dramatic writing and his experiments made him a notable figure not only in the American theatre but also a dramatist of international importance.