CHAPTER III

BEYOND THE HORIZON

As it is true with the composition of literature of any nation that contemporary socio-political and cultural situations largely determine its course and development, it is true with the American literature. Even a superficial review of the American literature would convince that the contemporary social, cultural and economic scene which is one of great complexity and diversity is fully reflected in the literature of the age. It is the age characterized by the revolts and reversals so that the common man and his aspiration find increasing expression in literature. With the passing of time this complexity intricacy continues to increase owing to various causes, which include influences from the other side of the Atlantic. Chief among such influences are the teachings of the new psychology of Freud, Jung and Bergson and teachings of Karl Marx and his followers. Rapid industrialization and urbanization bring with them their own problems and difficulties that color the literature of the new century. The anxiety, boredom, the sense of remorse and loneliness and neurosis, caused by these developments find their own place in literature. The two world wars proved to be fatal experiences for the Americans and created a kind of vacuum for them. There was loss of faith in traditional values and the result was frustration and pessimism.
There was rapid industrialization in the country leading to a change in the occupational life of the people. There was less of leisure and practically no time for the enjoyment of the pleasures of family life. Industrialization also means urbanization, dirty and crowded city slums, environmental pollution and ugliness of man’s physical surroundings. There was a corresponding increase in tension and stress. New areas of conflict soon emerged as all-important factors in the social life of the nation. These conflicts influenced political and economic life and found place in literature. Although the more thoroughly naturalistic work was slow in becoming widely read in America, naturalism remained throughout the literature of the modern age and influential force. It gave rise to much vulgarity and obscenity as the writers tended to concentrate more and more on the seamy side of life. They believed in apparent human life as a whole and in expressing the whole of it, even at the cost of traditional moral and social values.

Beyond The Horizon is the first major play by Eugene O’Neill. It is his first performance in a mainstream theatre. Written at the age of 23, O’Neill had to wait for its performance till 1929 as New York was struggling in the midst of the epidemic of Influenza. The audience accepted this play as a serious and absorbing play and reviewers admired it. The play won O’Neill first of the four Pulitzers Prizes. The production ran 144 performances and made O’Neill independent of his father’s purse-strings. James O’Neill the author’s father, a celebrated heroic actor whose career went back more than fifty years, attended the performance and was seen to leave the theatre wiping tears of pride from his cheeks. As with several events in the author’s life, there was heavy irony in the
occasion. Within a month James O’Neill suffered a stroke and while he was recovering he was diagnosed with intestinal cancer. From March to August 1920 Eugene grieved deeply while he watched his father die slowly and painfully spending many hours and days t his father’s bedside while his father lay unconscious. Apart from his family Eugene also came across many tragic experiences in his personal life.

O’Neill explained the origin of the play in a printed statement, in which he wrote:

I think the real life experience from which the idea of Beyond the Horizon sprang was this: On the British tramp steamer on which I made a voyage as an ordinary seaman Buenos Aires to New York, there was a Norwegian A.B, and we became quite good friends. The great sorrow and mistake of his life, he used to grumble, was that as a boy he had a small paternal farm to run away to sea. He had been at sea twenty years, and had never gone home, once in that time, yet he cursed the sea and the life it had left him-affectionately. He loved to hold forth on what a fool he had been too; leave the farm. There was the life for you……at exactly the right moment……he turned up in my memory. I thought, ‘what if he had stayed on the farm, with his instincts? What would have happened? But I realized at once, he never would have stayed……it amused him to pretend that he craved the farm. He was too harmonious a creature of the God of Things as they are……and from that point I started to think of a more
intellectual, civilized type from the standpoint of the above mentioned God. It would have my Norwegian’s inborn craving for the sea’s unrest, only in him it would be conscious, intellectually diluted into a vague, intangible wanderlust. His powers of resistance, both moral and physical, would also probably be correspondingly watered. He would throw away his instinctive dream and accept the thralldom of the farm for why, for almost any nice little poetical craving- the romance of sex, say. (Conversation with O’Neill, 24)

‘*Beyond the Horizon*’ is the first play of O’Neill which was praised highly by the critics for its theme and technique. It is necessary to refer to the different aspects of the technique that make for the success of the play.

*Beyond the Horizon* is the first play of O’Neill in which he used a symbolic title with a telling effect. The title suggests that longed-for heaven which forever pursues, but is by the laws of logic eternally forbidden to reach. There is combustion of pity and irony in this title that is carried out consistently in the subject matter of the drama.

This play is notable for its setting which helps out in bringing out its theme. Arthur and Barbara Gelb point out:

In these earlier plays the conflict between human aspirations, whether “immortal longings” or romantic self delusion, and the forces which prevent their realization is suggested by the setting as by the action itself. In *Bound East for the Cardiff* it
is in the fog which surrounds the dying Yank, in *Moon of the Caribbees* in the distance between Smitty and his surroundings, and in *Beyond the Horizon* it is symbolized by the dark ring of hills which hems in the world of the farm, and the petty demands and frustrations that sap the life of Robert Mayo, and shut out the beauty and wonder of the sunset and the sea and freedom which lie beyond. All of these devices are successful, but in so far as they are “things,” physical elements in the setting, they seem to suggest that the inhibiting, limiting force lies somehow outside of the individual. (1962:18)

O’Neil often adopted the technique of depicting the contrast but in *Beyond the Horizon* has become obsessive and schematic. In the words of Henry Raleigh,

> Beyond the Horizon begins in happiness in a warm sunset in the spring; it ends in tragedy on a cold dawn in the fall; in between is the heat-and scenes of anger-of the summer. The individual scenes alternate, in precise order, between the indoors and outdoors. Most of the play takes place in the valley, but the surrounding hills are always being looked at and remarked on, and in one scene (II, 1) the action takes place on top of one of these hills. Though it is a farm play and is concerned with the land, the sea can be
seen from the top of this hill. The characters divide into those who are attached to the farm and those who travel by seeing to foreign lands, and the plot is propelled by the periodic returns of the travelers. The characters are arranged in schematic fashion; the two brothers opposite in characters one sensitive, sickly, idealistic (Robert Mayo), the other solid, simple, healthy (Andrew Mayo), the two older men: the one vigorous and irascible (James Mayo), the other vigorous and hearty (Captain Scott); the two older women: the one gentle and sensitive (Mrs. Mayo), the other peevish and durable (Mrs. Atkins). Or the contrast, instead of being pervasive and schematic as it is in *Beyond the Horizon*, is located in one central disparity that entails a series of correlative contrasts. (1979:112)

It is interesting to recall that O’Neil gave a fitting reply to his critics who criticized his techniques in the play. Writing to Barret H. Clark in March 1920, O’Neil expressed his opinion about the technique that he had adopted in this play.

You remember, when you read *Beyond the Horizon*, you marked out it being an interesting technical experiment.

Why is it, I wonder, that not one of other critic has given me credit for a deliberate departure in form in search of a greater flexibility? They have all accused me of bungling
through ignorance—whereas, if I had wanted to, I could have laid the whole play in the farm interior, and made it tight as a drum, a la Pinero, then, too, I should imagine the symbolism I intended to convey by the alternating scenes would be apparent even from a glance at the program. It rather irks my professional pride, you see, to be accused of ignorance of conventional everyday technique—I, a Baker alumnus! Professor Baker himself, whose opinion in matters of technique I value as much as any man’s... , has both read and seen Beyond and is delighted with and proud of it. He never mentioned my ‘clumsiness.’ Perhaps he saw it but appreciated the fact that it was intentional. Well, well, how I do go on! But I’ve longing to protest about this to someone ever since I read the criticism by really good critics who blamed my youthful inexperience—even for poor scenery and the interminable waits between the scenes!(1947:14)

Clark also defended O’Neill’s technique in the play in these words,

After all, there was stingingly novel in the division of act into two scenes, one indoors and one outdoors; it was a simple way of suggesting a tide-like rhythm in the lives of the characters.(1947:16)

The striking point about this play is that O’Neil has handled the theme realistically and he has proved that there is no antithesis between romantic material and realistic treatment. It is, however, undeniable that
what makes *Beyond the Horizon* a distinctive play is its flavor of romance. In the words of Louis Sheaffer:

> But what makes “*Beyond the Horizon*” still the best of his naturalistic plays is not its form, but its flavor of romance. In what it is akin to everything he has done. In his first play he put his own longings for adventure, which lead him to South Africa and South America which took him into the hold of a streamer and the life “on the beach.” When Robert Mayo says, “Supposing I was to tell you that it’s just Beauty that’s calling me, the beauty of the far off and unknown,” it is O’Neil himself speaking.(1973:33)

The dialogues in between *Beyond the Horizon* are adequate and appropriate, if not particularly effective or powerful. In this play the happenings are of compelling interest and the point of view of every character has been concisely and clearly set forth in terms of drama. The characters talk like real people and yet the process of selection has been so shrewd that there is none of the deadening dullness of the merely literal and photographic.

As we see it in the dialogue between Andrew and Robert in Act I Scene I:

> ANDREW: Oh, of course I know you are gong to learn all about navigation and all about a ship, so’s you can be an officer. That’s natural too. There’s fair play in it, I expect, that when you consider you’ve got a home an grub thrown
in: an dif you’re set on traveling you can go anywhere you’re mind to without paying a fare.

ROBERT: (with a smile that is half sad) it’s more than that Andy.

ANDREW: Sure it is. There’s always a chance of a good thing coming your way in some of those foreign ports or the other. I’ve heard there are great oppourtunites for a young fellow with his eyes open in some of those new countries that are being just opened up. (jovially) I’ll bet that’s what you’ve been turning over in your mind under all your quietness! (He slaps his brother on the back with a laugh) Well’ if you get to be a millionaire all of a sudden, call round once a while I’ll pass the plate to you. We could use a lot of money right here in the farm without hurting it any.

ROBERT: (forced to laugh) I’ve never considered the practical side of it Andy.

ANDREW: well you ought to. (85)
Taking into consideration the different elements of O’Neil’s technique in *Beyond the Horizon* we can agree with this estimate Dorris Alexander:

> Despite a certain clumsiness and confusion involved in it’s too luxurious multiplicity of scenes, the play has greatness in it and marks O’Neil as one of our foremost playwrights, as one of the most special men to be both gifted a tempted to write for the theatres in America. In it strength, its fidelity, its color, its irony, and its politeness it recalls nothing so much as one of the Wessex tails of Thomas Hardy. (1992:44)

There is no doubt that *Beyond the Horizon* is the first full length tragic play and there are different elements that constitute its tragic appeal. The play not only ends in the death of its protagonist but the lives of other characters are also tragic and they suffer from terrible loss of hopes. The totality of impressions produced by the play is that waste caused by the blighting of hopes and frustrations.

Robert is a poetic dreamer and there is a longing for beauty in him which he thinks can be fulfilled in the unknown region *Beyond the Horizon*. In a dream vision he would forget his pains as he say’s:
ROBERT: (with feeling) It’s just as hard for me Andy—believe that! I hate to leave you and the old folks—but I’ve got to go. There’s something calling me—(he points to the horizon) Oh! I just can’t explain it to you Andy.

ANDREW: No need to, Rob. (Angry at himself) Hell! You want to go that’s all there’s to it; and I wouldn’t have you miss this chance for the world.

ROBERT: It’s fine of you to feel that way, Andy.

ANDREW: Yes I suppose it is. For you it is different. You are a Mayo through and through. You’re wedded to the soil. You’re as much a product of it as an ear of corn is, or a tree. Father is the same. This farm is his life-work and he is happy in knowing that another Mayo, inspired by the same love, will take up the work where he leaves off. I can understand your attitude, and Pa’s; and I think it is wonderful and sincere. But I ---well I’m not made that way. (83)

“I used to stare out over the fields to the hills, out there—(the points to the horizon) and somehow after a time I’d forget my pain I was in, and start
dreaming.” As he is about to leave the farm for a three year voyage to the regions known for their beauty, he discovers that his brothers fiancée, Ruth loves him. He therefore remains behind to marry her. “Shortly after the marriage reality crowds in upon romance, and in a few years the farm has deteriorated under Robert’s management.

Supported, however, by the love of his wife and child, Robert clings to his early idealism-only to have another illusion destroyed when he discovers his wife had decided after a month of marriage that she was in love with Andrew. Ruth herself places a foolish hope in something “Beyond the Horizon” when she expects the returning Andrew still to love her, for he had forgotten Ruth six months after sailing. Now neither she nor Robert sees any meaning in life beyond the lover of their child for whose sake they continue to live together. The ultimate blow comes when the child dies-and their divergent reactions to this loss give the key to their character.

Robert’s life has not been without a element of self sacrifice and the manner in which he accepts the inevitable shows that even after failures and disappointment he has not lost self respect. His dying words to Andrew bring out an essential aspect of his character:

ANDREW: (Stopping and looking about him) There he is! I knew it! I knew we’d find him here.
ROBERT: (trying to raise himself to a sitting position as they hasten to his side—with a wan smile) I thought I’d give you the slip.

ANDREW: (with kindly bullying) Well you didn’t you old scoundrel, and we’re going to take you right back where you belong---in bed. (he makes a motion to lift ROBERT)

ROBERT: Don’t Andy. Don’t I tell you!

ANDREW: You’re in pain.

ROBERT: No I’m dying. (he falls back weakly, RUTH sinks down beside him with a sob and pillows his head on her lap. ANDREW stands looking down at him helplessly. ROBERT moves his head restlessly on Ruth’s lap.) I couldn’t stand it back there in the room. It seemed as if all my life---I’d been cooped in a room. So I thought I’d try to end as I might have—if I’d had ht courage---alone—in a ditch by the open road—watching the sunrise.
ANDREW: Rob! Don’t talk. You’re wasting your strength. Rest a while and the we’ll carry you---

ROBERT: Still hoping, Andy? Don’t. I know. ( There is a pause during which he breathes heavily straining his eyes to the horizon) The sun comes so slowly. ( with an ironical smile)The doctor told me to go to the far off places—and I’d be cured. He was right. That was always the cure for me. It’s too late—for this life---but---( He has a fit of coughing which racks his body).

ROBERT: You mustn’t feel sorry for me. Don’t you see I’m happy at last—free—free!—freed from the farm—free to wander on and on---eternally! (he raises himself on the elbow, his face radiant, and points to the horizon) Look! Isn’t it beautiful beyond the hills? I can hear the old voices calling me to come--- (Exultantly) and this time I’m going! It isn’t the end. It’s a free beginning—the start of my voyage! I’ve won my trip—the right of release---beyond the horizon! Oh you ought to be glad—glad--- for my sake! (He collapses weakly) Andy! (ANDREW (bends down to him) Remember Ruth—(168)
His spirit of selflessness is revealed in his instruction to Andrew to take care of Ruth. As he dies, on the same hill where the play opened, Robert says:

ROBERT: The doctor told me to go too far off places-and I’d be cured. He was right. That was always the cure for me. Its too late for this life-but………you must’nt feel sorry for me, beginning-the start of my voyage! I’ve won to my trip-the right of release-Beyond the Horizon.(167-168)

Doriss Folk has significantly remarked about Robert’s idealism and his death as being both his bulwark and his destruction:

His spirit in comparison to Ruth’s was invincible. Death seemed to him to bring insight and triumph over all the ills of body and soul. But here as in his later plays O’Neil is contrasting the inner, the subjective view of the protagonist with the outward one. When viewed objectively, Robert’s death in reality is not a victory but a mere escape. It is a sorry compensation for a barren life, wasted in a futile search for identity. Robert has never been able to accept and embrace the
If we read or watch the play carefully, it becomes clear at once that though Robert Mayo is a bit of weakling, he is capable of something more than self pity. He is described as having “a touch of poet” in him, and his aspiration to go for beyond Smitty’s maudlin pangs of guilt and self disgust. Early in the play he tells his brother Andrew pointing out dreamily to the horizon;

ROBERT: Supposing I was to tell you that it’s just Beauty that’s calling me, the beauty of the far off and the unknown, the mystery and the spell of the East which lures me in the books I have read, the need of the freedom of great wide spaces, the joy of wandering on and on-in quest of the secret which is hidden over there Beyond the Horizon? Suppose I told you that was the one and only reason for my going? (85).

O’Neil has little patience with Mayo himself and his longings are described as being “too conscious, intellectually diluted into a vague, intangible wanderlust. Robert is honest enough to admit that farming is not his cup of tea and that he longs for something else.
As Michael Manhein observes:

His powers of resistance, both moral and physical, would also be correspondingly watered. He would throw away his instinctive dream and accept the thralldom of the farm for why for almost any nice little poetical craving-romance of sex, say.’ But while his aimless yearning to wander may have been romantic self-delusion, the alternative suggested by Mayo’s brother, that “you might as well stay here, because we’ve got all you’re looking for night on the farm,” O’Neil characterizes as “thralldom.” He himself had a profound sympathy with this intense desire for something more, something better, than life can offer, and it’s inevitable frustration lies at the heart of his vision of man’s tragedy.(1982:23)

The accompanying and minor human predicament is that of the brother, a sturdy, generous, earth bound fellow, born to till those very acres, and sure to go wrong if he ever left the clean earth and the work amid things of his own creation. So in the Hardyesque irony of the O’Neil mood, it is this brother whom fate and his own character drive out into the lively open. The measured tread of Fate can be heard among the overtones of this remarkable tragedy.
The final curtain of the play is dropped not on the exultant death of Robert but on Andrew and Ruth who have to live in the real world. In the words of Doris Falk:

O’Neil rings down the final curtain on the exultant death of Robert but on Andrew and Ruth who must remain in the real world(1958:39)

The rhythmic ‘alteration of longing and loss ends on a note of loss. The closing lines of the play turns the audiences attention to Ruth as she listens to Andrew’s frantic plea for some sort of new start for both of them.

ANDREW: Andrew……I-you-we’ve both made a mess of things! We must try to help each other-and in time-we’ll come to know what right-is (Desperately). And perhaps\we-\(But Ruth, if she is aware of his words, gives no sign. She remains silent gazing at him dully with the sad humility of exhaustion, her mind already sinking back into that spent calm beyond the troubling of any hope).(169-169)

Ruth Mayo feels that she is frustrated and humiliated woman.

Having married the wrong Mayo brother, Robert, whom she thought she loved, rather than Andy, who loved her, she must see her marriage fall apart, along with the form. Her consolation is that the absent Andy
still loves her and that he will be a final refuge for her. But this consolation is taken away from her by Andy himself and in a most humiliating fashion. Their years have passed and Andy has returned. Dressed in her best white dress, Ruth is alone with him on a sun-lit hilltop, and she takes the opportunity to sound him out, to let him know, although he did not know it, that she loved him all along. But he quite unconsciously and brutally lets her understand that he does not love her any longer, describing himself at the time when he did love her as a “dumb fool.” She tries to stop the conversation after this, but the obtuse Andy blunders ahead unconsciously twisting the knife, until laughing, hysterically, she commands him to stop talking.

As Doriss Alexander remarks:

O’Neil points his canvass with what Henley called ‘the exquisite chromatics of decay’. You might also say then, that the play is alive because it follows the inexorable process of death. Not since Arnold Bennett’s Old Wives Tales has any book given as so quite so persuasively a sense of the passage of time.(1992:27)
O’Neil has certain similarity with Thomas Hardy in depicting a world that is hostile to man, he seems to have been influenced by Shakespeare also. Like the English dramatist, O’Neil has also emphasized at least in *Beyond the Horizon*, the hero’s own responsibility rather than the role of a hostile fate.

As we it in the dialogue between Robert and Ruth:

RUTH: (With an attempt at lightness) But you haven’t told me your reasons for leaving yet?

ROBERT: (Moodily) I doubt if you’ll understand. It’s difficult to explain even to myself. Either you feel it or you don’t. I can remember being conscious of it first when I was only a kid--- you haven’t forgotten what a sickly specimen I was then, in those days, have you? (89)

This does not affect the tragic appeal of the play but it is necessary that it should be adequately suggested by an effective method of indicating the inner nature of the struggle. What cannot be mixed, however is that the forces which presented the realization of Robert Mayo’s dreams lie within himself, rather than externally in the ‘world’ or in ‘fate’.

In *Beyond the Horizon* (1918) Ruth Mayo is a Strindbergian character that 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, in total inanition, incapable of saving herself. With this play O’Neill first tasted prestige and satisfaction, even earning the reluctant approval of his father, who was to die within a few months.

ROBERT: I saw Andy’s love for you—and I knew that you must love him.

RUTH: (Breaking out stormily) I don’t! I don’t love Andy! I don’t! ( ROBERT stares at her in stupid astonishment, RUTH weeps hysterically) Whatever put such a fool notion into---into your head? (She suddenly throws her arms around his neck and hides her head on his shoulder) Oh, Rob! Don’t go away! You mustn’t now! You can’t! I won’t let you! I’d break my heart!

ROBERT: (the expression of stupid bewilderment giving way to one of overwhelming joy. He presses her close to him—slowly and tenderly) Do you mean that you love me?

RUTH: (sobbing) Yes, yes—of course I do ---what d’you s’pose? (She lifts up her head and looks into his eyes with a
tremulous smile) You stupid thing! (He kisses her) I’ve loved you right along.

ROBERT: (mystified) But you and Andy were always together!

RUTH: because you never seemed to want to go to any place with me. You were always reading an old book, and not paying any attention to me. I was too proud to let you see I cared because I thought the year you had away to college had made you stuck up, and you thought yourself too educated to waste any time on me.

ROBERT (kissing her) And I was thinking—(with a laugh) What fools We’ve both been!

RUTH: (overcome by a sudden fear) You won’t go away on the trip, will you Rob? You’ll tell them you can’t go on account of me, won’t you? You can’t go now! You can’t! (91)

For O’Neill, the life of the farmer was confining, while freedom would be found elsewhere. When at the conclusion the sun rise 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. Those who live on in the light of full day have been beaten down, or have not followed their dreams.
With this play O’Neill singlehandedly started an intellectual and emotional revolution in Broadway theatre, to which he continued to contribute throughout his writing career. Yet there is still something simplistic in this undeniably moving play. Quite legitimately one can argue that Robert Mayo would either have been destroyed by the physical hardships of the sea, or have developed the same emotional carapace as the less sensitive Andrew, but the sincerity of O’Neill’s realism and the colloquialism of his dialogue give strength to this groundbreaking play. The action also reaches mythic proportions and transcends specific locality.

Nearly all his early plays dealt with contemporary life although usually in an unusual or exotic setting: an open boat, the bowels of a tramp steamer, and so on.

His first full-length produced play, *Beyond The Horizon (1918)*, is not precisely dated but could well take place in nineteenth century or, at the latest twentieth century rural America. Of all the plays he wrote after this, only a few can be described as contemporary, i.e., as dealing with the life of the period during which they were written.

In Beyond The Horizon there is a three year gap between Acts I and II and a five year one between II and III.

Doris Falk’s remarks on the significance of the play and its last scene and sums up what the play is about:
Beyond the Horizon was an exciting an important event in the development of American drama. It was a play with a serious, significant message, appearing at a time when the stage was cluttered with trivialities and the dual nature of the concept itself, all help account for the neglect of Beyond the Horizon at the present time.

Because the message of the play concerns contradictions, its final scene appears to be a contradiction-except, of course, in the specific context of O’Neill’s philosophy of opposites. The audience is left with a feeling of having had an emotional experience, but the experience is confused. Robert is the protagonist and has apparently achieved his goal. His death brings with it an implicit resurrection in the form of his exultant insights; but the truth of the resurrection is neglected by the final scene. What appeared to be a tragic affirmation of man’s nobility in the face of inevitable suffering turns out to be a study in frustration, where weak and foolish people waste their lives. This may be exactly what O’Neill wants us to see, and perhaps we, the audience, are at fault in expecting more. The fact remains that the “alternation of longing and of loss” culminates in a total effect not of rhythm, but of bewildering paradox, to which the
final solution seems really to be Ruth’s-withdrawal from Nothing into Nothing.” (1958:16)

O’Neill’s conscious, publicly stated life-attitude was, as he said, the affirmative one as of *Bound East for Cardiff*, but the concluding scene for *Beyond the Horizon* suggests a deeper and perhaps more accurate version of the philosophy—one which he found difficult to face. Never again until his last plays was he able to bring down the curtain on a scene as desolate as this one; in the conflict between hope and despair this fact is at the root of some of O’Neill’s most serious difficulties in achieving dramatic effect.