Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) is one of the few prominent playwrights of the twentieth century. He has a special position in America and is as much a playwright of international stature in the world theatre of the first half of the twentieth century, as Chekhov, Shaw, Pirandello and Brecht. He shaped the course of American Drama in the most significant period of its development, from 1915 to about 1930.

A survey of the critical material on O'Neill makes it evident that editors, critics and scholars have most often been led by partisanship in their approach to his plays. They are either aggressively laudatory or violently antagonistic; few are "balanced". The plays of O'Neill touch something fundamental in those who expose themselves to their effect. They reach down to frightening depths; they step on private, social, religious, philosophical and aesthetic issues; they either evoke immoderate enthusiasm or provoke immoderate anger. Almost everyone of his plays has produced warring factions whose representatives have often been led to express themselves in categorical terms. In the January, 1960 issue of Theatre Arts Louis Kronenberger expressed that Long Day's Journey into Night was "The great event in the American theatre of the 50's. He characterized the play as an "overwhelming drama seething with all the thrust of great and all the convincingness of life." But, writing in the same year, William L. Sharp lamented that "The popularity of Eugene O'Neill who cannot write at all" arrested "to the insensitive ear.
not only of the playwright and his audience, but the dramatic critic as well" (Tulane Drama Review, Winter, 1960). And Gunther Crack, reviewing a performance of Strange Interlude in Berlin, exclaims that "The play could only have been written by O'Neill who combines great theatrical talent with an enormous knowledge of the human soul" (Cultural News from Germany, April, 1961). This battle of the critics over the importance of O'Neill is not over; he remains a controversial playwright.

O'Neill is a great tragic artist whose vision of life and human soul is essentially tragic. His plays are known for their tragic beauty and sublimity. They are modern tragedies which strike at the very root of the sickness today. O'Neill was not an "ivory-towerist" or an escapist in the romantic sense of the term. Being an existentialist, he dealt with life in a very realistic and authentic manner. He visualised life as full of hope and promise, and concluded that there was nothing wrong or repulsive about it. He affirmed life and pleaded for its total acceptance at its face value. His interest in life was not limited to the realization of eternity but centred on making it more meaningful and worth-living. As a dramatist, his commitment was to the faithful dramatization of human situation.

O'Neill himself has remarked, "The playwright must dig at the roots of the sickness today as he feels it." The feeling of isolation, which has become the hallmark of the modern age, springs from the tragic sense of life which has its roots in the sickness of today. It is variously described as loss of identity, loneliness, alienation, meaninglessness, loss of faith or values,
rootlessness, anomie or anxiety-state, etc. It is recognized as a symptom of man's contemporary crisis, a human problem, a condition of having the experience but missing the meaning. In the contemporary experience, it refers to a dis-relationship between the self and its world, the reduction of man to the status of a thing, the insoluble conflict of the self between the pleasure and reality principle, the loss of the feeling of being an active determining force in his own life, and the unbridgeable gulf between reason and experience, the self and the non-self.

Man suffers and his life becomes a tale of isolation, loneliness and estrangement, ending with the cessation of his earthly life, neither because of the hostility of Fate, as in the Greek tragedy, nor because of 'Hamartia' in his character. He suffers from the sense of alienation, because of his loss of faith in some supernatural power of traditional religions, a faith which the Greeks had, and which Christianity supplied in the Middle Ages, but which has been eroded by science or materialism today. The old religions have not been replaced by new ones. Hence, man's soul is sick because of too much materialism; and he suffers from inner emptiness on account of his lack of some sustaining faith. He feels orphaned, lonely, and at bay. His agony arises from a feeling of 'Insecurity', a feeling of 'not-belonging', and he is confused and bewildered from within and from without.

Materialistic values prevail; life has become too mechanical and impersonal; and this has further shaken man's sense of
security. Man is lonely even in a crowd, and he cannot draw solace or strength from his faith in any supernal power. The result is that he feels insecure, shaken, estranged, and isolated. This feeling of insecurity and isolation causes unbearable spiritual anguish, fear, and torture. Sometimes, as in the case of Brutus Jones in the play, Emperor Jones, and Yank in The Hairy Ape, it becomes a terrible obsession which brings them to their doom. In play after play, O'Neill's characters are stretched on the rack, suffering the tortures of Hell. The rack on which he stretched his characters could be the past life, and the torment could come from man's sense of being separated from Nature, of not 'belonging' in the universe, as in The Hairy Ape. Again, the soul may be tortured by 'not belonging' to the old supernatural God, or to the new scientific God represented by the machine, as in Dynamo. It may also come from 'not belonging' to oneself and to any all fulfilling love, as in Strange Interlude, or from 'not belonging' incestuously to a forbidden object, as in Mourning Becomes Electra.

Again, this feeling of isolation may arise from the 'romantic illusion' which some may harbour. Lost in the 'romantic illusion', they forget the reality of life, and these illusions ultimately lead them to their doom. In Iceman Cometh, each of the characters has his own 'pipe-dream' which is the cause of his undoing. The tragic tension and isolation may be caused by the Puritan ideals which are basically a negation of life, an inhibition of natural instincts and impulses as in
Mourning Becomes Electra. Whatever from such escape from life may take, it is always a cause of isolation and suffering.

Social environment is also an important factor for man's isolated state and agony. In The Hairy Ape Yank is a man as well as worker brutalized and mechanised by an impersonal and mechanical social order. Racial discrimination, and slum-life in Christie, granding and improverished farm-life in Beyond the Horizon, patriarchal authority at its extreme and the struggle for land in Desire Under the Elms, extreme family pride, joy-denyng puritanism, mercantile possessiveness are all the causes of isolation, suffering and tragedy.

Basically and essentially, O'Neill's plays are the embodiments of a cosmic anguish. As he himself said, he has studied man not in relation to man, but man in relation to God. Living in an impersonal, mechanical, urbanized, and industrialized social environment, man today is alienated from God, traditions and religions of the past, Nature, and his fellow-beings. He suffers from loss of identity, inner emptiness, isolation, normlessness, powerlessness, and sense of insecurity. Thus, isolation and loneliness, man's disorientation, or man's bewilderment from within and from without are the major themes in the plays of O'Neill. And the present study is an attempt to bring out the theme of isolation and loneliness in his plays.

The thesis contains five chapters. Chapter I, 'Introduction'
outlines the socio-cultural, psychological and spiritual milieu of the time to which O'Neill belonged. Drama is most objective of the arts, but this great dramatist made the personal experience the basis of his plays. Therefore, an understanding of his understanding of life and characters is indispensable for a proper appreciation of his plays, and this has been given in this chapter. Then, the dramatist has been introduced in adequate detail. The nature, concept, the extent of the topic of study have fully been discussed. It has brought out that human limitations, which expose and bring to the surface inequality and differences, are the major causes of isolation and loneliness. Differences of opinion, interest, possession, mentality, ideology, religion, character, race, personality, virtues, and knowledge, are all some of the objective roots of isolation and loneliness.

Chapters II to IV are devoted to the study of O'Neill's plays following the chronological sequence of the year in which the individual play was written, not the year of its first production or publication. Thus Chapter II, 'The Early Phase' examines the four major full-length plays—Beyond the Horizon (1918), The Emperor Jones (1920), The Hairy Ape (1921), and All God's Chillun Got Wings (1923). An attempt has been made to bring out the theme of isolation and loneliness in these plays through the analysis of plot, characters, situations, incidents and the innovative techniques of the playwright. Likewise, Chapters III and IV deal with the plays of the Middle Phase—Desire Under the Elms (1924), The Great God Brown (1925),
Strange Interlude (1927), and Mourning Becomes Electra (1931); and the plays of the Later Phase--The Iceman Cometh (1939), Long Day's Journey Into Night (1941), A Touch of the Poet (1942), and A Moon for the Misbegotten (1943), respectively. The theme of isolation and loneliness has been examined and illustrated in them. Chapter V, 'Conclusion', presents the observations, and some problems and prospects arrived at in this study.

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