Chapter II
THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT

The central concern of O’Neill’s plays is man’s difficult and unfortunate plight. O’Neill sees human existence as a challenging and perplexing experience which is often painful; he views it as fraught with contradictions and tensions and unreconciled conflicts clamouring to be resolved. This view is not, of course peculiar to O’Neill; it is shared by most existentialist philosophers, by many theologians, by countless poets and writers and even by some scientists but his treatment of this theme is peculiarly his own.

The distinctive features of the stance he assumes vis-à-vis the question of human predicament can be seen by comparing it with the attitude of certain representative thinkers and philosophers to the same subject. It is particularly useful so far as this study is concerned, to compare O’Neill with Plato, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein, all four of whom have evinced a keen awareness of the tragic predicament of man. The famous metaphor of the cave in The Republic describes what Plato thought of the human plight:

Imagine the condition of men living in a sort of cavernous chamber, underground with an entrance open to the light and a long passage all down the cave. Here they have been from childhood chained by the leg and also by the neck, so that they cannot move and can see only what is in front of them, because the chains will not let them turn their heads. At some distance
higher up is the light of a fire burning behind them; and between
the fire and the prisoners (therefore behind them) is a track with a
parapet built along it, like the screen at a puppet show, which
hides the performers while they show their puppets over the tap.

Now behind this parapet imagine persons carrying along
various artificial objects, including figure of men and animals in
wood or stone or other materials, which project over the parapet.
Naturally, some of these persons will be talking, others silent.¹

O'Neill's concept of man and God is not unlike that of Plato but there
are divergences as will be shown later. He concurs with Emerson in the basic
tenets of his philosophy of man and God but he is by no means an
Emersonian. The following extract, which spells out Emerson's major ideas
on this subject, is a basic pronouncement so far as Emersonian philosophy is
concerned:

I conceive a man as always spoken to from behind, and unable to
turn his head and see the speaker. In all the millions who have
heard the voice, none ever saw the face. As children in their play
run behind each other, and seize one by the ears and make him
walk before them, so is the spirit of our unseen pilot.

That well-known voice speaks in all languages, governs all men,
and none ever caught a glimpse of its form. If the man will exactly
obey it, it will adopt him, so that he shall not any longer separate
it from himself in his thought, he shall seem to be it, he shall be it.
If he listens with insatiable ears, richer and greater wisdom is
taught to him, the sound swells to a ravishing music, he is borne away as with a flood, he becomes careless of his food and of his house, he is the fool of ideas, and leads a heavenly life. But if his eye is set on the things to be done, and not on the truth that is still taught, and for the sake of which the things are to be done, then the voice grows faint, and at last is but a humming in his ears. His health and greatness consist in his being the channel through which heaven flows to earth.²

It is not the philosophers alone who concern themselves with the human predicament; it is a fundamental concern shared alike by the philosopher, the artist and the scientist. The following assessment of the human predicament by Albert Einstein, one of the greatest scientists of all time, will help us to see O’Neill’s own assessment in the right perspective:

Strange is our situation here upon earth. Each of us comes for a sojourn (short visit), not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, man is here for the sake of other men—above all for those upon whose smile and well-being our own happiness depends. About the idea of fate it seems that we cannot have any freedom at all in the philosophical sense, for we act not only under external compulsion but also by inner necessity.³

Einstein seems to believe in Schopenhauer’s saying—‘a man can surely do what he wills to, but he cannot determine what he wills’ a conclusion he arrived at when he witnessed or suffered life’s hardships. According to
Einstein, the idea of God and the concept of fate make us think over the basic question, whether the universe has any purpose. To ponder interminably over the reason for one's own existence or the meaning of life in general terms, appears to him to be folly from an objective point of view. And yet, he believes, everyone holds certain ideals and values, a set of principles which guide his aspiration and his judgement. He means that it is left to the individual self to fix his values and ideals which fill him with the joy and zest for living whether it be goodness, knowledge, wisdom, truth, beauty or love.

The ideals Einstein values most are goodness, truth and beauty. He does not believe in a life which has only comfort or happiness as its goals. According to him a simple and unassuming life is good for everybody physically and mentally. The trite objects of human efforts—possessions, outward success, luxury—have always seemed to him contemptible. Man can find meaning in life, short and perilous as it is, only through devoting himself to society.

Einstein is of the opinion that the man who regards his own life and that of his fellow creatures as meaningless is not merely unhappy but hardly fit for life. It is left to the individual to choose wisely his value patterns and fix his ultimate goals in life whether it is happiness of the noble self or whatever it be and it should be an ideal objectively sought for by human being.


the philosophy of nature must not be unduly terrestrial; for the earth is merely one of the smaller planets of one of the smaller
stars of the milky way. It would be ridiculous to warp the philosophy of nature in order to bring out results that are pleasing to the tiny parasites of the insignificant planet.4

But vitalism as a philosophy and evolutionism show, in this respect, a lack of sense of proportion and local relevance, according to Russell. Most of the historical religions regard the facts of life, which are personally interesting to us, as having a cosmic significance confined to the earth's surface. Optimism and pessimism, as cosmic philosophies, show the same naive humanism; the great world, so far as we know it from the philosophy of nature, is neither good nor bad, and is not concerned to make us happy or unhappy. All such philosophies spring from self-importance and express the emanation of ego and are best corrected by a little astronomy.

But in the philosophy of value the situation is reversed. Nature is only a part of what we can imagine. Everything, real or imagined, can be appraised by us, and there is no outside standard to show that one valuation is wrong. We are ourselves the ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of value and in the world of values nature is only a part. To some, moral values can be advocated by religions, provided the superstitions and irrational ideas are dispensed with. In the world of values, nature in itself is neutral, neither good nor bad especially with reference to the point of view of the human predicament. Russell is of the opinion that it is we who create values and our desires which confer values. In this realm we are kings, and we debase our kingship, if we bow down to nature in fixing the values. According to Russell, good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge and wisdom.
O'Neill also upholds 'love' as the motivating force and exposes 'love of one's own life' and 'love for one's fellow-beings' as the factors reviving one's zest for living and this idea is clearly emphasized in his play *Lazarus Laughed*, in which Lazarus speaks of both man's greatness and insignificance: "The greatness of man is that no God can save him until he himself becomes a God!" and "Laugh, 'yes' to your insignificance! There will be born your new greatness!" (Vol. III, LL 289-290). He stresses man's basic need to communicate with himself and his fellowman: "Love is man's hope—Love for his life on earth, a noble love above suspicion and distrust" (Vol. III LL 309).

We desire affection in order to escape from the feeling of loneliness and in order to be, "understood." This is a matter of sympathy, not merely of benevolence; the person whose affection we want must not merely wish us well but must know in what our happiness consists. But this belongs to another element of good life, which according to Russell is 'knowledge.' "Neither love without knowledge nor knowledge without love can produce a good life."5

Although love and knowledge are necessary for a good life, love is in a sense more fundamental since it leads intelligent people to seek knowledge, in order to find out how to benefit those whom they love. But if people are not intelligent, they will be content to believe what they have been told and may do harm in spite of the most genuine benevolence. Love can be selfless and it becomes selfish when one loves another person for a selfish reason, to his recognition so as to contribute to his own subjective happiness. Though the term 'love' has become a stale and hackneyed term, it has this much of its
innocent implications. But knowledge and wisdom are both indefinitely extensible; therefore however a good life may be, a better life can be imagined.

The questions become pertinent, ‘What is wrong with the present world?’, ‘What should be there to create a perfect world?’ In a perfect world, every sentient being would be to every other the object of the fullest love, compounded of delight, benevolence, charity and understanding inextricably blended. But it is true that there are many in whom we cannot feel delight, because they are disgusting; if we were to do violence to our nature by trying to see beauties in them, we should merely blunt our susceptibilities to what we naturally find beautiful. But sympathy can condition our minds to like the unlovable by convincing our minds “there is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so.” Love in that case will become love for the sake of love. Russell depicts the human situation in the following terms:

Human heart, as modern civilization has made it, is more prone to hatred than to love because it is dissatisfied; because it feels deeply perhaps even unconsciously that it has somehow missed the meaning of life, that perhaps others, but not we ourselves, have secured the good things which nature offers for man’s enjoyment. The splendour of human life may be greater to those who are dazzled by divine radiance, and human comradeship seems to grow more intimate and more tender from the sense that we are all exiles on an inhospitable shore.⁶
O'Neill believed that man is essentially alone both at his birth and at his death. This loneliness of the human soul is a condition almost intolerable to contemplate. It seems that only divine love could pierce that loneliness and that, as a corollary, all that makes love more difficult to attain is wrong. It must be the mission of every man to speak, to communicate with love to every soul alive. It will help to keep civilisation and vitality and joy alive. It is the integrity of the single individual which determines the character of the masses; without the integrity of the individual, power and corruption will take over, and it is the ability of seeing the other side of the question and of seeing things in the right perspective which constitutes the definite mark of an educated man.

Bertrand Russell delineates the picture of the pathetic plight of man in touching terms:

We stand on the shore of an ocean crying to the night and emptiness. Sometimes a voice answers out of the darkness. But it is a voice of one drowning and in a moment the silence returns. The world seems to be quite dreadful. The unhappiness of most people is very great and I often wonder how they will endure it. To know people well is to know their tragedy. It usually is the central thing about which their lives are built. And I suppose if they did not live most of the time in the things of the moment, they would not be able to go on.  

It is indeed a dismal picture that emerges from the above statement—a thoroughly pessimistic world view which is shot through with an acute
awareness of the tragedy of man's life. A consideration of this view will put us in the right frame of mind in which to study O'Neill's depiction of man's predicament on earth. The medium of drama enabled O'Neill to express as well as experience vicariously the problems which obsessed him. In *Lazarus Laughed* he speaks of man as "those haunted heroes" (Vol. III LL 328). Actually this is less a definition of mankind than a description of himself. He composed plays because he had to write to liberate himself. It was a compulsion. For him the literary creation was an intense imaginative experience. It was a passionate answer to the problems which tormented him with excruciating strength. He roamed the world for years in search of a solution, trying to find a remedy for his fundamental despair, giving up the comfort and security of life and nearly losing his health and life in the process.

After his wandering years, when his health broke down and he was obliged to bridle his wanderlust, he went on exploring the world in his imagination and thoughts, not as a dilettante or a tourist in the realms of thought, but as a passionate pilgrim in quest of a shrine at which to worship. Though brought up as a Roman Catholic, he lost his faith as an adolescent. Yet he abhorred this spiritual vacuum and he ardently looked for a substitute ever after. His religious faith was killed by rationalism and scientific materialism but the restlessness and violence of his quest for a personal religion sprang from no coldly rational intellect.

Each of his plays can be considered an attempt to find God or at least to find some justification for the flagrant inconsistencies of the human condition. His basic interest was in psychology rather than in metaphysics.
He said so himself in a letter to Joseph Wood Kručh: "Most modern plays are concerned with the relation between man and man, but that does not interest me at all. I am interested only in the relation between man and God."\(^8\)

Early in his career, O'Neill recognised the basic necessity of finding a philosophy that would reconcile a rationalistic view of the universe with man's need for a source of solace or for something beyond rationalism—for a sense of the infinite beyond the finite. This is evident from what he states in an essay:

The playwright today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it—the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in and to comfort his fears of death with.\(^9\)

In his attempt to find that meaning and to state it in dramatic terms, O'Neill temporarily embraced and discarded many modern substitutes for religion, and even attempted to re-state the Catholic concept of religion in terms of modern psychology. Essentially he has been a mystic, who used the trappings of realism, but a mystic who was uneasily aware that with the advent of scientific determinism came the need for a new symbolism.

For a new day in man's thought, a new and fresh power was needed. An instinctive, convinced belief in mythological gods and heroes (Hebraic as well as Scandinavian or Greek) was past; even the moral order no longer carried a vital power in the modern world. Instead, writers began to find that power in the scientific laws which were the true, if inanimate rulers of the
universe. In *Moby Dick*, Melville used a scientific and natural symbolism. Nature becomes there the tragic force and *Moby Dick* the Deus ex machina. Henrik Ibsen, whose influence also can be traced in O'Neill's works, made heredity a tragic hero in his *Ghosts*; however unjust it may be, it led as surely to irrevocable doom as ever the moral order had.

In O'Neill's first important play, *The Moon of the Carribbees*, he sets man against nature, the hero, Smitty being set against the sea and reduced to silhouetted gestures of self-pity. Smitty's sentimental postings, set against the revealing moods of the sea's eternal truth, reveal that he is out of harmony with nature and therefore no longer attuned to beauty—a theme partially echoed in *The Hairy Ape* which also deals with how man's sense of belonging is lost in the modern society. Only the noble savage, or in one time the natural man, can attain this harmony.

Throughout the plays of O'Neill, the ultimate longing and the ultimate symbol remain the same: man's desire to find a satisfactory spiritual peace, a place "to belong" not only in this world but in relation to the universe. The quest was in part at least a personal one also. Much later he was to write of himself: "I will always be a stranger who never feels at home who does not really want and is not really wanted, . . . who can never belong" (LDJN Jonathan Cape Edition 135).

For dramatic purposes, however, he turned back to the theme of man's struggle against nature; he wrote one of his greatest minor plays *Ile* on this theme. The struggle is shadowed forth rather than expressed in this play. As in all great plays there are here two conflicts: the internal struggle between a
captain and his crew and the struggle between a man and the universe. Because he is above all else the primitive man, the proud hunter, captain, Keeney makes his decision, which is relentless and inexorable.

The play was satisfying in this respect, but to O'Neill the philosophy behind it was not. According to O'Neill, man's spirit seeks an assurance of immortality. If a rationalistic and mechanistic philosophy denies it and to the rational mind proves that it cannot be found through religion, then it must be sought elsewhere. In his own search he fell under the sway of the idea that a man attains immortality through his descendants. 'This is the underlying motif of his play *The Fountain*. O'Neill's idea of writing *The Fountain* came on finally from his interest in the recurrence in folklore of the beautiful legend of a healing spring of eternal youth. So, Juan Ponce de Leon searches fruitlessly for the spring which will wash away the years and give him an early immortality. At last, when he has given up hope, he finds a vicarious immortality in the youth of his nephew.

This is the clearest affirmation that O'Neill's philosophy at that time could admit. The fountain was a symbol of life, tossing its little drops, its human beings, high in air. They took myriad shapes and colours. Some were caught in the light, others dropped dully back, and a few burst into an incandescent miniature rainbow. It did not greatly matter that more drops must be propagated, that more drops may be tossed into the air, and absorbed back again into the whole.

Yet there is something more. According to his belief, the creative power, the strongest power in nature, would perform the age-long functions of
mythic religion. For the man, this concept was not finally satisfying; for the dramatist it proved exceedingly fruitful. It is based on this theme of creation and continuance that he wrote two of his finest plays *The Great God Brown* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. The latter play is a fictionalized version of the Orestrian trilogy of Aeschulus, and is intensely psychological in that every action in the play can be accounted for in terms of fixations, complexes and repressions. The characters are only slightly disguised and like the Greek original it conveys the idea that man and woman cannot resist forces stronger than themselves. In this play with modern American setting, O'Neill is attempting to rephrase the motivations of classical tragedy so as to relate them to our doubts, fears and desires, but in the process to give us also faith in the creative life force.

In *The Great God Brown*, this theme is combined with the more dominant motif of the religion of art. O'Neill says his purpose in this play is to show "the mystery any one man or woman can feel but not understand as the meaning of any event or accident—in any life on earth." To give added depth, richness and suggestiveness, he deliberately mixes folklore and religion. Dion Anthony is in part Dionysius, and in part St. Anthony, and he returns for strength to Cybel, the pagar, earthmother. But this mystical element serves to accentuate the importance of the individual, even as the use of masks to indicate an actor's public or private character emphasises an individual complexity. But one person is influenced and changed by others even as he acts upon them, as we grope in the world's half-light for a fuller illumination. Here the reader can identify himself with the characters, and can fully
comprehend the nature and the intensity of their desires, whether he accepts the underlying philosophy.

This is not possible with all his plays, at least for most of us. O'Neill has embraced even more dubious philosophies. In Dynamo he envisioned a man who saw a new God in the whirling wheels of machinery and the weird power of electricity, and thereby tried to substitute universal laws of nature in the place of religion. But this study of a fantastic modern religious mania was neither dramatically nor philosophically convincing. O'Neill also flirted briefly and tentatively with Marco Millions, but it was at best a half-hearted flirtation since he was, soon afterwards, in Days Without End describing Communism as "the most grotesque God that ever came out of Asia" (Vol. I, DWE 503). Sociological nostrums, especially that man will quickly improve, if only his environment be changed for the better, won his half-hearted allegiance in such plays as All God's Chillun Got Wings and in Desire Under the Elms.

Whether his philosophical ideas had proved satisfying or not, he had consistently attempted to get beyond the literal and factual reality. Both the man and the drama seem ever in quest for a valid, tenable explanation of the meaning of life. In that quest he came to Christian faith and he wrote the moving play Days Without End on this theme. In this play, meaning is found not in the fountain or the dynamo or in the sexual delta, but in the crucifix. He has not abandoned modern terms or modern psychology, and he continues to be concerned with man's essential dualism to such an extent that the two parts of the main character are played by the different actors. Somehow, too, there is little difference in the terms of his Christian characters
and those of his earlier non-Christian ones. John Loving believes with the rationalistic part of his mind that “we are all the slaves of meaningless chance” (Vol. I, DWE 542), but with the idealistic part that “a new Saviour must be born who will reveal to us how we can be saved from ourselves” (Vol. I, DWE 543).

If the play has too much of dramatic and philosophical debate in it, to be quite successful as drama, it is the clearest statement we have of O'Neill’s constant striving to find a satisfactory philosophy of life. It gives us an epitome of his own spiritual evolution: he is seeking the infinite behind the finite, searching for something that will add to the dignity of man. Whatever the terms employed, however unsatisfactory the explanations, O'Neill holds in this play that man’s spirit is greater and ultimately more important than man’s body. In this respect and only at certain points, the views envisaged by O'Neill in his play alone can be said to have some similarity with what Spinoza, Descartes and Emerson had to say on ‘soul.’ If at times he seems only to have a faith that man must have a faith, he has made an honest and unrelenting search for valid and tenable bases for a faith that will not deny scientific truths but will affirm a deeper, more positive spiritual truth, a cosmic truth.

As early as his very first play, The Web, he attempted to show that man is caught in a web of circumstances, a web that is not of his own weaving. O'Neill had begun as a playwright with this deterministic philosophy of life and the universe; rather disconcertingly, he has partially reverted to it in his later plays. The disturbed and disturbing state of the world shook his lightly-
rooted faith; even more directly, a serious personal illness in 1934 temporarily ended his dramatic activity, it developed into, or was later diagnosed as, the incurable, slowly ravaging Parkinson's Disease.

It may be too early to analyse the line of thought in the works of O'Neill's darker years; but certain unmistakable trends seem dominant. He had turned back into his own past for dramatic material, increasingly he pinned his faith on human love and warmth to give a meaning to life; and he presented man lacking the will to act, as being spiritually dead, however alive physically he might be. There is a Catholic quality in these plays, but the purging clearly was intended more for the author than for the audience. O'Neill was attempting to objectify by writing out of himself certain obsessive memories that long had haunted him.

This is made manifest in the brief, moving foreword to Long Day's Journey Into Night, cast in the form of a letter to his wife Carlotta:

Dearest, I give you the original script of this play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood. A sadly inappropriate gift, it would seem, for a day celebrating happiness. But you will understand. I mean it is a tribute to your love and tenderness which gave me faith in love that enabled me to face my dead at last and write this play—write it with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for all the four haunted Tyrones. (LDJN 05)

Eugene includes himself among the haunted, and he makes no attempt except for changing names to disguise the autobiographical nature of the play. James Tyrone is an immensely popular actor, embittered because he has
sacrificed the chance of greatness for immediate popularity, and seeking wealth through ill-timed real estate speculations; Mary Tyrone is a drug-addict because her husband employed an incompetent, inexpensive doctor at the younger son's birth, and the doctor gave her opium to quiet her pains; James Junior is a dipsomaniac, a wastrel, and a jealous-hearted failure. The tightly-knit action takes place on the day when Edmund (or Eugene) is admitted to have tuberculosis and is to be sent to a sanatorium.

Of these four, only Eugene has a chance to achieve salvation of any kind in this world. His sickness is physical, his moral nature, although warped, is fundamentally sound. But the sickness in his father and mother, and brother is essentially a moral sickness: in seeking to escape from the world they have grown egocentric, cold; their flashes of warmth are sporadic and to a degree irrational; they have lost the capacity to love and the will to act. Man seeks always for serenity and order, for a sense of belonging in a mysteriously alien universe. Mary fancies that she might have found it, if she had become a nun; James, if he had not prostituted his ability of acting; James Junior if he had achieved something—he is not sure quite what. These hopeless escapist fancies lead them inevitably into the past, away from the present, and ahead of them is only the darkly symbolic night.

It is a powerfully written, integrated tragedy, but the motivating force behind each of these tragic figures derives not from nobility or even ignoble ambition but from insufficiency. In earlier more objective plays, O'Neill used many devices to point up the contrast between appearance and reality, he relied upon psychology to present an awareness of the difference between
conscious and subconscious realities. Here the devices are relatively straightforward but the psychological twistings and turnings are exceedingly complex as the characters attempt to conceal their real thoughts and motivations not only from each other but from themselves, until driven by some compulsive inner force to confess the subconscious reality.

There is something of the detective-story-technique in his using action to conceal rather than to reveal character. This similarity of method appears even more clearly in *A Moon*, where a virgin deliberately masquerades as a loose woman and her warm-hearted old Irish father hides a basic goodness under apparent meanness and gruffness. This, too, is an intensely personal work, for the protagonist is James Tyrone Junior; the incidents briefly described in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* are developed and made a necessary part of the dramatic action in *A Moon*.

In the play *A Moon*, O'Neill's theme of death in life reappears, even more explicitly. Phil and Josie Hogan are alive because they have warmth and the ability to love; James is empty, and Josie cradling. As human beings Josie and her father have many defects, but they have also a quality of aliveness, that James has killed in himself, so that Josie tenderly and pityingly can wish only for the man she loves.

The title implies that James had never at any time had any real chance to be different, to control his own destiny. He was misbegotten truly, whereas Josie is so only because she has freely given her love to an emotionally dead man incapable of returning that love. This is not only a sibling's pity for an old brother but it can be considered also an attitude toward life. The intensely
personal nature of the play and the felt need of catharsis for the author, might make the interpretation of the play difficult. Yet clearly O'Neill believes that it is not enough to be loved; one must be capable of giving out as well as of taking in, if one is to be saved, in this world or the next. In these two plays there is no hint that salvation may be won by a faith or a philosophy, for all the values are personal or subjective ones. The person rather than the idea, O'Neill seems to be saying, gives a meaning to life.

Since it is less subjective, *The Iceman Cometh* should provide a better test as to meaning than to the autobiographical works. The tone is that of the dream-phantasia and expressionistic distortion has been carried so far that the philosophical line of thought has been obscured. The group of men in Harry Hope's saloon, back in 1912, have diverse backgrounds but all have two items in common: each has in his past a cankerous secret that has so corrupted him that he has lost the will to act and the power to make decisions; each has taken refuge in a deadening alcoholic daze. As the play opens, they are waiting for a hardware salesman, Hickey, who in the past has without really disturbing them managed to give them a transitory joyousness, an illusion of aliveness. But we can become aware of each other's isolation, although such recognition is spasmodic and generally comes too late for action. Out of an association of suffering and doomed selves emerges, paradoxically, a certain hope, a "hopeless hope," that O'Neill expressed in *The Straw*. As in *The Iceman Cometh*, Larry Slade who wishes to be the complete "Isolato," has to admit at the end: "I'll be a weak fool looking with pity at the two sides of everything till the day I die" (Vol. I, I.C. 726) to mean that part of our "doom" is understanding and even pity. We have one other
saving grace: we can laugh. “Home patiens” is after all “home ridens.” Like moments of transcendence, moments of comedy are mysterious and brief, “a sort of unfair ‘non-sequitur.’ as though events, as though life, were being manipulated just to confuse us . . . a big kind of comedy that doesn’t stay funny very long.”11 This view of O’Neill was reflected in his technique. He considered that the first act of *The Iceman Cometh* was ‘Hilarious comedy,’ though play gave way to tragedy as the play developed.

His play *The Emperor Jones* may be called expressionist in so far as expressionism basically seeks to project a subjective state through the counterpart of stylised theatrical technique. In this play the fear and disorder felt by Jones is in marked contrast to, get revealed by, such stylised technical devices as the steady beat of tom-toms or drums, the ritualistic movements of the witch doctor and the objectification of the Little Formless Fears. The psychological analysis of the primordial and the racial collective conscious aspects of the character Jones is the most noteworthy feature of this play. This concept of analytic psychology is Jürgian.

*The Hairy Ape* incorporates another aspect of European expressionism, the concern with political and social change. However, it does not pursue a message or aim at social reform in the manner of the works of the German playwrights. O’Neill as usual emphasises the individual search, particularly the inner clash of the natural animalism in man with man’s own vision of a supernatural force and with the yearing for a human “home” the deep desire to belong. In this play he exposes how the brutalising effect of materialistic and competitive society makes man’s condition apparently hopeless.
In *Lazarus Laughed*, O'Neill had tried to deny death. In *Strange Interlude*, he had denied life but comforted his heroine with recrudescent childishness. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, he again denied life but let his heroine remain alive for the masochistic pleasure that it gave her. Lavinia, the last Mannon, broke the chain of crime and retribution by remaining unmarried and living with the dead inside the ancestral home. “It takes the Mannons to punish themselves for being born” (Vol. II, MBE 178), she said, “with a strange cruel smile of gloating over the years of self torture” that lay ahead. The great crime had been life itself; living had been its retribution. Having long since discharged Dionysius, O'Neill next diminished the role of the mother, pausing first to write two plays, as it has already been mentioned, *Days Without End*, in which he went through the motions of returning to the faith that he had left as he entered adolescence and *Ah, Wilderness!*, in which he recalled the summer of 1906, not as it was, but as he wished it might have been.

But in *The Iceman Cometh*, he returned once again to his past, to 1912. He was prepared to reduce the demands that he had made of religion—love and peace—and that had been supplied by the mother. Peace alone now sufficed. To pay off the curse of having been born, one punishes oneself by remaining alive. To the masochist that is a source of pleasure; but others, like the derelicts in *The Iceman Cometh*, need to anaesthetise themselves against the pain of living. Adrift between heaven and hell, they were purgatorial ghosts silently punishing themselves without suffering. For they had rediscovered the old family remedy—drink and dope-dream—and found peace and contentment. But the theme of the play was not how to live.
O'Neill had developed that theme in his early plays when he had dealt with the life-sustaining power of illusion. Under the illusion that he was not afraid to die, the protagonist waited for death, which could come only after he had surrendered the last illusion. Peace would be his reward.

Whatever became of love in his plays? In *The Iceman Cometh*, O'Neill demonstrated not only that truth, justice, and faith are illusory but that love is non-existent, that it is a pipedream. The main business of the play was to unmask love—all forms, including that of the mother, a destructive pipedream, love-generated shame, guilt, hate, and death.

O'Neill had long been aware of the face behind the mask, of reality behind appearance. "Much possessed by death," he had written *Lazarus Laughed*, in which the heroine's fleeting fear of death was comforted by returning to the peace, protection, and comfort of childhood. But *The Iceman Cometh* put an end to evasion. Here it is the person who deprives life of its meaning, as though O'Neill was presenting the other side of the same coin. In *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Edmund at least has warmth and potentialities; in *A Moon*, Josie and Phil Hogan have warmth and an inner if well-concealed integrity. The denials and negations are set against affirmations.

In *The Iceman Cometh*, there is at best only a negative affirmation: that these men are essentially dead because in their egocentricity they have lost the qualities that give a meaning to life. They are no longer capable of human love, or even the will to act. Each one reveals the conscious act and the subconscious reasons behind the act that have deprived him of the power to
make and carry out a decision. In so far as each was responsible for his own action, the play is not deterministic. But O'Neill never really indicates how much choice a man had, or how far he was simply a puppet in the web of circumstances—and of circumstances not of his own weaving.

*A Touch of the Poet* is related to these highly personal dramas only in that O'Neill continues to use the dream-motif as a means of denying or evading the too-harsh realities of life. Cornelius Melody, ex-Major, ex-gentleman, and presently tavern-keeper, lives in his memories of earlier gallantry in love and war. When the dream is shattered, when Melody is inexorably forced to admit to himself his actual situation, the man dies even while he continues to live.

Even in this non-autobiographical play, O'Neill's quest for a valid faith has shifted from the philosophical to the personal. His wife and daughter are vital because they have the human warmth to give themselves to love. In the autobiographical plays this contrast between emotional life and emotional death is made even more explicit. In one sense, O'Neill as dramatist has changed radically. He was less interested "in digging at the roots of the world's sickness" than in delving directly into his own mortal and spiritual past. That the values he expressed dramatically are also values that had personal meaning, is partially borne out by the concluding paragraph of the dedication to his wife, of his play *Long Day's Journey Into Night*: "These twelve years, Beloved one, have been a journey into Light—into love" (LDJN 05).
With human love there is light. Implicit in these plays also, are overtones suggesting that human love in itself is divine, that as long as man retains inside himself warmth and feeling, his plight is known to an understanding and forgiving God. Especially near the end of Long Day's Journey Into Night are these transcendental overtones heard, in Eugene's handling of the baffling, tragic interrelationships in his own family. In this respect he seems nearer to Catholic fatalism than to scientific determinism. He has described (through Edmund) in his own life occasional mystical experiences when,

the moment of ecstatic freedom came. The peace, the end of the quest, the last harbour, the joy of belonging to a fulfilment beyond men's lousy, pitiful, greedy fear and hopes and dreams. . . . Like a Saint's vision of beatitude, like the veil of things as they seem drawn back by an unseen hand. For a second you see—and seeing the secret, are the secret. For a second, there is meaning! Then the hand lets the veil fall and you are alone lost in the fog again, and you stumble on toward nowhere, for no good reason!!

(LDJN 134-135)

This is the dilemma, the grim dichotomy that O'Neill has struggled with and never quite mastered. With his rational mind he has seen men struggling on toward nowhere, but he has seen also (possibly not with his eyes) that they both see the secret and are the secret. In rationalistic determinism nothing is hidden. If O'Neill's visions were momentary, sporadic and unconnected, he felt nevertheless that these visions were real—as actual as, say, the eating of bread or drinking of wine. As his faith in the abstract idea or the philosophic
or theological doctrine waned, he substituted for it the warmth of human love. However unorthodox an approach to divinity this may be, it gives a mellow underlying richness to the otherwise dark autobiographical plays.

In the play *Desire Under the Elms* also we find the secret expression of O'Neill's poignant nostalgia for a joy of life which he was unable to experience. Reduced to essentials in this very primitive setting man appears primarily as an animal. The first specimens Eben and especially Simeon and Peter, look like oxen, eat, work and behave like a team of oxen, and feel tied up to other animals of the farm by bonds of brotherhood. They obey their instincts blindly and think only of drinking, eating and fornicating. These inarticulate, animal-like creatures differ from their dumb brothers in only one respect. They are possessed with the mania of owning things whether gold or land. They all crave for money or title-deeds. They have only one redeeming feature: an embryonic sense of beauty. The play thus leads us to the disillusionment that human mind is inherently selfish, jealous, cruel, wicked, and even sadistic. Far from being a free agent, man is thus by and large the slave of his instincts and O'Neill here revives the old Calvinistic dogma of predestination. As early as his very first play, *The Web* of the transparent title, he attempted to show that man is caught in a web of circumstances, a web that is not of his own weaving. In *Desire Under the Elms*, Eben feels trapped in exactly the same way: "Each day," the stage directions inform us, "is a cage in which he finds himself trapped" (Vol. III, DUE 203). His temperament is wholly determined by his heredity: it is a combination of his mother's softness and lack of will.
In Desire Under the Elms Ephraim Cabot himself, for all his willpower and vigour, is caught in the same web as the others. His whole behaviour is conditioned by his puritan upbringing. He cannot think of anything but work. For him “work is worship” (Carlyle). Ephraim is a degenerate puritan as the play progresses. Work has ceased to be a form of worship for him, yet he believes in its virtue and absolute value because he has been brought up that way. He once tried to escape this self-imposed serfdom. His puritan compulsions practically deprived him of his freedom of choice. That is why he returned to the New England farm after his migration to the better plains of the West. All these characters are caught in a meshing of three basic “drives”—the need for love, the will to power, and the desire for beauty. Yet subsuming these drives is a sort of transcendent equilibrium or fate; like an arboreal oversoul, two great elms “brood oppressively” over Cabot’s house, occasionally raining tears on the roof.

So, at the start at least, the three major characters of Desire Under the Elms are not free. They are in psychological or moral chains. Consequently, they cannot be held responsible for their actions and Simeon with his peasant shrewdness is perfectly aware of “something” (Vol. III, DUE 207) that is to say one of those mysterious things which impel men was to act this way or that, whether they like it or not, whether they are aware of it or not.

How can a man save his soul under such circumstances? Though, theoretically, O’Neill’s approach is strictly non-theological and he is not concerned with the problems of salvation, he is constantly obsessed with it, all the same and in this particular play, he gives it a Nietzschean
answer: passion. Passion alone he suggests, can enable man to transcend his animal nature. He repeatedly exalts the purity and transfiguring power of love. Eben’s passion for Abbie which at first is mere lust soon becomes love—and there is a difference in kind between the two. The passage from lust to love is similar to the transmutation of lead into gold. Whereas lust which is tied to the body is finite and transient, love, which transcends the body is infinite and eternal. At the end of scene three of Part III, Abbie proclaims that her love for Eben will never change, whatever he does to her. The play ends on an apotheosis of love.

Along with the idea that man can be redeemed by a great passion and save his soul and attain grandeur, Desire Under the Elms gives another message—the message of submission or obedience to the laws of nature. In the play, Abbie recommends to yield to the life impulse to let nature speak at every hazard “without check with original energy.” It is against nature, it is impious, she claims, to resist its will: “It’s agin nature, Eben. Ye been fightin’ yer nature ever since the day I come . . . .” (Vol. III, DUE 229).

This is a combination of Nietzsche’s Dionysian philosophy and Freudianism and in Desire Under the Elms it leads to an optimistic conclusion: the couple Eben—Abbie is not crushed by adverse circumstances. They have fulfilled themselves, they have fully lived and, far from being driven to despair by their trials, they are full of a strange “hopeless hope.”

In this play we thus witness the dramatic clash of two opposite philosophies—Old Cabot’s puritanism and Abbie’s worship of Dionysius—a conflict between the stones of the former and the elms of the latter.
O'Neill obviously sympathised with warm uninhibited characters like Eben and Abbie in this play.

O'Neill was probably thinking of his own predicament when he made Dion, “life’s lover,” complain in *The Great God Brown* with a suffering bewilderment:

*Why am I afraid to dance, I who love music and rhythm and grace and song and laughter? Why am I afraid to live, I who love life and the beauty of flesh and the living colours of the earth and sky and sea? Why am I afraid of love, I who love love? . . . Why must I be so ashamed of my strength, so proud of my weakness?* (Vol. I, GGB Prologue 264)

He would have liked freely to worship “the Great God Pan” (Vol. I, GGB 267), as Dion calls him, instead of that he had to bear “the intolerable chalice of life” (Vol. I, GGB 322). He would have liked to laugh with Lazarus and shout like Lazarus’s followers: “There is only life; There is only laughter” (Vol. III, LL 310), but his ingrained masochistic Catholicism made laughter die on his lips. Two men were at war within O'Neill; he was both Bill Brown and Dion Anthony in *The Great God Brown*. But the twain never fused in the play.

However, O’Neill’s personal failure and his acute awareness of the cruelty of the human condition did not prevent him from concluding that life is a vivid and exciting experience well-worth the trouble to the end. So it should be stressed that both *The Iceman Cometh* and *Desire Under the Elms* can be said to be the secret expression of his poignant nostalgia for a joy of life which
he was unable to experience. O'Neill's ultimate attitude to life during the nostalgic period (1923-26) is best expressed by the hero of *The Great God Brown*: “I've loved, lusted, won and lost, sang and wept!” I've been life's lover! (Vol. I, GGB 296).

However, O'Neill proclaimed in *Lazarus Laughed*: “Men are also unimportant! Men pass! Like rain into the sea! The sea remains! . . . . Man remains . . . For man death is not” (Vol. III, LL 359-360). The same life force flows through all man and whatever their personal limitations may be, whether they are bums, drunken sailors or New England farmers, it endows them all with tragic grandeur. All individuals are potentially as worthy of interest. In all his plays, we find the expression of the quiet affirmation of life and the fundamental dignity of all men in a universe which is god-filled or godless or at least deprived of the help and support of the personal God.

What O'Neill has been attempting in all these plays is to analyse, whether the poignant sorrows of humanity can be justified and if so, in what terms? We see him in all these plays tracing out certain reasons for the man's sorrows and thereby helping us to find some possible answers to the sufferings and miseries in human life. In other words, what O'Neill endeavours in his plays is to interpret life and life's sufferings both teleologically and non-teleologically so as to overcome, to justify, to suffer or sympathise with the human predicament in the cosmos or in the seemingly apparent chaotic state of things in the world.

O'Neill's probing into the reality of human situation led him to a dissection of man's metaphysical and ontological status. His plays have
tremendous human significance in so far as they deal with the most
fundamental problems hindering a happy life for man in an indifferent, alien if
not altogether inhospitable and hostile, but at the same time beautiful and
mysterious universe.

O’Neill’s concern with the deep questionings of the mind, with man’s
perilous hold on the universe, and with his fear of emptiness and loneliness
had been manifested even in his early play *The Thirst*. His concept of the
“hopeless hope” which later echoed is echoed in *The Iceman Cometh* is
reflected in the Dancer’s words: “My God, this is horrible. To wait and wait
for something that never comes.”14 The Dancer’s question, “what have we
done that we should suffer so?”15 epitomises man’s predicament in this
mysterious and inscrutable universe. Both the gentleman and the Dancer
begin to realise the emptiness of the universe and purposelessness of the
cosmos. The universe which appears to be impersonal and blind seems to be
deaf to the prayers of man. As the ancient heavens had not listened to the
prayers of King Lear, here the heavens turn a deaf ear to the appeals of the
two ship-wrecked creatures. “But the blind sky will not answer your appeals
or mine.”16

Amidst the encircling gloom and darkness in human life with all its
intermittent darkness and light with all its meanings and meaninglessness, with
all its purposefulness and purposelessness, as depicted by O’Neill, his plays
can be treated as a path for a search for light in the labyrinth of darkness—a
quest for truth—which helps to illuminate the path in man’s journey of life, so
as to detect and differentiate the resolvable and irresolvable problems,
obstructing happiness in human life and also to resolve those which are not intractable, and upon mere detecting of those intractable problems, we can at least say, we are able to half-resolve it. O'Neill himself believed that the significance of life lies in 'fighting, willing and living.' In a letter to Mary Clark, his nurse at Gaylord Sanatorium, O'Neill reaffirmed his positive philosophy:

I am far from being a pessimist. I see life as a gorgeously—ironical, the tragedy of which gives man a tremendous significance, while without losing fight with fate he would be a tepid, silly animal. I say losing fight only symbolically, for the brave individual always wins. Fate can never conquer his or her spirit. So you see I'm no pessimist. On the contrary, in spite of my scares, I'm tickled to death with life.
NOTES


5 Ibid. 56.


15 Ibid. 78.

16 Ibid. 83.
