Preface

The idea of doing this dissertation on the plays of Eugene O’Neill, America’s only playwright to receive the Nobel Prize in literature budded in my mind, when Eugene O’Neill was remembered around the world during 1988, the year in which his birth centenary was celebrated. Eugene O’Neill was born on 16th October 1888. His claim as a virtual founder and the predominant playwright of the American theatre, with an international stature is borne out by his reception of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1936. He is one of those uncommon artists whose centennials deserved world wide celebration. The sheer impact of O’Neill on world culture is a measure of his importance as America’s foremost playwright, an importance that American critics recognised.

O’Neill’s success was rooted in his professional singleness of purpose. The man lived for his art. Because his art was life, O’Neill was fiercely protective of his artistic integrity. His meticulousness and tenacity were rewarded with a growing artistic skill, which ended in mastery.

The driving force behind O’Neill’s sense of purpose was his emotional intensity. The library of America has now published the complete plays, fifty plays arranged in the order in which O’Neill wrote them, and edited by Travis Bogard who has supplied concise and perceptive notes for each play. With his late masterpieces O’Neill finally achieved the fusion of the intensity of vision and the mastery of form that entitles him to be counted among the world’s genuinely great playwrights. O’Neill’s materials were often ordinary, but in his period of mastery he transformed everything he touched. Mundane reality became universal symbol and melodrama was transported beyond cliché into the domain of tragedy. Meditating on the painful memories of his own restless life after wrestling for a lifetime with the intractabilities of language, O’Neill gave the world a series of mature masterpieces, *Emperor Jones, Days Without End,*
Lazarus Laughed, Hairy Ape, Marco Millions, The Iceman Cometh, A Touch of the Poet, A Moon for the Misbegotten and Long Day’s Journey into Night to name a few. In an age when post-modern criticism’s audacious reduction of literature to non-signifying texts with no relationship to reality is coming into question, the incessantly autobiographical O’Neill reminds us that there is indeed an “outside” of the text and that in his case the impact of that outside on the text is pervasive and profound. He was one of the most fertile and comprehensive artists of the twentieth century. Anarchism, socialism, expressionism, realism, naturalism, the myth of the American frontier, technological advance, Darwinism, psychoanalysis, the collective unconscious, race relations, Nietzsche, the literary avant-garde in Europe, Greek tragedy, oriental thought—these influences and countless others irrigated O’Neill’s polymorphous dramaturgy. He was the greatest theatrical experimentalist in American history and, through his daring authority of his failures and successes, the father of modern American drama.

As mentioned at the outset, the occasion of the centenary of American’s Premier dramatist, made me choose Eugene O’Neill’s plays for my study for this dissertation and I felt that it was good and proper to make a humble attempt to pay my tribute to Eugene O’Neill by exploring the many facets of his life, plays and his vision. As a significant step forward in the realisation of O’Neill’s cherished dream that became a major motif in his plays: ‘the brotherhood of man’ is the subject matter of one of the chapters of my dissertation. It was primarily because he stood for universal brotherhood stalwartly Janus-masked, benevolently facing both east and west, throughout his creative career.

Eugene O’Neill, the virtual founder and the predominant playwright of the American theatre, with international stature, has not been given especially in India the deserving acclaim, he has received in his capacity as one of the influential dramatists of this century. It was in such a context also that the need was felt to put in perspective a
playwright who could effectively voice the ironies of the predicament of man in this mysterious universe.

Eugene O'Neill's view of life was so mature that he did not wish away the dark realities of life but encompassed within his rich imagination the sad plight of man on earth. A sharp intellect and a fertile imagination enabled O'Neill to sense the inexhaustible ambiguities of life. He depicts characters who, out of their inability to comprehend the mysteries of the universe in which they live, finally become victims of the twin evils of modern times, namely science and materialism. Through subtle turns of dialogues and situations, he could extenuate the pain one is likely to experience while witnessing the plight of these miserable people.

The proposed dissertation outlines the scarcely explored areas of O'Neill's plays. It probes how O'Neill's vision develops into that of a humanist and a mystic in his life and his plays. It investigates also how the mystical, contemplative philosophies and religions of the east, and the philosophies of the west influenced O'Neill's vision. Further it analyses how the dramatist depicts the sad and poignant aspects of the human predicament and delves into the mystery of man's eternal struggle with himself, his fate and with an overwhelming universe. It also probes O'Neill's conception of God and also the relevance of religion today. It investigates also how he seeks to find the means of creating a happy society by resolving the self-imposed, socially imposed and existentially inherent sorrows socially, politically, mystically or transcendentally as implied in his plays.

Eugene O'Neill was exposed to the many nationalities and ethnic distinctions of his fellow crewmen and learned among these rough, uneducated seamen lessons about the value of friendship, sacrifice, and integrity. So, he was able to depict his ethnic gallery of characters with compassion and understanding. O'Neill sought intently to improve the lot of suffering humanity as he explored numerous social issues: the dehumanisation and exploitation of the working class by indifferent capitalists as in *The Hairy Ape*, discrimination against non-whites by whites as in *All God's Chillun Got*
Wings: the Faust-like nature of the American character, as O'Neill perceived it, as having sold its life and soul for material objects. The apotheosis of O'Neill's crusade for universal brotherhood is found in *The Iceman Cometh*, which depicts a wide social spectrum: people from many walks of life and of different nationalities. O'Neill sought in the play to capture, the humour and friendship and human warmth and deep inner contentment of the characters. It was precisely through his association with outcasts that O'Neill discovered truths about human nature and the human condition. He understood the human psyche, its baseness and its greatness, as few writers have.

One other tale, besides the friendship saga, obsessed O'Neill: his own tortured, convoluted life story. Because all human lives pivot round the same types of familial ties, O'Neill's work assumes universal dimensions. He speaks the common language of the heart, expressing the longings of all mankind to love and be loved, to belong, to determine the why of existence. Because this language is readily understood by people of all classes and races, O'Neill has become an international playwright, respected and produced in countries throughout the world.

It is understandable why O'Neill, like Whitman and Henry David Thoreau, became one of the Chinese Philosophers' disciples, attracted as he was particularly to Lao Tzu's creative quietism which Witter Bynner in his translation of Lao Tzu: 'The Way of Life' (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1980, p. 12) calls "the fundamental sense commonly inherent in mankind, a common sense so profound in its simplicity that it has come to be called mysticism."

O'Neill believed ardently in Taoism according to which Men's conduct depends on instinct and conscience. Their own gentle, kind way of life suggests to neighbours how natural, easy, and happy a condition it is for men to be members of one another. In the period when O'Neill sought a replacement for his lost faith, he turned to and found a meaning for existence in Lao Tzu. The Chinese mystic and his 'Way of Life' continued to influence the author in the early 1920s. It is in his play, *Long Day's Journey into Night* that we find the real O'Neill, sharing perhaps the great climactic
mystic experience of his life and in it we are able to discover O'Neill's mystical and spiritual evolution.

The theatre for Today's World, as O'Neill sees it, is a source of inspiration that lifts us to a plane beyond ourselves and drives us deep into the unknown within and behind ourselves. The theatre should reveal to us what we are and hold the mirror of a soul up to a nation. The theatre, as O'Neill views it, has a two-fold purpose: to act as a moral force, making us aware of our ignoble lives when they are lived on the lower plane of reality or revealing our true mystic natures in lives lived on a higher moral level, and to mirror the image of the state of its citizens, gauging the collective moral well-being of a nation. For example, the sickness of soul, found in the four Tyrones in Long Day's Journey Into Night is merely indicative of the sickness of the American character, the microcosm of the family reflecting the macrocosm of society.

In the year 1953 Eugene O'Neill died. His birth centennial was in the year 1988; and the year 2003 marks the 50th year of his death. However, O'Neill does not belong to any period, but to eternity nor does he belong mentally solely to anyone country but to the whole world. He had scattered his enquiring spirit afar, that part of him that ever sought truth and wisdom—turning for religious and philosophical inspiration to China and the East, to Lao Tzu, Confucius, and Buddha, as well as Vishnu and Muhammad; and to Europe, to Nietzsche, Freud, Jung, Schopenhauer, Bakunin, Marx and for theatrical inspiration to Strindberg, Chekhov, Ibsen, Kaiser and Toller.

As readers or scholars we can perpetuate for posterity the recorded history of the twentieth century man as portrayed in world drama and encourage our fellow citizens to read the plays of O'Neill, that depict the realities and conundrums of life with all its complexities and tragedies and that reflect portraits of human beings, victims of a flawed inner self and fated by some behind-life-force. There is no limit to what we can do here to keep the spirit of dedication to O'Neill alive.
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George K. C.