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## Uniformity of Theme in Eugene O'Neill: Nature, a Sentient Factor in Man's Destiny

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UNIFORMITY OF THEME

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in

EUGENE O'NEILL

NATURE, A SENTIENT FACTOR IN MAN'S DESTINY

by

ANNYE BRITTINGHAM BURBANK

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
OF THE  
COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY  
  
for the degree of  
  
MASTER OF ARTS  
  
1932

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## **The Purpose of This Thesis**

The purpose of this thesis is to show that Eugene Gladstone O'Neill, though versatile in technique and protean in style, maintains the uniform theme that man's destiny is predetermined by nature, whether that nature be in the form of the elements: the sea, the soil, the atmosphere, or in the complex organism of man himself: the instincts, the desires, the racial heritage of his protagonists.

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill

His Personality and Its Reflection



## Eugene Gladstone O'Neill

### His Personality and Its Reflection

The personality of Eugene O'Neill is as prepossessing as his works. In his early youth he seemed destined to utter ruin, but Fate reversed its decision and permitted him to find himself that he might reveal to mankind the actualities of life. Endowed with a strong will, he finally worked out his own salvation, and then sought to break up the old conventions of the stage and to portray life in the tragic mode of the Greeks.

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill, born October 16, 1888, at the Barrett House on Broadway at Forty-third Street, New York, is still in the prime of life and bids fair to become America's greatest dramatist. He is fortunate in having had parents who possessed talents which made an indelible impression upon his childhood and youth. His father, James O'Neill, one of the most impressive personalities in the American theater of his generation, remembered primarily for his remarkable success in "Monte Cristo", had his share in shaping his son's destiny. His mother, though not an actress, always accompanied his father on his road tours in "Monte Cristo", and for the first seven years of his life O'Neill was carried from city to city over the United States. His appreciation of good music he attributes to his mother who was an exceptionally fine

pianist and who taught her son in his earliest childhood a love of rhythm, harmony, and good taste in music.

After spending his first seven years on road tours with his mother and father, O'Neill attended Catholic boarding schools for a period of six years and then entered Betts Academy at Stamford, from which he was graduated in 1906. In the fall of the same year he matriculated at Princeton, but college at that period of his life was irksome to him, and he did not regret his dismissal in the following June.

Soon after his experience in college, O'Neill abandoned himself to romantic adventures, seeking exotic scenes and people, little dreaming that he was storing inestimably valuable experiences which would form the background of his realistic drama.

In 1909 he visited Honduras on a gold-prospecting trip, but after a few months he returned home and became assistant manager of his father's road company. His interest, however, did not lie in that kind of employment, and he again sought diversion in a sea voyage on a Norwegian ship which landed him in Buenos Aires. He trifled with first one job and then another, working for the Westinghouse Company, the Swift Company at La Plata, and the Singer Company at Buenos Aires again. But O'Neill was too restless for employment. He preferred to hang about the docks, to make friends with sailors, outcasts, and the down-and-outs, and to drink the

many concoctions of tropical intoxicants. His roaming instinct, however, did not completely annihilate his better self. He was not a hopeless failure; he simply had not found himself.

From Buenos Aires he traveled on a cattle ship to Durban, Africa, but having no money, he was refused admittance into Africa and was forced to return to Buenos Aires. After a lengthy period of complete destitution there, he signed as ordinary seaman on a British tramp steamer bound for New York.

Having arrived in New York, O'Neill took quarters at "Jimmy the Priest's", a waterfront dive. After a few months' stay around the waterfront of New York he became an able seaman on the American Line, New York--Southampton, but he soon terminated his sea voyages and returned to the United States.

On his return to his native land O'Neill once again enrolled as a member of the "Monte Cristo" Company, and appeared as an actor in Utah in one of the minor parts. At the close of the season, fifteen weeks later, he was employed as cub reporter on the Telegraph in New London, where he formed a sincere friendship for his boss, Frederick Latimer, who, believing in O'Neill's ability to write, greatly encouraged him to develop his talent.

In December, 1912, O'Neill's health broke down and his physician diagnosed his illness to be incipient

tuberculosis. This is not surprising. For sixteen years he had lived a dissipated life, seriously taxing his physical endurance. He was ordered to a sanatorium, and on Christmas Eve he entered Gaylord Farm, at Wallingford, Connecticut. Here Eugene O'Neill began to take stock of himself. He had an opportunity to consider his past, his present, his future. These five months at Gaylord marked the turning point of his life. Here the urge to write drama descended upon him. The wild boy, whose restless curiosity had driven him in search of strange experiences, had learned great truths of life. He knew the hearts and thoughts of men,--bare and stripped of all hypocrisy. He had not been an intruder of the underworld, he had been a participant. His plays would come out of his own experiences. He had read deep into the book of life. The man who left Gaylord Sanatorium was far different from the youth who entered there. The period of reflection had moulded a new philosophy, created new aspirations, and aroused a conscious effort to rebuild his health.

When O'Neill did begin to write, he began in earnest. During his convalescence on Long Island Sound, he read everything he could get his hands on; the Greeks, the Elizabethans, the Moderns, especially Nietzsche, Ibsen, and Strindberg. After his restoration to health he enrolled in Dr. Baker's famous English 47 class at Harvard. Though O'Neill denies that he gained much in technique from Dr.

Baker, he admits that his personal association with the professor was invaluable. From Harvard he went to Greenwich Village, where he found congenial companions among the Radicals and the Anarchists.

His first volume of one-act plays was rather melodramatic, yet in them were power and promise. His development has been just slow enough to be sure. He perfected himself in one-act plays before attempting longer ones. Step by step he has climbed until in "Mourning Becomes Electra" he has consummated his most ambitious work. In his plays O'Neill deals not with situations but with characters and psychological forces directing their fates. He gets behind all the nice motives of life, which appear on the surface and exposes to plain view the real emotions and desires of men and women, not always in agreement with the conventional code of society.

In a letter<sup>1</sup> to Dr. Arthur Hobson Quinn, editor of Representative American Plays, O'Neill gives his theory of tragedy:

"Where I feel myself most neglected is just where I set most store by myself--as a bit of a poet who has labored with the spoken word to evolve original rhythms of beauty where beauty apparently isn't-----and to see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy, in as near the Greek sense as one can grasp it, in seemingly the most ignoble, debased lives. And just here is where I am a most confirmed mystic, too, for I'm always, always trying to interpret Life in terms of lives, never conscious of the Force behind--(Fate, God, or biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it--Mystery, certainly)--and of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to

1. Review of Reviews, Vol. 74: 551, N 26

make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. My profound conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about."

In American art O'Neill is a progressive. Through all his work, however, there is a fixed purpose--to interpret truly aspiring humanity, aspiring upward, even through sin and shame. Whatever his characters may attempt, success or failure means little; it is the struggle for a place in creation which is worthwhile.

Thus, through O'Neill the man we have O'Neill the artist.

**Dramatic Technique**

**Revival of Old and Invention of New Dramatic Devices**

## Dramatic Technique

### Revival of Old and Invention of New Dramatic Devices

One of the most significant things about Eugene O'Neill is that his qualities as a dramatist are fundamentally theatrical. He has resurrected in himself that profound and mystical vitality of the Greeks by rediscovering paganism. He bears many points of resemblance to Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. In O'Neill, as in Sophocles, fate, the prime motive of ancient tragedy, is no longer felt as a capricious external power, but as the inevitable outcome of character and the unavoidable condition of life. Tragic pathos is refined to a sense of the universal human fellowship in frailty and suffering. O'Neill has completely shifted the tragic situation from a conflict between man and the divine laws of the universe to man's inner soul.

Eugene O'Neill is a unique dramatist in that during his life time he has actually attained the hearing of a world audience. The dramatist must run the gauntlet of merciless inspection and criticism at the hands of not only his fellow-craftsmen but a public ever attaining higher levels of sophistication and developing superior standards of taste through contact with the world's best drama. The dramatist of today must possess not only wide knowledge of his art, but astute mastery of its technique. Since society has a knowledge of human nature, acquired by a scientific, a



psychological, and a philosophical study, it is quick to attack and condemn any fault on the part of the playwright.

The modern man has become dissatisfied with Shakespeare's conception of the world, since Shakespeare was not a social philosopher. His is a drama of superman and superwoman. His heroes and heroines grapple with that power and force known as Fate, Destiny, Providence, or the Divine Order. His dramas present the clash of man and the Universe. O'Neill's dramas present the clash within the man. His attention is fixed upon social evil and social tragedy. His freedom of technique has enabled him to open new paths for his creative consciousness, has shattered the outworn conventions of the stage, and has inaugurated new heresies. His drama has been of an evolutionary form; it has sprung from an inner compulsion to create self-expression, and not from any motive to conform to classical traditions or to current canons of taste. His plays have not swayed the general public, but regardless of public approbation or disapproval, he has shown that he, and not the public, is the ultimate authority of his dramatic form.

The drama of O'Neill in the main deals with conflict, struggle, and the clashes arising from the development of character and the growth of the soul. His drama has been essentially explicative in character, concerning itself less with actions themselves than with the psychological motives which give rise to such actions or the development

of character in consequence of such actions. Always there has been a relentless facing of facts of life as he has seen them, with no sentimentality, no shaping up of his materials to suit the public taste. So constant has been this dramatist's ironies of life that his plays must be tragedies. More and more has he studied the individual in an effort to discern and present the forces producing conduct in man.

O'Neill became an experimentalist in form in order to accomplish his end. He wrote as he saw the people, as he sensed their emotional conduct. He wrote to get the effect desired. If the public accepted his work, he was glad; if not, he at least had been honest with himself. So his experimentation has resulted in a varied technique. He has employed symbolic devices to express the passion of the mind and heart; he has used the mask to portray man's dual personality; he has revived the soliloquy and the aside without in the least disturbing the audience's continuity of interest in the dialogue; he has shown absolute disregard for the unities and has cut out a pattern to suit his theme, regardless of time, place or device.

Studying fear, O'Neill wrote "The Emperor Jones." Here he felt the need of a freer form, and wrote an episodic monologue of eight scenes. Having read how the medicine men of the Congo, in their religious rites, timed the beats of the kettledrum with the heart beat and then

drummed savage hearts into a state of frenzy, he used the same effect in the gradually accelerating beats of the tom-toms. Starting at a rate corresponding to the normal pulse beat, the speed of the tom-tom's beat increases without interruption until we actually seem to hear the palpitating of Jones's heart as his soul sheds its armor of civilization. Thus, through this means O'Neill has become a symbolist, suggesting or picturing the complicated commingling of human emotions.

"The Hairy Ape" does only on a larger scale what "The Emperor Jones" has done. Studying the suffering mind, O'Neill found emotional expression for what he discovered. He considered "The Hairy Ape" as a "symbol of a man who had lost his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not yet acquired in a spiritual way."<sup>1</sup> The symbolism occurs in the grotesque spectacle of Yank's trying "ter tink" and dividing people and things into those that "belong" and those that do not "belong". The imagination behind the invention is unique in that it sums up all the feelings of the wounded creature: his glimpses into thought, his impatient defeats, his reticences. In this play the thought and feeling are essentially theatrical. When read, it might seem exaggerated or out of taste, but when acted, the story begins, moves, and ends in a line so straight and so inevitable, that it may easily be taken for granted by the imagination. His stage devices but accentuate the motive of the tragedy.

<sup>1</sup>. New York Herald Tribune, Nov. 16, 1924

"Dynamo" is an interesting study because the feeling behind it is genuine and personal. It seems to arise from the author's own turmoil and emotional necessity. Though at times the play seems to be adolescent and trite and incapable of arousing a sympathetic appreciation of the inanimate machine-god "Dynamo", still we are moved to the depths by the importance of this feeling to the author, and we are captivated by his careful technique in emphasizing sounds.

In a letter<sup>1</sup> to the New York Times, he wrote, "I have always used sound in plays as a structural part of them." In this same letter he explained that great care must be used in the sounds called for in this play, particularly the noise of the gradually approaching storm in the first act: "thunder with a menacing, brooding quality as if some electrical god were on the hills, impelling all the actors, affecting their thoughts and actions."

The steady hum of the dynamo in the electric plant has much to do with the characters in the play: Ramsay Fife is dominated by it; Mrs. Fife hums her sentimental tunes to its imaginary accompaniment; Ada Fife is terrorized by it; Reuben Light is enticed to accept through its song the mechanical god, and, in his effort to placate its ruthless demands, brings about his own immolation. So astutely has O'Neill employed this expressionistic device of sounds that the reader or spectator feels its force throughout the play.

1. New York Times, March 3, 1929

As another means of symbolism O'Neill has reverted to the use of the masks--not in mere imitation of the Greeks, but through his ingenuity of imagination, as a real means to an end.

In "The Great God Brown" the masks are well used. Coming on and off as they do, when the characters confront one another, the masks say quickly and clearly certain things they need to say. They are made to justify themselves by being made expressive. They say what nothing else in the play can say, and are used not only to express the real character sometimes shown the world, but also to express the transfer of one man's personality to another. In this play the force of life manifests itself through the masks of its characters: Dion Anthony, the painter represents the creative spirit of art; William Brown, the successful man of today; Margaret, the normal woman; Cybel, the prostitute--all representing the eternal creative instinct in different phases. The struggle here is expressed symbolically, and the interpretation of the varying changes of personality in the characters is made quicker of appeal through the use of masks. O'Neill with all his symbolism never fails to create live people, and in "The Great God Brown" we are held by the human struggle without seeing the symbolism at all.

In "Lazarus Laughs" O'Neill has used not only the mask, but also the chorus, Greek in form, to achieve his desired end. In this play he takes the theme of laughter and develops it through scene after scene of climactic crises, not by any

change in its original simplicity, but by the ever expanding vistas of its meaning. The attendant choruses of the Greek type, the hallelujahs of the day of Christ, the barbaric atmosphere of the Roman era are all vigorously blended to accentuate the theme.

" 'Lazarus Laughed' is a spiritually liberating dithyrambic poem in eight movements carved out of laughter. It is the most strangely exhilarating play of our world-without-ideal--a world which worships mimetically the memory of life, of beauty. Eugene O'Neill is only one who has imagined Lazarus, the death's head of the New Testament, as returned from the grave, a laughing Dionysian: exhilarating, because the song of that Great Laughter is as elemental as the natural laughter of the sun through the cleansing thunder, lightning, and rain of an oppressive summer day. It is as if O'Neill in the face of the oppressive fears men call civilization, had plunged his spirit into the crucible of life's elements, and had emerged with Lazarus as the symbol to men of Man's mighty 'Yes' to life. ....What Lazarus sings is that there is no Death, only Life--the Oneness of Man in the Dust. Men die, but Man never dies because he is ever reborn in the dust of men.

.....  
 "It is this song that Lazarus sings to the end of his second life. He sings it to the Jewish and to the Nazarene world of the earliest Christian movement, torn by the internecine hatred and torturous doubts the while Jesus is in prison. He sings it to a sterile Greece, feeding upon its memories of Dionysian beauty, contemptuously enslaved by the bloated Rome of Tiberius and Caligula. He sings it to that Rome itself, with its inverted men and women disintegrating in the Nirvana of their perverse lusts. ....

"As a counterpoint to Lazarus' song of laughter, O'Neill has composed a transcendent theatrical score of the movement of men's lives in Jerusalem, Greece, and Rome in the opening years of Christ which calls for creative fusion of the arts of dancing and poetry and music gradually estranged since the death of the Dionysian rites.

"It calls for group dancing--joyous country dances bestially parodied by blood--lusting mobs until they become fearsome dances of death. It calls for music;

it is an inevitable plus perfect libretto for an opera score. It calls for sculpture--in the masks of the choruses, crowds, and protagonists. For O'Neill arbitrarily subdivides humanity into seven types of general human character and the resultant multiplication produces exactly forty-nine different examples of homo sapiens. It calls for stage architecture which will illustrate the poverty and unrest of the Bethany countryside, the Doric memories of Greece, in an ancient Greek temple facade, the weight of an old Roman temple, the orgiastic splendor of Tiberius' banquet hall, the unleashed madness in a Roman amphitheatre.

"Whoever plays Lazarus must know how to laugh affirmatively. It must be laughter unshaded by doubts and tears--laughter which makes all who hear, laugh. Lazarus alone wears no mask. So ideal is the nature created by O'Neill for Lazarus that you see him not as the name resurrected from St. John's account, but as a symbolical flame in which Man is constantly tending toward rebirth--as from scene to scene Lazarus grows visually younger.

" 'Lazarus Laughs' is dithyrambic in that it indicates the Dionysian impulse in the symbolical figure Lazarus. ....O'Neill has not written a classic Greek play. His is a classic modern play--a play of our time, one answer to our hopes, discontents, sterilities. ....

"Out of the New Testament Lazarus story O'Neill has reconstructed the earliest Christian moment in the decadent worlds of Jerusalem, Greece, and Rome as a ... mirror of our moment. Lazarus' exhortation to the men of that world to remember laughter is as applicable now as it was then. It is a loving fable O'Neill has mined from the meagre lines of Saint John. Out of that brief sentence 'Jesus Wept' O'Neill creatively plucked the conclusion that Lazarus laughed. The miracle was not that Jesus brought Lazarus back from death, but that he brought him back to life and O'Neill is the first one to interpret this." 1.

Irving Sussman in the Musical Digest predicted that out of O'Neill's production of "Lazarus Laughed" might come a new opera-form, an ideal opera--perhaps the Great American Opera so long awaited. When the play was given in Pasadena, California, four hundred costumes and three hundred masks

1. Arts and Decorations, Vol. 27, Sept. 1927, Page 68

had to be provided. The incidental music, written by Arthur Alexander, a Los Angeles pianist and composer, followed every inflection of speech, intensifying the mood and meaning, and revealing and vivifying the theme so marvelously conceived and planned by O'Neill.

In "Strange Interlude" two technical novelties appeared. One, the double length of the play; the other, the return of the soliloquy and the aside. Through this dramatic means of expression O'Neill broke down the realistic taboo. This play stretches the range of modern English drama, both in time and subtlety of plot; involving motivation, complexity of feeling, and intellectual frankness.

This play is divided into nine acts and covers a period of twenty-seven years or more; yet so skillfully has the playwright developed his plot and so expertly delineated his characters that one's intellectual interest obviates one's physical fatigue.

In resurrecting the soliloquy, O'Neill has humanized his characters and placed them naturally in the scheme of life. He has gone to the core of the lives of his people and forced them to give us the motive or reason of their acts so that a rounded view of the characters is possible. Through the soliloquy he has enabled the audience to get a true revelation of character and the springs to action--a revelation that the mere conventional speeches of the actors, the dramatic dialogue proper, fails to convey.

O'Neill likes to be explicit and comprehensive. In



"The Great God Brown" he handled his allegory through the aid of masks. But he felt the mask to be inadequate to meet the interpretation of "Strange Interlude". He realized that man not only wore a false face in front of the world, but hid himself behind a curtain of speech--the ordinary conversation. He, therefore, conceived the idea of dramatic inclusiveness, by including in the audible drama the ordinarily unspoken parts of one's conversations--the things he is thinking as he finishes speaking something entirely different. Thus we have meditation and act as things often completely dissociated from each other.

The asides which O'Neill first developed in "Strange Interlude" are continued in "Dynamo". All preliminary approach to a problem by long exposition is cut short by speeches packed with the essence of an attitude or a point of view. The whole fundamentalist--atheist antagonism in the older generation and its effect on the young people is concentrated in sharp asides.

Thus through the agency of soliloquies and asides we get the whole history of a life-time--a means which accentuates the covert, motives underlying overt tragedies.

O'Neill's art has been progressive. In The Yale Review<sup>1</sup>. George P. Baker wrote that O'Neill's first volume of one-act plays was melodramatic in a certain overstraining of stage values and a greater feeling for the theatre than for human qualities. With "Bound East for Cardiff", however, he could

<sup>1</sup>. Yale Review, 15: 789-792, Je '26

see that O'Neill was working out situation with character into studies of characters who created the situations in and of themselves. Through persistent effort he has grown until he has broken all dramatic rules without impairing his reputation regarding dramatic laws. He declines to be limited by theme or locality and has shocked contemporary dramatists and critics with his impulsive trilogies: "Beyond the Horizon", "Strange Interlude", and "Mourning Becomes Electra". In "Mourning Becomes Electra", his most ambitious work, he deliberately challenges comparison with the great Greek dramatists, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, by appropriating one of their plots and changing it to fit his modern conception of drama.

By a process of evolution O'Neill has brought into the drama the idea that the individual is the creature of the historical moment, of social environment, of physical heredity. He has set himself the severest task: the placing of real people in natural situations. However, he understands people of his own time and country, their racial feeling, and social hereditament. He has followed the three types of serious drama: the Greek, the Elizabethan, and the Modern. In him we have found that temperamental, biological, and social determinism is the modern equivalent of ancient fatality. In him the ancient tragic terror has become softened into something which closely resembles social pity and altruistic concern.

Although his tragic world has a pessimistic determinism, O'Neill himself is not a misanthropist. He treats his creatures with pity, not with contempt. During his first decade he dealt by preference with the disinherited. He delighted in portraying the more unfortunate among farmers and laborers. Peasants, sailors, stokers, prostitutes, and negroes were his types, and the sea, the unproductive farm, and the slum were his locale, but during the past five years he has been exploring other fields. He has invaded the province of the professor, the doctor, the novelist, the business man, the adventurer, the royalist, the soldier, the purist, and has succeeded--no matter how difficult the situation--in devising some unique technique to emphasize his theme of determinism or fatalism.

Versatility in Style

Realism, Naturalism, Romanticism

## Versatility in Style

### Realism, Naturalism, Romanticism

No contemporary writer has been more versatile in style than Eugene O'Neill. He has ventured into realism, naturalism, materialism, romanticism, and expressionism. He has discussed problems: racial, social, intellectual, spiritual, and incestuous. Yet in the exposition of his drama, one note predominates: man is inhibited by some force and his acts are predetermined by that Force.

As a realist he set for himself the task of placing real people in natural situations. To do this the artist must deal with people of his own world, of his own time. Just as the biologist concerns himself with the life forms of animals and the evolution of types, so must the scientific realist study the life forms of human beings and the evolution of certain psychological, social, and ethical types. O'Neill has been successful in realistic drama because he has experienced the realities that he has portrayed. Because of his adventures on the sea, he has been able to write his realistic dramas of the sea--a series of episodes in the life of the motley crew of the British tramp steamer, "Glencairn". Scotch and Irish, Swede and Russian, Yank and Briton, rubbing shoulders, matching wit and profanity on deck, in forecastle, in seaport dive--all these O'Neill knew in his own years before the mast, and he has painted them in sure, bold strokes.

"The Moon of the Caribbees" reveals the conflict between the passions of the West Indian harborage and the memories of home fortified by rum: "Bound East for Caridff", the incomprehensibility of death: "The Long Voyage Home", the fatal recurrence of accident in keeping a homesick sailor tied to the sea: "In the Zone", the mutual humiliation which abashes both victim and tormentors when a suspected bomb proves to be only a bunch of love-letters: "Ile", the madness of the wife of a whaling captain in the loneliness of the polar sea: "Where the Cross Is Made", the treasure-mania of a captain and his son. In "Anna Christie" we are gripped by the fidelity of the picture of the sea and the waterside life. The sordid saloon, the barman, the drinkers, the old sailors, the drab--all appear just as they would, should one visit the water-front of New York, Confidence in the truthfulness of this study increases as the leading characters, Chris Christopherson, Anne, and Mat Burke are revealed.

"The Straw" is another example of O'Neill's realistic drama. O'Neill puts himself into the play in the character of Stephen Murray. Like Stephen Murray he had spent six months in a sanatorium, Gaylord Farm in Connecticut, "thinking it over", and as one reads the play, he feels that he is reading O'Neill's autobiography.

Under naturalism the author disclaims any right to draw conclusions or to moralize. He seeks only to reproduce life

as it actually is at bottom, in the light of biological and social science. He studies man as an organism--the product of race, environment, epoch; the integration of all antecedent influences and present environment. In such drama O'Neill has chosen from contemporary life the life of the humble and the lowly. The subjects treated are repulsive to many readers and theatre-goers accustomed to the universal idealization of life in the conventional play. The ugly, the abnormal, the asymmetric have been his types. His search has been not for beauty, for the ideal, or the moral; his search has been for the truth in the light of modern social relativity. He has been intent upon exhibiting in the most effective way the influences of environment and heredity. Consequently, he has chosen his subjects from those classes of society which exhibit the operation of these forces in the most striking way. Hence, his characters are individuals descending in the character scale--abnormal, aberrant, distorted types, moral perverts, or human symptoms of a decadent civilization.

Although "Diff'rent" was never a great success in the theatre, it is a good example of the naturalistic drama. O'Neill showed that he knew his characters and was able to make them speak and act in accordance with their ideas and impulses. It is true that the characters of Emma and Bennie are revolting, but the author has succeeded in opening our eyes to the appalling denouement of sex repression.

In "Desire Under the Elms" O'Neill has limited the horizon of his characters physically and spiritually, to the tiny New England farm upon which the action passes, and has made their intensity spring from the limitations of their experience. It is a story of human relationships become intolerably tense because of inhibitions, repressions, and limitations, of the possessive instinct grown inhumanly powerful because of the lack of opportunity for its gratification, and of physical passion which becomes destructive because of the sense of sin. This play is a

"living organism, pulsating and malefic. Greed, desire, tyranny of the soil, the ghosts of the dead, the ferocity of the living, youth and age, childbirth, and infanticide charge this play in every scene with wrath and brutality. There is no flinching. It is a natural tragedy incarnadined. It is the quintessence of what O'Neill has to say".<sup>1</sup>

In "Beyond the Horizon" O'Neill has combined naturalism, materialism, and romanticism. What makes this play the best of his naturalistic plays is its flavor of romance. In this play the author has put his own longings for adventure, which led him to South Africa and to South America, which took him to a hole on a ship and to a 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'Neill himself that is speaking. Robert is the romanticist who by irony of Fate degenerates into an ignominious failure as a farmer. Andrew, his brother, is the materialist, ever seeking monetary gains in lands of

<sup>1</sup>. New York Times, May 1931, "Dramatist of the Soil and the Sea."



romance. Ruth married to the romanticist, with whom she can have no sympathy, and longing for the materialist whom she has rejected, finds herself in an intolerable position. Her passion can neither reciprocate nor be reciprocated. This graphic combination opens our eyes to the tragic consequences of misplaced vocations.

"Marco Millions" and "The Fountain" seem to be antithetical in their romantic-materialistic trend. In the former, materialism is the dominant force, and in his greed for gold the protagonist is entirely oblivious of the beauty he is destroying and the soul of love he has annihilated. In the latter, romanticism wins over materialism, although the struggle has been a bitter and selfish one.

O'Neill has been unusually successful as an expressionist. He has ever sought to harmonize action, background, and scenery in order to show what is going on in the mind of the individual. He has resorted to masks, choruses, symbolic sounds and soliloquies and asides. He has not hesitated to imitate the Greek and the Elizabethan dramatists, but his imagination has led him beyond mere imitation. Greek tragedy was not a realistic, but an expressionistic imitation. It dealt with a heroic past conceived, not in a real but an imaginary world. Its gods and heroes spoke, by their very natures, in rhythmic speech, rising in emotional crises into song. Their deeds and destinies were lyrically sung by an ideal populace, the chorus. Nor was environment neglected. The background

of the theatre was appropriate to the action of the great majority of the plays, and the emotion of the subjects was expressed in harmony and rhythm and in tone. The Elizabethan dramatist could ignore time, shift from place to place, could make characters unpack their hearts in soliloquies and explain in asides whatever was passing through their minds. He could bring about comic or even tragic situations with utmost ease by aid of convention which rendered the thinnest of disguises absolutely impenetrable.

The growth of modern drama has been conditioned by an ever increasing harmony between action and its background. O'Neill has completed this evolution, he has transferred bodily to the stage the interior scenes from real life. "The Emperor Jones", "The Hairy Ape", "Lazarus Laughs", "Dynamo", "The Great God Brown", and "Strange Interlude" illustrate his expressionistic type.

Although O'Neill emphatically states<sup>1</sup> that "All God's chillun Got Wings" is not a race problem play, the general populace both white and black considered it so and vigorously protested its performance. When one reads Shakespeare's "Othello", he is so enthralled by the tragedy that he overlooks the fact that fair Desdemona has been married to the black Moor, Othello. It is the tragedy that predominates. O'Neill, too, intended to portray the special lives of individual human beings and to show their tragic struggle for happiness. The play does present a problem, however, for it

<sup>1</sup>. New York Herald Tribune, March 19, 1924.

shows that miscegenation does not work well. Although revolting, the problem of miscegenation will not be solved by an agreement not to mention it, and the ignoble white and the aspiring black may derive valuable lessons from such a drama.

In "Lazarus Laughs" O'Neill seems to have found a spiritual satisfaction that he could not gratify in "Dynamo". In "Dynamo" the protagonist renounced the God of his father and sought a new god in science, but science did not satisfy, for science is intellectual and religion is emotional and spiritual. In "Lazarus Laughs" the emotions are aroused through eternal joy--the joy of eternal life. The play is based on the verse in Psalm II "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh." Lazarus, returning from the dead, brings this essential truth back with him, and laughs in God's eternal laughter. Here O'Neill seems to stress the immortality of the soul, thereby holding out the only definite hope that he has promised in any of his plays.

The incest problem also plays a large part in O'Neill's dramas. In "Desire Under the Elms" a woman seduces her stepson, paternal jealousy is evidenced, ghostly mother love motivates action, filial and paternal hate vie with each other in the insane desire for possession, and sexual gratification sacrifices an innocent babe. In "Strange Interlude" Nina seeks to find and express her emotional necessities; father, lover, husband, son; being in turn daughter, prosti-

tute, wife, mistress, mother; and Marsden, the novelist, suffers from a mother-complex.

But the most highly developed Greek motive of incest occurs in "Mourning Becomes Electra". In Orin we find the Oedipus-complex in his mother-fixation and also the Electra-complex in his sister-fixation in the third part of the Trilogy. In Lavinia we find the father-fixation and in Christine the son-fixation. However, O'Neill seems to be at his best in this drama in which he has pictured decaying Puritan New England and its sexual maladjustments.

Fatalism

Uniformity of Theme

Influences of the Sea

## The Theme of O'Neill's Drama

### Fatalism

#### Man's Destiny Is Predetermined by Nature

#### Influences of the Sea

In all of Eugene O'Neill's plays there is an underlying philosophy that man's destiny is predetermined by nature,-- whether that nature be in the form of the elements of the sea, the soil, the atmosphere, or in the organic complexities of life: the instincts, the desires, or the racial heritage of his protagonists.

The sea and the soil are the forces that O'Neill understands most completely; consequently, the characters that have been steeped in the brine of the deep and bound to the soil he most vividly imagines and portrays. In the development of his one-act plays, he has used the sea as the major factor in controlling the lives of his people. The sea has its being as a sentient God, impelling, forbidding, chastizing, restraining those who venture upon its province. This sea-being stalks about entangling in its net the prey that it would annihilate. We meet him in "In the Zone", "The Moon of the Carribbees", "Bound East for Cardiff", "The Long Voyage Home", "Ile", "Where the Cross Is Made", and other one-act plays of less note.

"In the Zone" relates an episode aboard the British tramp steamer "Glencairn" in the submarine zone during the year of 1915. In the fo'c'sle the sailors are in a state

of high nervous tension, constantly watching for a submarine attack. There is one of the crew, Smitty, who keeps himself aloof and arouses the suspicion of the others when he secretes a box under his mattress. Believing Smitty to be a spy for the Germans and to possess valuable information, the sailors seize the box during his absence from the fo'c'sle and, anticipating danger, throw it into a pail of water so as to invalidate any explosive contents. Smitty, coming upon them in this act, is bound, accused of treachery, and insulted by blows. He pleads with the men not to open his private box, but his appeal is in vain. Upon opening the box, the sailors find only a bundle of letters from the girl to whom Smitty had been engaged, and in reading them, discover the cause of Smitty's reticence and aloofness: he had been dismissed as her lover because he drank, and in desperation he had fled to the sea. But Smitty can find no consolation in the sea--he hates it--and he is inevitably drawn to read and reread the missives from the one he loves. The men, deeply ashamed of their insult, release Smitty and slink away in silence. Although this play is more sentimental than the subsequent one-act plays, it has force and shows the prevailing power of the sea upon Smitty, who is unable to fit into the situation in which he has placed himself.

Again we have this crew on the same tramp steamer "Glencairn" in "The Moon of the Caribbees". This play is characterized by atmosphere; there is no plot. It is just a scene of

drunkenness and lust in the tropic night under the full moon, with negroes chanting in the distance. Though sordid, it is highly poetic in that it presents images that have been intensely realized and vividly rendered. The atmosphere of the steamer, at anchor off an island in the West Indies, and songs, crooned by the negroes on shore, become a Force from which Smitty cannot extricate himself. He can neither adjust himself to his environment nor leave it. He, too, hates the sea, yet he cannot escape it. Memories, aroused by the negro melodies, deny him peace until he drowns them in drink. It is clear that situation has led Smitty into character, and now character is leading him to think of forces which are subtly compelling him to be what he is. He is no longer a free agent--he is a bit of broken humanity, a pitiable object of loneliness in the presence of the sea. In a letter<sup>1</sup> to Barrett H. Clark, O'Neill explained "The Moon of the Caribbees":

"....."The Moon of the Caribbees", for example--(my favorite)--is distinctly my own. The spirit of the sea--a big thing--is in this latter play the hero. ....Smitty in the stuffy, grease-paint atmosphere of "In the Zone" is magnified into a hero who attracts our sentimental sympathy. In "The Moon", posed against a background of that beauty, sad because it is eternal, which is one of the revealing moods of the sea's truth, his silhouetted gestures of self-pity are reduced to their proper insignificance, his thin whine of weakness is lost in the silence which it was mean enough to disturb, we get the perspective to judge him--and the others--and we find his sentimental posing much more out of harmony with truth, much less in tune with beauty, than the honest vulgarity of his mates. To me "The Moon" works with truth, while "In the Zone" substitutes sentimentalism. ...."

1. Barrett H. Clark, Eugene O'Neill, R. M. McBride & Co. New York, 1927. Page 43.



In "Bound East for Cardiff" the same atmosphere of the steamer Glencairn prevails and the principal characters are the same as in "The Moon of the Caribbees" and "In the Zone". The episode takes place on a voyage between New York and Cardiff. The sailor Yank, wearied with the life of the sea and disappointed that he had not been able to retire to a comfortable life on land lies dying in his bunk while the others indifferent to imminent death tell yarns and exchange reminiscences. Added to the gruesomeness of the sea, a heavy fog, significant of impending death, enshrouds all. One sailor, Driscoll, has formed a sincere friendship for Yank, and though he realizes the futility of his efforts, he tries to comfort the dying shipmate.

Driscoll<sup>1</sup>.--Are ye feelin' more aisy loike now?

Yank--Yes-now-when I know it's all up,-----I was just thinkin' it ain't as bad as people think--dyin'. I ain't never took much stock in the truck them sky-pilots preach. I ain't never had religion; but I know whatever it is what comes after it can't be no worsen'n this. I don't like to leave you Drisc, but--that's all.

Driscoll--(With a groan) Lad, lad, don't be talkin'.

Yank--This sailor life ain't much to cry about leavin'--just one ship after another, hard work, small pay, and bumb grub; and when we git into port, just a drunk endin' up in a fight, and all your money gone, and then ship away again. Never meetin' no nice people; never gittin' outa sailor town, hardly, in any port, travellin' all over the world and never seein' none of it; without no one to care whether you're alive or dead. (With a bitter smile.) There ain't much in all that that's make yuh sorry to lose it, Drisc.

Driscoll--(Gloomily) It's a hell or a life, the sea.

Yank--(Musingly) It must be great to stay on dry land all your life and have a farm with a house of yor own with cows and pigs and chickens, 'way in the middle of the land where yuh'd never smell the sea or see a ship. It must be great to have a wife, and kids to play with at night after supper when your work is done. It must be great to have a home of your own, Drisc.

1. Eugene O'Neill, The Moon of the Caribbees and Six Other Plays of the Sea; Boni & Liveright, New York, 1919.

Driscoll--(With a great sigh.) .....Such things are not for the loikes av us.

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Yank--We won't reach Cardiff for a week at least. I'll be buried at sea.

-----  
It's as good a place as any other, I s'pose--only I always wanted to be buried on dry land, .....I wish the stars was out, and the moon, too; I'd lie out on the deck and look a them, and it'd make it easier to go--somehow.

Thus Yank, once in the clutches of the sea, cannot release himself, and finally his remains are engulfed in the rapacious deep.

The scene of "The Long Voyage Home" is the bar of a "low dive on the London waterfront". The crew of the Steamer Glencairn having just been paid off are eagerly received by the proprietor. All are intoxicated except Olson, a Swede, who growing tired of the sea has saved two years' wages that he might establish himself on a farm with his brother and mother. Many times has he planned to return to the farm, but every time he was paid off he squandered his money and had to return to this sea. At last it seems that he will realize his dream; he is really homesick for the farm and his people, especially his eighty-two-years-old mother. But fate does not so decree. He is persuaded to take a soft drink which has been drugged and is then robbed and sent aboard a ship bound on a two years' voyage around the Horn. The irony of fate again manifests itself. The Swede loses possibly his last opportunity of returning to land, and again must follow the detested sea.

In "Ile" we have a tragedy brought on by a man who risked everything once too often. Captain Keeney, a hard New England whaling captain, dominated by pride refuses to return homeward at the pleading of his frenzied wife and the threats of his mutinous crew until he has accomplished his aim--a ship loaded with whale oil. "It ain't the damned money," he says, "what's keepin' me up in the Northern Seas, Tom, but I can't go back to Homeport with a measly four hundred barrel of ile. I'd die fust." Although his wife's happiness, sanity and perhaps life depend on his returning home and his mutinous crew is opposed to him, Keeney is driven on by an almost irresistible passion for "Ile" and as soon as someone cries that the ice has broken, that open water is ahead and whales are in sight, he reverses his decision to return home and precipitates the tragedy.

Keeney<sup>1</sup>.--(Turning to his wife) Annie! Did you hear him? I'll git the ile. (She doesn't answer or seem to know he is there. He gives a hard laugh, which is almost a groan.) I know you're foolin' me, Annie. You ain't out of your mind--(Anxiously) be you? I'll git the ile now right enough--jest a little while longer, Annie--then we'll turn hom'ard. I can't turn back now, you see that, don't ye? I've got to git the ile. (In sudden terror) Answer me! You ain't mad, be you? (She keeps on playing the organ, but makes no reply. The Mate's face appears again through the skylight.)

Mate--All ready, sir. (Keeney turns his back on his wife and strides to the doorway, where he stands for a moment, fighting to control his feelings.)

Mate--Comin', sir?

Keeney--(His face suddenly grown hard with determination.) Aye. (He turns abruptly and goes out. Mrs. Keeney does not appear to notice his departure. Her whole attention seems centered in the organ. She sits

1. Eugene O'Neill, "Ile" in The Moon of the Caribbees, Boni and Liveright, New York, 1919.

with half-closed eyes, her body swaying a little from side to side to the rhythm of the hymn. Her fingers move faster and faster and she is playing wildly and discordantly.)

In his moment of trial Keeney proves the man he is. He loves his wife; but the lure of the sea to seek more "ile", by irony of fate, is more impelling than the pathetic appeal of his wife to rescue her from her loneliness and from approaching insanity.

"Where the Cross Is Made" is another tragedy of the sea. Captain Bartlett, insane, is pursued by the phantoms of two men whose murder he had permitted, and by a belief that his schooner, laden with gold, is on the point of returning. His passion for the treasure has caused the death of his wife, has driven his son Nat mad, and forced his daughter to bear the sorrows of the family alone. Though slight in plot, this play is stark in its grimness. For O'Neill, the sea is usually the constant symbol of eternal realities, the inhuman powers of nature against which men and women must measure their puny strength.

"Anna Christie" rings with authenticity. One is gripped by the actuality of the sea and the waterside life on the barge and in the barroom of "Johnny-the-Priest's". The barman, the drinkers, the old sailors, the drabness--all are typical of the waterfronts of our large cities, and O'Neill, having spent the greater portion of his youth in such dives, portrays them with fidelity. Old Chris, Anna, and Mat seem to be portraits painted from real life. These

figures of the sea and the underworld are painted not to suit fashionable taste, but as they are--dirty, drunken, and generally disreputable, because in them O'Neill finds embodied the fundamental realities of his world.

"'Jimmy the Priests',"<sup>1</sup> O'Neill says in an interview, "was the original for 'Johnny the Priest's'; which is the saloon setting for the first act of 'Anna Christie' ". It was here that O'Neill lived in 1911, and it was, he continues, "certainly a hell-hole.....  
.....The house was almost coming down and the principal house-wreckers were vermin. I was absolutely down, financially, those days, and you can get an idea of the kind of room I had when I tell you that the rent was \$3 a month.....I had Chris Christopherson as a room-mate. He had sailed the sea until he was sick of the mention of it. But it was the only work he knew. At the time he was my room-mate he was out of work, wouldn't go to sea and spent the time guzzling whiskey and razzing the sea. In time he got a coal barge to captain." <sup>1</sup>.

The story deals with the regeneration of Anna under the influence of the sea and the love of a man. In her childhood Anna had been sent away inland to a farm to be saved, as her father thought, from the devastating influence of that "old devil sea". Growing tired of her abuse in the home of her relatives, she had seized her first means of escape and had fallen into degradation. She now returns to her father, soiled, crushed, escaping from the unspeakable pit of prostitution into which she had fallen far from the sea. But the sea, especially the fog, has a regenerating effect upon Anna. "I love it!" she says. "I don't give a rap if it never lifts! It makes me feel clean--out here--'s if I'd taken a bath.-- I don't want to sleep. I want to stay out here--and think

<sup>1</sup>. New York Times, Dec. 21, 1924.

about things." It is the loneliness, the detached majesty of the sea, that awakens in the girl courage to confess and bear the consequences of her confession. Purified in soul, she is ready for a pure love when Mat Burke emerges from the fog. The passion of man and woman develops rapidly up to the point where Anna confesses her past. Both father and lover react in a way one would expect. Chris goes off, gets drunk, and comes back repentant. Mat instinctively rebels against marrying a prostitute. Although Anna tells him that she still has a virginal soul, that she has never loved before, Mat leaves in disgust and he, too, goes off to drown his disappointment in drink.

It is not surprising that Mat Burke, according to his social and religious training,--no matter how little he regarded either in practice,--should turn from Anna in anger when he heard her confession; but it is less surprising that, with the force of the attraction between the two, he should come back to her, not to be happy ever after, perhaps, but for some happiness, at least.

In this play O'Neill deals with men and women not as conventions of the stage, not even as they should be, but exactly as he sees them--blindly, helplessly driven by forces they have not the character to withstand. He does not deal in ambiguities. He knows the sea and the seamen. He knows life and he writes honestly of what he knows. Anna, Mat, and Chris are three human souls in the grip of the relentless machine called fate. His men and women must face the bitter

realities of this universe unflinchingly. Useless is the effort to shut out the ruthless universe; useless is the attempt to measure one's strength against stern realities; useless is the creating of an illusion of happiness to be found somewhere else. One has to take life as it is and where it is.

The sea has played its part in shaping the characters of O'Neill's early plays--in a few instances it has proved a purifying agency, but more often a devastating agency.

Fatalism

Uniformity of Theme

Influences of the Soil



## Fatalism

## Influence of the Soil

"Beyond the Horizon" proves the tragic consequences of misplaced vocations. Two brothers, Robert and Andrew Mayo, different in temperament and inclinations, choose for their life's work that for which each is entirely unsuited.

O'Neill gives an interesting account of the original of this play:

"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 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 left the 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 led him--affectionately.....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.....He was too harmonious a creature of the God of Things as They Are.....From that point I started to think of a more intellectual, civilized type from the standpoint of the above-mentioned God--a man who would have my Norwegian's inborn craving for the sea's unrest, only in him it would be conscious, too conscious, intellectually diluted into a vague; intangible wanderlust. His powers of resistance, both physical and moral, 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."

Robert Mayo "is a tall, slender young man of twenty-three. There is a touch of the poet about him expressed in his high forehead and wide, dark eyes. His features are delicate and refined, leaning to weakness in the mouth and chin.....He is reading a book by the fading sunset light. He shuts this, keeping a finger in to mark the place, and turns his head toward the hori-

<sup>1</sup>. New York Times, "A Letter from O'Neill", April 11, 1920.

zon, gazing out over the fields and hills. His lips move as if he were reciting something to himself." 1.

Andrew Mayo "is twenty-seven years old, an opposite type to Robert--husky, sun-bronzed, handsome in a large-featured, manly fashion--a son of the soil, intelligent in a shrewd way but nothing of the intellectual about him." 1.

His uncle having planned to take him on a long voyage, Robert is anticipating the realization of his dreams--to see beyond the horizon. His brother, Andrew, a practical man, thinks only of Robert's material opportunity in visiting foreign ports. He is attached to the soil as a farmer and cannot appreciate Robert's fine sensibilities.

1. Andrew.....: Farming ain't your nature. There's all the difference shown in just the way no two feel about the farm. You--well, you like the home part of it, I expect; but as a place to work and grow things, you hate it. Ain't that right?

Robert--.....: You're 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.....I can understand your attitude, and Pa's; and I think it's wonderful and sincere. But I--well I'm not made that way.

.....  
Andrew--.....I know you're going to learn navigation, and all about a ship, so's you can be an officer. That's natural, too. There's fair pay in it, I expect, when you consider that you're always got a home and grub thrown in; ..... you can go anywhere you've a mind to without paying fare.

.....  
Robert--(forced to laugh) I've never considered that practical side of it for a minute, Andy.

Andrew--Well, you ought to.

Robert--.....(Pointing to the horizon--dreamily)  
Supposing I was to tell you that it's just Beauty that's calling me, the beauty of the far off and unknown, the mystery and spell of the East which lures me in the book<sup>s</sup> I've 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?"

Robert Mayo is the victim of his dreams. On the evening before he is to sail with his uncle, he persuades himself that he is desperately in love with Ruth Atkins, who is engaged to his brother Andrew. Ruth discards Andrew for Robert, and because she has an invalid mother she induces Robert to give up his voyage and settle on the farm. Andrew, no longer able to live on the farm, since his love has been disappointed, decides to sail with his uncle, even though he incurs his father's curse because of his leaving.

Before long Ruth discovers that the marriage has been a mistake and thinks she is still in love with Andrew. Three years pass and Robert, ill and disillusioned, with only his child to comfort him, fails miserably in his efforts to make a success of the farm. Andrew returns for a short time, only to bring disillusion both to Ruth and to Robert; the woman realizes that he no longer loves her, and Robert, who had hoped to get from his brother some of the romance he had dreamed of, finds Andrew only a commonplace materialist without an ounce of imagination. All three realize that their positions are impossible, yet they are powerless to change them.

From this point on Robert is the central figure. We are shown the mental and physical degeneration of a man who cannot live without illusions. Indeed, each character is obsessed by his desire for what he can never have--for what lies beyond the horizon. The whole atmosphere of the farm

"contrasted with that of former years, is one of an habitual poverty too hopelessly resigned to be any longer ashamed or even conscious of itself. Ruth has aged horribly. Her pale, deeply lined face has the story expression of one to whom nothing more can happen, whose capacity for emotion has been exhausted."<sup>1</sup>. One tragedy has followed close upon another. Robert's one source of joy passed out in the death of his little daughter, and now, racked in the pain and waste of tuberculosis, he realizes that the end is near. But still he hears the call beyond the horizon. Stealing away from Ruth and Andy, he staggers and stumbles to the top of a bank where he can see the sun rise and catch a glimpse into the "Beyond".

Robert--.....The sun comes up slowly. 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--

.....  
 Robert--(To Ruth and Andrew) 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.....Look! Isn't it beautiful beyond the hills? I can hear the old voices calling me to come--And this time I'm going! It isn't the end. It's a free beginning--the start of my voyage! I've won to my trip--the right of release--beyond the horizon!

The irony of Fate! When we first meet these characters we feel that each has planned a vocation for which he is particularly endowed. But in the twinkling of an eye Fate steps in and, using the strategy of the romance of sex, irrevocably binds to the soil the aesthete and sets adrift among the beauties of the world the materialist.

<sup>1</sup>. O'Neill, Eugene, "Beyond the Horizon" Act III, Scenel.

### "Desire Under the Elms"

"Desire Under the Elms" is a narrative of hardness and loneliness--the hardness which is nature's and the loneliness which is God's. Ephraim Cabot talks to God as a task-master in whose very hardness he rejoices. He gloried in an adversary worthy of his steel. This is one of O'Neill's bleakest tragedies. The old writers of tragedy gave us some compensation in that their protagonists, although they went down in defeat, did so in a blaze of glory. Often their outward defeat was atoned for by their winning a spiritual victory. But that is not O'Neill's point of view. He sees man as a more passive victim, as only a subordinate part of nature, the sport of forces within and without himself. In this play he has shown us man not only a victim of life, of nature, of circumstance, of other men, but even a victim of self. For the defeat his protagonists suffer is spiritual. They end in a spiritual frustration and a disintegration of character.

When some of his critics complained of the bleakness of his tragedies, O'Neill replied:<sup>1</sup>.

"Sure I'll write about happiness if I can happen to meet up with that luxury, and find it sufficiently dramatic and in harmony with any deep rhythm in life. But happiness is a word. What does it mean? Exaltation; an intensified feeling of the significant worth of man's being and becoming? Well, if it means that--and not a mere smirking contentment with one's lot--I know there is more of it in one real tragedy than in all the happy-ending plays ever written. It's mere present-day judgment to think of tragedy as unhappy!

<sup>1</sup>. Philadelphia Public Ledger, Jan. 22, 1922.

The Greeks and the Elizabethans knew better. They felt the tremendous lift to it. It roused them spiritually to a deeper understanding of life. Through it they found release from petty considerations of everyday existence. They saw their lives ennobled by it. A work of art is always happy; all else is unhappy..... I don't love life because it's pretty. Prettiness is only clothes-deep. I am a truer lover than that. I love it naked. There is beauty to me even in its ugliness."

O'Neill sees life in its nakedness and reveals it as a poet and artist.

Ephraim Cabot, a New England farmer aged seventy, has just married his third wife, Abbie Putnam, an attractive woman of thirty-five years. She marries in order to provide herself a home. The two sons by Ephraim's first marriage, despairing of ever owning their father's farm, steal their father's gold and leave for California, but the son by the second marriage, Eben, aged thirty-two, believing that the farm belongs to him, remains on the farm and looks upon his new step-mother as a designing and dangerous interloper. He hates her with all the intensity of a Cabot descended from Ephraim Cabot. But Abbie is both clever and sexually attractive, and in order to keep the farm in her possession she tells her husband that she believes she could still have a child by him. The old man, delighted, promises to make his property over to his new heir.

Abbie then proceeds to seduce Eben, but in so doing she falls desperately in love with him, as he does with her. A son is born to them, though ostensibly he is Ephraim's child. Abbie, however, has aroused in her heart a passion which

wrecks all her plans: the lies necessary for carrying out her plot can no longer be concealed, and Eben tells everything to his father. Ephraim then destroys Eben's illusions by telling him that Abbie has pretended to love him only to make sure of the property. Eben, in rage and disappointment, decides to leave home at once. Abbie, in despair, frantically seeks to prove to him that she loves him for his own sake--and to prove that it is not the property that she desires, but only he, she kills their child, the heir to the property. Eben is horror-stricken, and he immediately informs the police. He confesses, however, that he is an accomplice, and is ready to pay the penalty with Abbie. They are taken off by the sheriff and his men, happy and exultant in their complete absorption of one another! 1.

The point about these folk is less that they have been denied the good things of the world than that they have been denied life itself. The lack is congenital. They are stunted, thwarted, starved like trees that try to grow in a bad soil and climate. These characters are extreme instances--sucked dry, perverted, denuded of every humane impulse, left only with hatred, greed, and lust. Obsessed with the idea of ownership, each character, in pursuit of his end, loses not only his earthly possessions, but even his own soul. Eben and Abbie have no consciousness of having sinned. Victims of puritanical repressions, of unrepressed passions, and of the mighty current of life, they have managed to break through

1. Clark, B. H., Eugene O'Neill, pages 89-90.

barriers and have consummated their love. There among the rocks and the hard soil of New England they have yearned for beauty and found it. But Fate has had its fling. In arousing all the repressed passion of Eben, Abbie has overlooked the fact that the sexual instinct cannot always be controlled. Her diabolical machinations caught her in her own trap. She is dominated by passion, and without reflection, she kills an innocent babe for self-gratification.



Fatalism

Uniformity of Theme

Influences of Racial Heritage and Environment

Fatalism  
Racial Heritage and Environment  
Victim to Disease  
"The Straw"

"The Straw" clearly depicts the insidious course of a fatal disease and the heartrendering realization of love after it is too late. Eileen Carmody, engaged to Fred Nicholls, is stricken with tuberculosis and is sent to the Hill Farm Sanatorium for recuperation. While there she meets Stephen Murray, a tubercular patient, whom she assists in his writing of fiction. Fred Nicholls, afraid of contracting the disease, neglects Eileen, and in her loneliness she turns her affections upon Stephen Murray who, uninterested in love, does not reciprocate, although he regards Eileen as a valuable friend.

After a few months, Stephen is dismissed as an arrested case, while Eileen, whose physical well-being depends wholly upon Stephen, remains. Realizing that her love is in vain, Eileen resigns herself to the prey of the disease.

When Stephen returns, four months later, to visit Eileen, he is shocked to learn that the hospital authorities are planning to move Eileen to the State Farm where all hopeless cases are carried. Miss Gilpin, superintendent of the hospital, knowing that Eileen can live only a short time and desiring that that short time should be

happy, petitions Stephen to tell Eileen he loves her. Stephen consents to do even more--he tells Eileen that the doctor has ordered him back to a sanatorium and he wants to marry her that she may help him recover his health. In his sympathy for her, he discovers that he really loves her, and the horror of an early separation overpowers him.

Murray. (Raising his face which is this time alight with a passionate awakening--a revelation) Oh, I do love you, Eileen! I do! I love you, love you!

Eileen. (Thrilled by the depths of his present sincerity--but with a teasing laugh) Why, you said that as if you'd just made the discovery, Stephen!

Murray. Oh, what does it matter, Eileen! Oh, what a blind selfish ass I've been! You are my life--everything! I love you, Eileen! I do! I do! And we'll be married--(Suddenly his face grows frozen with horror as he remembers the doom. For the first time Death confronts him face to face as a menacing reality).

In his despair Stephen asks the superintendent why they have been given a "hopeless hope", and Miss Gilpin replies: "Isn't everything we know--just that--when you think of it? (Her face lighting up with a consoling revelation.) But there must be something back of it--some promise of fulfillment,--somehow--somewhere--in the spirit of hope itself."

Relentless fate has thrown together two young people, face to face with the realities of love and passion--and of death. Their life, like their love, is a hopeless hope. Both cling to hope as if it were a straw, but their disappointment is inevitable. Tuberculosis will claim its victim.

## Victim to Suppression

## "Diff'rent"

In "Diff'rent" Fate avenges the pharisaical standards of morality set for Caleb Williams. Emma Crosby is engaged to Caleb Williams, a sailing captain whom she believes to be "diff'rent" from other men, sexually pure. Discovering that he has had an affair with a native woman in the South Sea Islands, she immediately breaks off the engagement, although Caleb pleads for her forgiveness. Thirty years elapse. Emma becomes an embittered victim of sex-suppression. She has changed from the precise prig of her youth to a ridiculous flapper in her old age. Caleb's nephew, Benny, a typical American doughboy just returned from France, is deliberately making a fool of Emma through flattery in order to get her money.

"As the curtain rises, Emma and Benny Rogers are discovered. She is seated in a rocker by the table. He is standing by the victrola on which a jazz band record is playing. He whistles, goes through the motion of dancing to the music. He is a young fellow of twenty-three, a replica of his father in Act One, but coarser, more hardened and cocksure. He is dressed in the khaki uniform of a private in the United States Army. The thirty years have transformed Emma into a withered, scrawny woman. But there is something revoltingly incongruous about her, a pitiable sham, a too-apparent effort to cheat the years by appearances. The white dress she wears is too frilly, too youthful for her; so are the high-heeled pumps and clocked silk stockings. There is an absurd suggestion of rouge on her tight cheeks and thin lips, of penciled make-up about her eyes. The black of her hair is brazenly untruthful. Above all there is shown in her simpering, self-consciously coquettish manner that laughable--and at the same time irritating and disgusting--mockery of undignified age snatching greedily at the empty simulacra of youth. She resembles some passe stock actress of fifty made up for a heroine of twenty."

Emma is gradually drawn into the snare set by the doughboy, deceived into believing that he is going to marry her. Her emotions having been inhibited for so long a period, Emma delights in the discussion of sex with Benny. All the repressions of a lifetime are brought to the surface, and, though she presents a ridiculous personage, she is indeed a pitiable and tragic figure.

Emma--(Then suddenly, wagging an admonishing finger at him and hiding beneath a joking manner an undercurrent of uneasiness). I was forgetting I got a bone to pick with you, young man! I heard them sayin' to the store that you'd been up to callin' on that Tilby Small evenin' before last.

Benny--(With a lady-killer's carelessness). Aw, I was passin' by and she called me in, that's all.

Emma--(Frowning) They said you had the piano goin' and was singin' and no end of high jinks.

Benny--Aw, these small town boobs think you're raising hell if you're up after eleven.

Emma--(Excitedly). I ain't blaiming you. But her--she ought to have better sense--at her age, too, when she's old enough to be your mother.

Benny--Aw, say, she ain't half as old--(catching himself). Oh, she's an old fool, you're right there, Emmer.

Emma--(Severely). And I hope you know the kind of woman she is and has been since she was a girl.

Benny--(With a wink). I wasn't born yesterday. I got her number long ago. I ain't in my cradle, get me! I'm in the army! Oui! (chuckles).....You forgot I was in France.....

Emma--(Sits down--wetting her lips). And what--what are those French critters like?

Benny--(With a wink). Oh, Boy! They're some pippins. It ain't so much that they're better lookin' as that they're got a way with 'em--lots of ways. (He laughs with a lascivious smirk.)

Emma--(Unconsciously hitches her chair nearer his.....) What do you mean, Benny? What kind of ways have they got--them French girls....Tell me!

.....

Emma is quickly disillusioned. Hoping to get revenge on his Uncle Caleb, Benny asks Emma to marry him. In spite

of what Caleb (who has returned after thirty years to ask Emma to marry him) tells her about Benny's chicanery, Emma clings to her pathetic illusion. "Just because I'm a mite older'n him--," she tells Caleb, "can't them things happen jist as well as any other--what d'you suppose--can't I care for him same as any woman cares for a man? But I do! I care more'n I ever did for you!"

It is Benny, however, who deals the final blow: if his uncle will buy him off, he will promise not to marry, Emma. "Say, honest, Aunt Emmer, you didn't believe--you didn't think I was really struck on you, did you? Ah, say, how could I? Have a heart! Why, you're as old as ma is.....and I say you look it, too!"

Fate has its revenge. Emma disillusioned and disgusted, suddenly with mechanical movements piles curtains, pictures, cushions, rugs, and everything off the table in a heap on the floor. In the midst of this Benny returns to bring the news of Caleb Williams suicide in the barn. The moment Emma hears this she "moves like a sleepwalker toward the door", murmuring, "Wait, Calbb, I'm going down to the barn"--to pay the retribution demanded by Fate.

## Victim to Ancestral Fear

### The Emperor Jones

The idea around which "The Emperor Jones" is built is the fact that the exemplar of an inferior race will succumb to weaknesses against which even a weak member of a superior race may be proof. This play is a marvelous representation of panic fear in the breast of a half-civilized negro.

O'Neill has explained the source of this play:<sup>1</sup>

"The idea of "The Emperor Jones" came from an old circus man I knew. This man told me a story current in Hayti concerning the late President Sam. This was to the effect that Sam had said they'd never get him with a lead bullet; that he would get himself first with a silver one.....This notion about the silver bullet struck me, and I made a note of the story. About six months later I got the idea of the woods, but I couldn't see how it could be done on the stage.....A year elapsed. One day I was reading of the religious feasts in the Congo and the uses to which the drum is put there; how it starts at a normal pulse and is slowly intensified until the heart-beat of every one present corresponds to the frenzied beat of the drum. There was an idea and an experiment. ....The effect of the tropical forest on the human imagination was honestly come by. It was the result of my own experience while prospecting for gold in Spanish Honduras."

Out of these ideas, images, and feelings of experience was created "The Emperor Jones", who is the tragic victim of ancestral fear implanted deep in his own soul. At the opening of the play we find Jones, an escaped convict from the United States, ruling as emperor over the savage, superstitious negroes on an island of the South Seas. He

<sup>1</sup>. New York World, Nov. 9, 1924.

has been able to maintain his position through force and chicanery, causing the natives to believe that he can be killed only by a silver bullet. But the natives grow tired of his unjust rule and in secret make silver bullets.

From the distant hills comes the faint, steady thump of a tom-tom, low and vibrating. It starts at a rate exactly corresponding to a normal pulse beat--seventy-two beats to the minute--and continues at a gradually accelerating rate. Jones starts at the sound. "What's dat drum beatin' for?" "For you", Smithers replies with a grin. As soon as Jones realizes that the natives are in revolt, he starts to run, expecting to reach a French ship that will convey him from the danger zone.

At nightfall he reaches the end of the plain where the Great Forest begins. A somber monotone of the wind through the leaves of the forest serves but to intensify the brooding, implacable silence of the forest. Entering the forest, Jones wearily sits on a stump, his anxiety increasing as he listens to the rhythmic beating of the tom-toms. He knows that he is being pursued. In his imagination formless fears creep out the darker blackness of the forest, and in a panic he fires at them. There comes a quick throb of the tom-toms, and he realizes he has given the enemy the direction of his escape. He plunges farther into the forest, only to come upon the ghost of the man he has killed in the States. As his fears multiply, so the rapidity and volume of the tom-toms increase to accentuate his rapid heart beats. From one



escapade to another he dashes until at last, in rags and terror, he comes from the forest, and falling on his knees, he confesses his wrongs and prays the Lord to keep him from the "ha'nts". In the midst of his prayer the old superstitions of his race reassert themselves and he is literally paralyzed with fear. The silver bullet that he has been saving for himself, when all hope should be abandoned, he fires in exasperation at a crocodile. The sound of this bullet immediately attracts the natives whose tom-toms, reverberating at a rapid rate, fill the silence. Having fired the silver bullet, his only means of suicide, Jones is at the mercy of the natives who, firing silver bullets, vindicate their superstitions in Jones's death.

Jones has not been able to escape the destiny of his race. With bravado based upon his conscious superiority to the rabble which he has betrayed, and complacently relying upon the fact that the tribesmen believe him invulnerable save from a silver bullet, Jones believed he could easily escape. But his armor, both physical and spiritual, disappears, and leaves him at heart a primitive savage, as superstitions as the wild pursuers whose drums continually throb through the forest shades. His pursuers trap him close by the very point where he started the night before, suggesting that he, too, had not advanced beyond the early superstitions of his race. What we actually seem to hear is the beating of his own heart; it palpitates an abhorrence as his soul sheds the armor of

civilization which had made him a king among the negroes of the South Sea Isle. In spite of his shrewd mental detachment, Emperor Jones is trapped by nature and is left a primitive savage.

## Victim to Loss of Identity

### "The Hairy Ape"

"The Hairy Ape" symbolizes the tragedy of a man who has lost his old harmony with nature.

In the first scene a crowd of stokers and sailors are drinking in the firemen's fore-castle of an ocean liner an hour's distance from New York. Yank, the leader of them all, is bullying and boasting that he makes the world go round, that he is steel, that he is seventy-five knots an hour--that he belongs. Two days later the steel king's daughter, on her way to new experiences of social work in the London slums, persuades two officers to take her to see the sailors in the stoke hole. At the sight of Yank, who is grimy, sweaty, half-naked, and blasphemous, she loses her nerve and shrieks with loathing, horror, and contempt.

The action of the drama is now transferred from the outer world into the consciousness of Yank. His soul, formerly sustained by the feeling that he was furnishing with his muscle the ultimate power that made the ship go and that he was a man of force at the center of the human order, suddenly becomes disillusioned. The girl's cry caused the very foundation of his life to collapse. She has called him beast; she does not consider him human. She thinks him a slave, a horror, a hairy ape! She even faints at the sight of him!

The next scene shows Yank trying to avenge himself. He waits on the corner of Fifth Avenue, New York, for the girl's social class as they come out of church, and deliberately bumping into the people, gets himself beaten and arrested by the police. Awaking in the cell with prisoners howling about him, Yank supposes himself to be in a zoo. Released from the zoo, he is advised to join the I. W. W's., but taking him for a secret agent, the members of that organization throw him out. Again an officer hurries him out of the way with the injunction that he may "go to hell".

The next day Yank visits the zoo and comes upon a gorilla in a cell. He talks to the beast, saying that it has it on man this time; for the ape knows that he does not know where he belongs. In his frenzy, Yank tears off the lock and lets the gorilla out. The beast, in turn, crushes Yank to death in his arms, and at last Yank finds a place to which to belong.

The tragedy is the inner tragedy of the proletarian soul. Yank is torn out of the world which he thought that he himself sustained.

O'Neill once said<sup>1</sup>. that "The Hairy Ape" was "propaganda in the sense that it was a symbol of man, who has lost his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not yet acquired in a spiritual way. Thus, not being able to find it on earth nor in heaven, he's in the middle, trying to make peace, taking the woist punches from bot' of 'em. This idea was expressed in Yank's speech.

<sup>1</sup>. New York Herald Tribune, Nov. 16, 1924.

The public saw just the stoker, not the symbol, and the symbol makes the play either important or just another play. Yank can't go forward, and so he tries to go back. This is what his shaking hands with the gorilla meant. But he can't go back to belonging either. The gorilla kills him. The subject here is the same ancient one that always was and always will be the one subject for drama, and that is man and his struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with the gods, but is now with himself, his own past, his attempt 'to belong'."

The denouement is inseparable from the whole idea; what happens and what it signifies are one. Here we have all the life of one groping and wounded creature culminating in disaster. There is no stratum of animal life to which he can adapt himself. He is neither man nor beast. The irony of fate goads and jeers. Death is his only escape.

"(The gorilla lets the crushed body slip to the floor.....; then picks it up, throws it in the cage, shuts the door, and shuffles off.....Then Yank moves, groaning, opening his eyes, and there is silence. He mutters painfully.) Say--dey ought to match him--with Zybszko. He got me, aw right. I'm trou. Even him didn't think I belonged. (Then, with sudden passionate despair.) Christ, where do I get off at? Where do I fit in?.....In de cage, huh? (In the strident tones of a circus barker.) Ladies and gents, step forward and take a slant at de one and only--(His voice weakening)--one and original--Hairy Ape from de wilds of--

"(He slips in a heap on the floor and dies. The monkeys set up a chattering, whimpering wail. And, perhaps, the Hairy Ape at last belongs.)"

This tragic theme of mankind's struggle with destiny goes back to nature. The core of the play is the animalness of the life it depicts. Just as nature traps "The Emperor Jones" so it destroys "The Hairy Ape".

Victim to Miscegenation  
"All God's Chillun Got Wings"

In "All God's Chillun Got Wings" O'Neill develops the theory that civilization applied to the black race, is at best, a veneer which covers mental inferiority and which can be torn away by the merest trifle, leaving its temporary possessor at the mercy of elementary emotionalism.

Jim, an ambitious black, sensitive because of his race, longs to be white and to achieve as the white race. He has always sought white companions and falls in love with a white girl with whom he has had an acquaintance since childhood. He has studied law but has failed to pass the bar after repeatedly attempting the examinations. The girl, Ellen Downey, a white woman of inferior type, has been betrayed by a white man, but Jim, in his abject devotion, marries her and honestly tries to make her happy.

Soon after the marriage, however, the couple are beset by the problem which generations of blacks and white have made for themselves. They are socially ostracized; even Jim's sister is loath to receive Jim's wife in her home. Jim makes tragic efforts to overcome his racial shortcomings but his efforts prove futile. Ellen becomes demented under the degradation and even plans to kill her husband, who symbolizes for her an innate and unreasoning fear of the negro. Jim idolizes his wife who symbolizes

for him his ideal of the white race. He is very sympathetic toward Ellen and blames their tragedy on the hardness of God.

Ellen--Will God forgive me, Jim?

Jim--Maybe He can forgive what you've done to me; and maybe He can forgive what I've done to you; but I don't see how He's going to forgive--Himself.

Here the tragedy reaches its lowest depth, but Jim gaining control of himself and beholding Ellen as his divine spark of inspiration, falls upon his knees praying:

Jim--Forgive me, God--and make me worthy! Now I see your Light again! Now I hear Your Voice! (He begins to weep in an ecstasy of religious humility.) Forgive me, God, for blaspheming You! Let this fire of burning suffering purify me of selfishness and make me worthy of the child you send me for the woman you take away!

Ellen--(Jumping to her feet excitedly) Don't cry, Jim! You mustn't cry! I've got only a little time left and I want to play.....Be my little boy, Jim. Pretend you're Pointy Face and I'm Jim Crow. Come and play!

Jim--(Still deeply exalted) Honey, Honey, I'll play right up to the gates of Heaven with you!

This play proves that miscegenation does not work.

Though this play was not written as a sociological problem, it brought forth a wave of protest from both black and white races. O'Neill wrote simply to portray the tragedy of two souls trying to adjust themselves and find happiness.

In his reply to protests against the performance at the Provincetown Playhouse, O'Neill wrote:<sup>1</sup>

The play itself, as anyone who has read it with intelligence knows, is never a race problem. It's intention is confined to portraying the special lives of individual human beings. It is primarily a study of the two principal characters and their tragic struggle for happiness. To deduce any general appli-

<sup>1</sup>.New York Herald Tribune, Nov. 19, 1924.

cation from 'All God's Chillun Got Wings', except in a deep spiritual sense, is arbitrarily to read a meaning into my play which is not there..... Nothing could be further from my wish than to stir up racial feeling. I hate it. It is because I am certain 'God's Chillun' does not do this but, on the contrary, will help toward a more sympathetic understanding between the races, through the sense of mutual tragedy involved, that I will stand by it to the end."

Again we see Fate arrayed in the garb of conflicting races, pronouncing inevitable doom to the individual who would dare break down its barriers.



## Victim to Materialism

## "Marco Millions"

In "Marco Millions" O'Neill has proved the emptiness of materialism and the tragic sadness of unloved love. This play is a romantic satire on Occidental materialism set against the background of medieval Oriental civilization. Through ten scenes Marco Polo, a Venetian in pursuit of "millions" achieves a career and success in money. He begins as an unassuming, unsophisticated young man, but terminates in a veritable Babbitt, minus his idealism. The beauty and romance, the serenity and skepticism of an age old civilization make no impression upon him.

The prologue sounds the note of tragedy. A Christian merchant on his way to the court of Persia with a letter of introduction to Kukachin, Queen of Persia, from the Polos of Venice meets on the vast plains in Persia near the confines of India, other traders: a Persian Magian and a Kashmiri Buddhist. While these three are laboring over religious superstitions, a long wagon drawn by thirty slaves and directed by a Mohammedan captain approaches. Upon its immediate arrival, the three merchants discover that upon the wagon is lashed a glass coffin in which is contained the beautiful remains of Queen Kukachin. The captain permits the three traders to view the body of Kukachin, and

while they stand enthralled by her beauty, they are all the more amazed when she opens her eyes and parts her lips. Each calls upon his God in prayer:

Captain--Allah, be pitiful!  
 Buddhist--Buddha, protect thy servant!  
 Magian--Methra, all Powerful One!  
 Christian--Jesus, have mercy!

(A voice which is Kukachin's and yet more musical than a human voice, comes from the coffin as her lips are seen to move.)

Kukachin--Say this, I loved and died. Now I am love, and live. And living, have forgotten. And loving, can forgive. Say this for me in Venice.

With this tragic warning the real play opens.

Marco Polo, having exchanged pledges of love between his girl sweetheart, Donata, sets out from Venice for the court of Cathay where Kublai, the Great Kaan, rules. He is sent as a representative of Western philosophy by Pope Tedaldo at the request of the Great Kaan. But Marco, in company with his father Nicolo and his uncle Maffeo who are rich merchants in quest of more gold, soon succumbs to the influence of these two relatives and is obsessed with the desire to win notoriety and wealth.

Under a special dispensation from the Great Kaan who is at first fascinated by Marco, the young Polo goes through the kingdom, organizing furiously with arrogant self-assurance of a bustling business man. In everything material he succeeds with a brilliance matched only by his abominable ethics. But he is totally oblivious of the ancient culture of Cathay and to the despairing love of Princess Kukachin, the granddaughter of the Kaan.

But Kublai soon sees through Marco's disguise. "He is beginning to weary me with his grotesque antics," he says. "A jester inspires mirth only so long as his deformity does not revolt one. Marco's spiritual hump begins to disgust me. He has not even a mortal soul, he has only an acquisitive instinct.....He has memorized everything and learned nothing. He has looked at everything and seen nothing. He has lusted for everything and loved nothing.....I shall send him home to his native wallow."

Kukachin, however, has fallen in love with Marco, though she has seldom come in contact with him, and she tries to defend him against her grandfather. Kublai, fearing further consequences, because he knows that Marco has no soul, decides to hasten Kukachin's marriage to the King of Persia, to whom she is already pledged, and to send the Polos back to Venice. Nevertheless, at the petition of Kukachin, Kublai permits the Polos to accompany her on the voyage to Persia.

The parting of sire and daughter is pathetic. The Kaan feels an evil omen impending.

Kublai--We have said all we can say. Little Daughter, all rare things are secrets which cannot be revealed to anyone. That is why life must be so lonely.....Yet I wish some Power could give me assurance that in granting your desire I am acting for your happiness, and for your eventual deliverance from sorrow to acceptance and peace.....I am death advising life how to live!.....Strive after what your heart desires! Who can ever know which are the mistakes we make? One should be either sad or joyful. Contentment is a warm sty for the eaters and sleepers! Do not weep! Even now I can refuse your hand to Arghun.

Kukachin--You do not understand. I wish to take this voyage.

The Kaan realizes that Kukachin's happiness depends only on Marco's love for her, and he, too, secretly hopes that on the voyage Marco's soul will be aroused to the love of Kukachin's soul. His last injunction to Marco was: "You are, at some time every day of the voyage, to look carefully and deeply into the Princess's eyes and note what you see there." But the prosaic Marco thinks only that the King fears his granddaughter may contract tropical fever.

And so the voyage proceeds. Never once does Kukachin's unselfish affection burn through the greedy egotistical shell of Marco's character. O'Neill chronicles all this in terms of emotional tragedy as well as in satire. Marco punctiliously performs his duty. Daily has he looked into the Princess's eyes, but he has not discovered the secret there.

Kukachin--(With an irony almost hysterical) More than anyone in the world, I can appreciate your devotion to duty. You have been a prodigy of heroic accomplishment! In the typhoon when a wave swept me from the deck, was it not you who swam to me as I was drowning?

Marco--It was easy. Venetians make the best swimmers in the world.

Kukachin--When the pirates attacked us, was it not your brave sword that warded off their curved knives from my breast and struck them dead at my feet?

Marco--I was out of practice, too. I used to be one of the crack swordsman of Venice--and they're the world's foremost, as everyone knows.

Kukachin--And when the frightful fever wasted me, was it not you that tended me night and day.....even brewing yourself the medicines that brought me back to life?

Marco--My mother's recipes. Simple home remedies-- from the best friend I ever had!

Kukachin--Oh, yes, you have been a model guardian, Admiral Polo!

Marco--Thank you, Princess.....Put in writing all you've just said in your first letter to the Great Kaan, and also tell your husband.

Kukachin--I will assuredly! I will tell them both of your heroic cruelty in saving me from death! Why could you not let me die?

The voyage comes to an end. The Princess is informed that the King of Persia has died and that she is to marry the son. She goes to grieve out her soul in Persia. Marco goes cumbered with gold to his Donata in Venice. While Marco is partaking of costly wines and viands at a banquet in Venice and is saluting his fat, stupid bride, the Great Kaan sits disconsolate in his throne room, eating out his heart in anguish for his homesick, love-sick granddaughter. Marco's "spiritual hump" has really been his and his granddaughter's undoing.

Why should Fate have brought two such irreconcilable souls together? Against the calm, schooled and resolute indifference of the Eastern philosophers is set not only the crass insensibility of the Venetian, but also a passionate and exalted romanticism, embodied in the granddaughter of the Kaan. Stricken with love for Marco, she can hope neither for any response from his prosaic soul nor for any real comfort in his tolerant but disillusioned wisdom of her own people. In the end each of the three characters must meet the fate reserved for his particular nature: the Princess dying for love, the Kaan struggling to accept the wisdom

of his philosophers, and Marco returning triumphant to Venice in an appropriate and sublime incomprehension of his failure.

## Victim to Age--Nemesis

## "The Fountain"

"The Fountain", a dramatic poem of exaltation, shows the futility of the attempt of age to maintain or regain its youth. Juan Ponce de Leon, a handsome Spanish noble of thirty-one, has had such success in war and affairs of state that he has become a romantic dreamer. He thinks only of more lands to conquer, more gold to gain, more glory to add to his name and that of Spain. Maria de Cordova, ten years his senior, in love with him, yet fully aware that love is unrequited, suffers deep humiliation at his pity. She knows, however, that his youth too some day will fade and that old age will be his nemesis.

Maria--.....There is only my soul left that knows the love of God which blesses and does not torture. Farewell once more, Juan. (He kneels and kisses her hand. She puts the other on his head as if blessing him.) You are noble, the soul of courage, a man of men. You will go far, soldier of iron--and dreamer. God pity you if those two selves should ever clash! You shall have all my prayers for your success--but I shall add, Dear Saviour, let him know tenderness to recompense him when his hard youth dies!

Vicente de Cordova, Maria's husband, having suspected an affair between Juan and Maria, is inadvertantly insulted at Juan's mordant sarcasm in reference to age and impulsively slaps Juan across the face. A duel between the two results. Vincente is wounded and Juan sails with Columbus in search of Cathay and the Fountain of Youth.

Twenty years pass. Instead of Cathay, Porto Rico has been discovered and established under Juan as its governor.

Juan now fifty years or more of age desires perpetual youth and burns with the desire to find the Fountain of Youth that he may drink of its waters and be rejuvenated. There is on the Island an Indian, Nano, who claims to know by divination where this fountain may be found, but he hates Juan, whom he believes to be responsible for the murder of his wives and children, and refuses to inform Juan. Meanwhile Fate introduces her means of retribution. Maria has died and has sent her daughter Beatriz as a ward to Juan with this message, "Bring him tenderness. That will repay the debt I owe him for saving me for you."

Juan. (deeply moved) Tenderness? Do you bring me that, Beatriz?.....No, do not--for it means weakness. Bring me the past instead. Give me back--the man your mother knew.

Beatrice. (who has been scrutinizing him without paying attention to his words) You are older than I dreamed, Don Juan.

Juan. (wounded--with harsh violence) No tenderness there! Youth! A cuirass of shining steel! A glittering sword! Laughter above the battle!..... It was so long ago, Beatriz--that sight in Granada--a dimly--remembered dream--.....Forgive me, I have become a savage lost to manners. (He kneels and kisses her hand with all his old-time gallantry) Welcome, dear ward, to Porto Rico.

Within three months Don Juan has fallen desperately in love with Beatriz, but realizing he must have youth to attract her, he tortures Nano beyond endurance to tell him the location of the Fountain of Youth in Cathay to which city he has received a patent from Spain to sail at his convenience. Finally to rid himself of his excruciating suffering and to get revenge on Juan, Nano lies to Juan,



Instead of directing Juan to Cathay, Nano leads the Spanish fleet to the coast of Florida, and there in connivance with other Indians, he deceives and gains his revenge on Don Juan.

Nano--There is the Spring.

Juan--(stepping forward to look at it--with growing anger) It looks a common spring like any other. Beware, dog! In these past months you have shown me many springs-----

Nano--(quickly) The voyage was long. There were many islands. You forced me to lead you to a spring on each. But I told you the Spring of Life was here.

Juan--I feared your revenge might be. (Relapsed into a mood of somber preoccupation--bitterly) I drank of every one. I closed my eyes. I felt the stirring of rebirth. Fool! Always the mirror in the spring showed me the same loathsome blighted face--

Nano--This is the spring.

Nano--(in a fierce tone of command) Drink!

Juan--(having drunk, remains kneeling by the spring--in a trembling tone of hesitating joy) New life thrills me! Is it youth? Do I dream? (He opens his eyes and stares down into the spring. A terrible groan tears from his breast) O God! (His grief is turned immediately into a frenzy of rage) Treacherous dog. You betrayed me.

Juan leaps to his feet, drawing his sword to slay

Nano, but the bows from the Indians send their arrows and Juan falls, pierced, on the ground. The Indians then proceed to the Spaniards' camp to finish their slaughter.

Regaining consciousness, Juan hears Beatriz singing:

Love is a flower  
 Forever blooming;  
 Life is a fountain  
 Forever leaping  
 Upward to catch the golden sunlight,  
 Upward to reach the azure heaven;  
 Failing, falling,  
 Ever returning,  
 To kiss the earth that the flower may live.

Many visions passed before his eyes, but one vision becomes a reality--"I see! Fountain Everlasting, time

without end! Soaring flame of the spirit transfiguring  
 Death! All is within! All things dissolve, flow on  
 eternally! O aspiring fire of life, sweep the dark soul  
 of man! Let us burn in thy unity! (Beatriz' voice  
 rises triumphantly)

God is a flower  
 Forever blooming  
 God is a fountain  
 Forever flowing.

Juan. O God, Fountain of Eternity, Thou art the  
 All in One, the One in All--the Eternal Becoming which is  
 Beauty!

In a semi-conscious state Juan is rescued by two of  
 his followers, who escaped the Indians, and is carried  
 aboard a Spanish ship to be returned to Cuba. Meanwhile  
 Juan's nephew has come under Spanish orders to Cuba and  
 he and Beatriz have found love in each other.

Juan. (After a conquering struggle with his  
 bitterness--fatalistically) So--thus old heart--in  
 silence. (Then rousing himself--intensely) But with  
 joy! with joy! Then you have found him at last--  
 my double?

Beatriz. (blushing, confusedly) I--I do not  
 know, Don Juan.

Juan. Then I know. You have stolen my last  
 gesture. An old man had a tale to tell you--oh,  
 so brave a tale!--but now he sees that if youth can-  
 not, age must keep its secrets.....You love each  
 other!

.....  
 Youth of this earth--love--hail--and farewell! May  
 you be blessed forever!

Beatriz and her lover go out singing:

Love is a flower  
 Forever blooming  
 Beauty a fountain  
 Forever flowing  
 Upward into the source of sunshine,  
 Upward into the azure heaven;  
 One with God but  
 Ever returning

To kiss the earth that the flower may live.  
 (Juan listens in an ecstasy, bows his head, weeps.)  
 Juan. (In a ringing voice) I am that song! One  
 must accept, absorb, give back, become oneself a symbol!  
 Juan Ponce de Leon is past! He is resolved into the  
 thousand moods of beauty that make up happiness, color  
 of the sunset, of tomorrow's dawn, breath of the great  
 Trade wind--sunlight on grass, an insect's song, the  
 rustle of leaves, an ant's ambitions. (In an ecstasy)  
 Oh, Luis, I begin to know eternal youth! O Fountain  
 of Eternity, take back this drop, my soul!

Juan sees the actual Fountain of Youth. His life has  
 been dedicated to the lifelong task of finding it. Un-  
 scrupulous, cruel when needful, he has been ruthless in  
 the quest that became a divine sort of madness. Yet this  
 drama, the reflection of an aspiration toward life, love,  
 and beauty, proves that no dreamer finds what he sets  
 out to attain, though some are rewarded spiritually. Through  
 tragedy he learned the lesson of life, divining at last  
 that the effort was worth while in itself. Juan could not  
 become young again, but he did learn that there is no gold  
 but love.

Victim to Duplicity  
"The Great God Brown"

The theme underlying "The Great God Brown" is the tragic effort of the soul to find an expressive beauty in life, against the frustrations of the world.

Two boys, Billy Brown and Dion Anthony, whose fathers are partners in business, have just graduated from high school. That each should be an architect, the parents have decided and that each should fall in love with the same girl, Fate has predetermined.

In this play O'Neill has employed a very subtle use of masks to reveal man's dual personality. When the audience is to understand that Dion is playing a certain part, he covers his face with an actual mask to express that part. The masks are quite static. They change as time goes on, but they change merely in the intensity of certain qualities. Dion's mask throughout the play is the same face, grown more ruthless, more bitter, or more mocking. Brown in the first part of the play is not masked, for he lives his mask. He refuses to recognize the existence of his other more vital self whose ruling motives are a desire for the thing Dion has--artistic insight and the love of Margaret. Margaret, too, wears a mask before the world, but she never recognizes the real personality of the one she loves most, Dion, without his mask.

During the first seven years after graduation, William

Brown has become a successful architect in a material sense, and, after the death of the elder Anthony and Brown, has become sole owner of their business. Dion forced to leave college at his father's death has married Margaret, sold his father's property, and spent most of its proceeds while maintaining his family on a pleasure trip in Europe. He has become dissipated and embittered, neglecting his family and losing ambition in his creative ability. Margaret, though deeply in love with Dion, is disappointed at his neglect and centers her attention upon her three boys. In desperate straits, she seeks employment in a library and ingeniously causes William Brown to employ Dion to give artistic finish to his too stilted architectural plans.

Brown is envious of Dion--of his artistic ability, of the love of Margaret, of the sympathetic understanding of Cybel, the prostitute. The personality which he recognizes as his own is a model individual: generous, considerate, forgiving. Although he would really like to destroy Dion, as he had destroyed Dion's pictures on the sand when they were boys, Brown is convinced that he himself is a virtuous creature. He assumes the credit for Dion's artistic achievement and even claims and accepts Dion's creations as his own.

Dion blunders on through life, tortured and torturing. He wears his mask because those who see his face are afraid. He becomes cynical, for "When Pan was forbidden the light and warmth of the sun, he grew sensitive and self-conscious.

and proud and revengeful--and became Prince of Darkness." Yet Dion cannot call his life good unless he has accepted the philosophy of Nietzsche that life is good because it is painful. "I've loved, lusted, won and lost, sang and wept", he claimed, but unhappy himself, he has been the cause of unhappiness to others; and when he dies, he knows no more than that he has lived. He has taunted others with their impotence; he has flaunted his passion in their faces; but he knows that his potency has availed him nothing. He has been able to understand neither Christianity nor Paganism.

Realizing that his end is near, Dion is determined to bring a revelation to Brown.

Dion.<sup>1</sup> (In a steely voice) I've been the brains! I've been the design!.....And this cathedral is my masterpiece! It will make Brown the most eminent architect in this state of God's country.....It's one vivid blasphemy from sidewalk to the tips of its spires.....From now on, Brown will never design anything. He will devote his life to renovating the house of my Cybel into a home for my Margaret!.....

.....  
I'm done. My heart,--My last will and testament! I leave Dion Anthony to William Brown--for him to love and obey.....then my Margaret will love me--my children will love me--....Nothing more--but Man's last gesture--by which he conquers--to laugh! Ha-- (He begins, stops as if paralyzed, and drops on his knees by Brown's chair, his mask falling off, his Christian Martyr's face at the point of death) Forgive me, Billy. Bury me, hide me, forget me for your own happiness! May Margaret love you! May you design the Temple of Man's soul! Blessed are the meek and the poor in spirit! (He kisses Brown's feet--then more and more weakly and childishly) What was the prayer, Billy? I'm getting so sleepy.....  
Brown--"Our Father who art in Heaven."

1. Act II, Scene III

Dion--"Our Father." (He dies.)

Brown--(dully) He's dead--at last.....(He stares at Dion's real face contemptuously) So that's the poor weakling you really were! No wonder you hid!.....(He picks up the mask from the floor) .....Say what you like, it's strong if it is bad! And this is what Margaret loved, not you! By God!

From now on, by means of Dion's mask Brown assumes the personality of Dion and for a time his game goes well. But confusion results. Society thrusts this or that personality upon its personages and woe comes to him who does not know how to wear it. He soon realizes that Dion has had his revenge.

Brown. You're dead, William Brown, dead beyond hope of resurrection. It's the Dion you buried in your garden who killed you, not you him! It's Margaret's husband.....Paradise by proxy! Love by mistaken identity! God!

The masks of "The Great God Brown" are forced upon the characters. Dion's, assumed at first as a protection for his over-sensitive soul, is insisted upon by Margaret, who, though she loves him intensely, refuses to see in him anything but what the mask tells her; she forces upon him the personality which he appears to have. Her idea is fixed and set; she is afraid of finding in Dion anything but her own conception of him. In the same way Cybel's mask is thrust upon her by society. The prostitute must be loud and coarse and vulgar, or society would lose its sense of superiority. She must conform to the conventional idea. Dion represents a struggle between two personalities; his only moments of peace are those in which he discards the mask in the presence of Cybel who tells him, when he puts

it on, to stop hiding. Again in the crucial moments with Margaret, he attempts to put it off. Had Margaret been willing to accept as Dion the face behind the mask, the two might have found happiness.

Through his own dissimulation Brown meets his tragic death. Cybel, having rendered tender ministrations, speaks in deep pain:

"Always spring comes again bearing life! Always again!.....Spring again!--life again!--summer and fall and death and peace again!--(with agonized sorrow) --but always, always, love and conception and birth and pain again--spring bearing the intolerable chalice of life again!--bearing the glorious, blazing crown of life again!

Margaret, who has picked up Dion's mask, becomes triumphant in her grief:

My lover! My husband! My boy! Good-by. Thank you for happiness! And you're not dead, sweetheart! You can never die till my heart dies! You will live forever! You will sleep under my heart! I will feel you stirring forever under my heart!

The tragedy of misunderstanding! Margaret speaks to the mask of the dead man whom she has loved but has never known.

In his explanation to the papers, O'Neill has the following to say in regard to "The Great God Brown":<sup>1</sup>.

"I realize that when a playwright takes to explaining he thereby automatically places himself in the dock! But where an open-faced avowal by the play itself of the abstract theme underlying it is made impossible by the very nature of that hidden theme, then perhaps it is justifiable for the author to confess the mystical pattern which manifests itself as an overtone in 'The Great God Brown', dimly behind and beyond the words and actions of the characters.

<sup>1</sup>.Barrett H. Clark, Eugene O'Neill, Robert M. McBride & Co., N. Y., 1927, Page 95.



"I had hoped the names chosen for my people would give a strong hint of this.....Dion Anthony--Dionysus and St. Anthony--the creative pagan acceptance of life, fighting eternal war with the masochistic, life-denying spirit of Christianity as represented by St. Anthony--the whole struggle resulting in this modern day in mutual exhaustion--creative joy in life for life's sake frustrated, rendered abortive, distorted by morality from Pan into Satan, into a Mephistopheles mocking himself in order to feel alive; Christianity, once heroic in martyrs for its intense faith now pleading weakly for intense belief in anything, even Godhead itself. (In the play it is Cybele, the pagan Earth Mother, who makes the assertion with authority: 'Our Father, who Art!' to the dying Brown, as it is she who tries to inspire Dion Anthony with her certainty in life for its own sake.)

"Margaret is my image of the modern direct descendant of the Marguerite of Faust--the eternal girl-woman with a virtuous simplicity of instinct, properly oblivious to everything but the means to her end of maintaining the race.

"Cybel is an incarnation of Cybele, the Earth Mother doomed to segregation as a pariah in a world of unnatural laws, but patronized by her segregators, who are thus themselves the first victims of their laws.

"Brown is the visionless demi-god of our new materialistic myth--a Success--building his life of exterior things, inwardly empty and resourceless, an uncreative creature of superficial preordained social grooves, a by-product forced aside into slack waters by the deep main current of life-desire.

"Dion's mask of Pan which he puts on as a boy is not only a defense against the world for the super-sensitive painter-poet underneath it, but also an integral part of his character as the artist. The world is not only blind to the man beneath, but it also sneers and condemns the Pan-mask it sees. After that Dion's inner life retrogresses along the line of Christian resignation until it partakes of the nature of the Saint while at the same time the outer Pan is slowly transformed by his struggle with reality into Mephistopheles. It is as Mephistopheles he falls stricken at Brown's feet after having condemned Brown to destruction by willing him his mask, but, this mask falling off as he does, it is the Saint who kisses Brown's feet in abject contrition and pleads as a little boy to a big brother to tell him a prayer.

"Brown has always envied the creative life force in Dion--what he himself lacks. When he steals Dion's mask of Mephistopheles he thinks he is gaining the power to live creatively, while in reality he is only stealing that creative power made self-destructive by complete frustration. The devil of mocking doubt

makes short work of him. It enters him, rending him apart, torturing and transfiguring him until he is even forced to wear a mask of his Success, William A. Brown, before the world, as well as Dion's mask toward wife and children. Thus Billy Brown becomes not himself to any one. And thus he partakes of Dion's anguish--more poignantly, for Dion has the Mother, Cybele--and in the end out of this anguish his soul is born, a tortured Christian soul such as the dying Dion's, begging for belief, and at last finding it on the lips of Cybel.

.....  
 "It was far from my idea in writing 'Brown' that this background pattern of conflicting tides in the soul of Man should ever overshadow and thus throw out of proportion the living drama of the recognizable human beings, Dion, Brown, Margaret and Cybel. I meant it always to be mystically within and behind them, giving them a significance beyond themselves, forcing itself through them to expression in mysterious words, symbols, actions they do not themselves comprehend. And that is as clearly as I wish an audience to comprehend it. It is Mystery--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. And it is this mystery I want to realize in the theatre. The solution, if there ever be any, will probably have to be produced in a test tube and turn out to be discouragingly undramatic."

## Victim to Dogmatism

## "Dynamo"

"Dynamo" is concerned with profound and eternal human problems. It is the expression of a brooding and passionately thirsty soul.

Reuben, a lad of seventeen, is the son of misguided parents. The Reverend Hutchins Light, his father, is a bullying sermonizer who is the victim of an inner uncertainty that compensates itself by being boomingly over-assertive. Amelia Light, his mother, fifteen years her husband's junior, has learned to submit to his father's puritanical conceits, but in her face one sees marks of rebelliousness, determination, stubbornness and an expression of virtuous resignation. Reuben has inherited characteristics from both lines. Though stubborn, he speaks timidly and hesitatingly. His natural voice has an almost feminine gentleness, yet in intercourse with the world, he instinctively imitates his father's tone, booming self-protectively. Reuben becomes the victim of dogmatic teaching and preaching in his home.

Next door to the Light family lives an atheist, Ramsay Fife, superintendent of a hydro-electric plant, who seizes every opportunity possible to belittle and enrage the Reverend Mr. Light. Fife is full of the malicious humor of the practical joker. "He has a biting tongue, but at bottom is a good-natured man except where the religious

bigotry of his atheism is concerned." His wife, a fat, doll-like type, is given to sentimentality. The daughter Ada, who resembles her father both in physique and temperament, at times shows flashes of her mother's sentimentality and is often revolting in her slang and self-assertive manner.

Fate ironically steps in, as Reuben falls in love with Ada,--a fact which is disturbing to both households. In attempting to play a joke on Reuben and his father and to prove them yellow, Fife, defying God and his lightning and extoling Lucifer whom he terms the "better electrical expert of the two", arouses new conceptions of God in the mind of Reuben, who up to this time, although confessing Jehovah to be his God, evidences lack of faith in his abject fear of lightning.

Upon their discovery of Reuben's love for the atheist's daughter, Hutchins and Amelia Light lose all sense of reasoning. Reuben loses confidence in his mother when she betrays him to his father, and he comes to hate his father with the bitterest intensity when his father attempts to bring him to terms through the despicable means of "beating". He grows defiant. He curses both mother and father and renounces God.

Reuben--If there is his God let Him strike me dead this second! I dare Him!  
 (His father squeals with terror.....His mother screams. He laughs triumphantly.)  
 There! Didn't I tell you! (.....Reuben turns his back on his home determinedly and starts walking off left--with bitter defiance.) There is no God! No God but Electricity! I'll never be scared again! I'm

through with the lot of you!

From now on there is a desperate struggle to find himself--to find a God to take the place of the one whom he has rejected.

Fifteen months elapse. Reuben returns home a hardened skeptic to find his mother dead and his father a heart-broken man. His attitude toward Ada Fife has changed. He thinks of her now as only a means of sex-gratification. Meanwhile, Ada is seriously in love with Reuben and cannot understand his changed attitude. To placate his conscience for his mother's death, Reuben feels that he must renounce Ada and worship the Dynamo which is the symbol of his mother's soul.

Electricity becomes his new god. He becomes a servant in his god's temple as an employee in Fife's Hydro-Electric Power Plant. He believes the relentlessly purring dynamo holds the ultimate secret of his quest. But the tragedy of his quest lies in the fact that after renouncing the God of Calvin, he has worshipped electricity in precisely the same manner, ever looking to the outside for something he must have within. Like all idols, Dynamo must be placated. Reuben believes that by renunciation of the flesh, and self-abnegation, he will eventually induce the god to speak. He tortures himself as his father before him had done, and when he fails, there remains but one thing--immolation. He sacrifices Ada and in remorse and despair he thrusts

his hands to the inscrutable idol, and grasping one of the brushes, dies amid brightly leaping sparks. But the bitterest thing is not death. It is the fact that one must die without knowing that which one died to know. Dynamo, still inscrutable, purrs on.

The quest has been tragically futile. Man cannot match his strength against that of the God of this universe. "Dynamo" is the Odyssey of man's loss of the dogmatic God and the tragedy of his enshrinement of the machine as a substitute. O'Neill here expresses what is taking place in the souls of Americans today.

Victim to an Ideal  
"Strange Interlude"

In "Strange Interlude" O'Neill has set up for himself the Greek ideal of tragedy. But O'Neill's tragedy differs from the Greek tragedy in this respect: In the Greek tragedy the antagonist was external compulsion, usually the will of the gods--a purely objective factor. In "Strange Interlude" the antagonist is an inner compulsion, the emotions of the character--a purely subjective factor. The Greeks saw the gods as perverse even when they considered their acts just, and in their despair, they cried that the ways of the gods to men could not be justified. O'Neill, too, seeks to justify the ways of God to men, but he thinks that life is worth while, despite its pain and tragedy.

"Strange Interlude" is the tale of the emotional life of one frustrated woman, Nina Leeds, and four men whom she attracts to her because of her peculiar psychological make-up--all of them bound together from youth to old age in an unbreakable web woven from the complex passionate threads of their several personalities.

Nina's father, a puritannical professor, had prevented the marriage of her and her lover, Gordon, who was killed in the World War. The prevention of the consummation of their union before Gordon's death embitters Nina and she revolts against her father's ideas. She leaves home in quest of satisfying her more or less imperfectly felt needs.

Within a year Nina returns home to attend her father's funeral. She tries to feel sorrow over her father's death, but she discovers that she is void of all feeling. She even confesses to Charlie that she has lived the life of a prostitute, trying to satisfy an inner emotion. But instead of satisfaction, only revulsion had resulted. From now on Nina becomes a pathological case. She becomes wife, mother, mistress, materialist, idealist--in fact she embodies all the attributes of each type of woman. She uses her male admirers to satisfy her complexity of emotions: Gordon satisfies the romantic memory of her ideal; the patient, mother-obsessed Charles Marsden fills the place of a father and brings forgiveness and peace to her soul; Sam Evans gives the material protection of a husband; Edmund Darrell, her lover, gratifies her longing for a healthy son; and later her son Gordon confirms her belief in God-the-Mother.

"Endowed with an inordinate thirst for life, Nina assumes the proportions of a superwoman and becomes a symbol for all humanity. With aspirations that can never be quite fulfilled, held in check by inhibitions, driven onward by appetites, she is the incarnation of vitality, a creature that must meddle in the lives of others in order that her own life might be filled to overflowing. No one is a match for her; nothing arrests her progress, except time itself. At last she is overcome by time and by that very spirit of youth (In the person of her son) that urged her to rebel. The young Gordon and the girl, he is determined to marry, leave her as she had left her helpless father.

"It was O'Neill's aim to expose, imaginatively, a chain of events in which a few people exhibit to us their thoughts and motives over a long period of years. Life begins; it offers us problems, joys, tragedies--occasionally a thing of beauty, but oftener as a senseless and cruel joke, yet it is a fascinating playground;



the puppets are momentarily self-important with their little schemes for overcoming death and unhappiness, and then toward the end they lose bit by bit their desires and the fierce impulses of youth, declining slowly into a sunset period in which peace alone seems worth having. Thus Nina seems to transcend her sex, to embody and be identified with the life instinct, as she dominated each situation in order not to be dominated by it. Because she is first conceived as a woman, each situation in her life is symbolized by a man, possessing something that she needs, has needed, or will need. In the case of Marsden, we see her carefully appraising him in the first act, marking him out for use at some future time. When everything else has passed, she falls into his protecting arms, there to end in peace the last days of her life." 1.

Though erotic, Nina presents a pitiful case. While outwardly she is a devil who ruins four characters by tying them to her with tentacles of her split emotions, inwardly she is an infinitely tragic human being struggling to attain some kind of emotional wholeness, some unification--a thing impossible to her, because her real lover is dead forever and only her ideal remains. Her aspiration to compensate her unconsummated love was predestined to failure.

The characters rationalize their desires. Life goes on--they grow old; but each one limited by his inhibitions inevitably becomes what he was destined to be: Sam Evans dying in ignorance of the real father of his son, has been successful in only a material way; Nina wearying of seeking happiness, accepts the peace that only Charlie can give; Charlie, having spent the best of his life in regrets, has only the twilight of his life to spend in comforting Nina; Gordon Evans, believing his mother loyal to his father, seeks

1. The Drama; Vol. 18, March 1928, page 169.

a new life in ignorance of his parentage; and Darrell, the most tragic of them all, shouts at the sky, at the airplane, at his departing son who will never know he is leaving his father behind, with the full realization that he is being abandoned by all to spend the rest of his days in loneliness and despair. Here we have a tragedy of a lifetime, of a limited poor soul who made mistakes, did his best, loved, struggled, tried to extricate himself from the web that entangled him, but once caught in the trap, he was doomed to inevitable frustrations.

Victim to Incest  
 "Mourning Becomes Electra"

In "Mourning Becomes Electra" O'Neill has led his fate-ridden characters through a morbidly fascinating series of experiences, including murder, suicide, lust, romance, and incest.

In its dramatic pattern, this tragedy is a modern rendering of the Electra-Orestes legend, successively employed by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. The New England house of Mannon is the house of Atreus; Ezra Mannon is Agamemnon; Christine Mannon, his wife, is Clytemnestra; Lavinia, his daughter, is Electra; Orin, his son, is Orestes. Captain Brant, his wife's lover, is Aegisthus. The hired man and his rude companions of the town are the chanting, apprehensive chorus. The Civil War from which Ezra Mannon is returning is the Trojan War from which Agamemnon returned. The pillars of the Mannon New England home are the portals of the Greek temple before which the tragedies were acted.

Although he has used the dramatic pattern of the Greeks, O'Neill has restated this tragic dilemma in a new spirit. Instead of external fate and factious gods, he summons the inner impulses of the neurotic mind which modern psychologists term as "complexes". These "complexes" appear in a mother's jealousy of her own daughter, in a son's jealousy of his father, and in a daughter's unconscious desire to occupy in the household the triple mental role of wife,

mother, and sister.

Here O'Neill has painted a picture of a family in decay--a family warped and twisted, locked in a closet with its family-skeletons, presenting to the world a non-committal attitude in order to hide its inner torture.

On a large New England estate, secluded from the curiosity of their neighboring townspeople, lived the Mannons. When the Civil War ended in the spring of 1865, only four members of that proud and haughty family remained on the estate, although a kinsman had made intrusions.

There was Ezra Mannon, Brigadier-General, hard-hearted, expressionless as flint, who, on the field of battle strewn with its dead, suddenly sickened of death and desired love and a happy life with his wife. He returned home, hoping to break down the barrier between him and his wife, only to find it was too late.

Mannon--.....I came home to surrender to you-- what's inside me. I love you. I loved you then, and all the years between, and I love you now..... You'll find I have changed, Christine, I'm sick of death! I want life!.....I've got to make you love me!

There was the wife, Christine Mannon, no true Mannon, but infected with the virus of the family, faithless as a wife, warped as a mother, going to her lover in her husband's absence. There was Lavinia, the daughter, possessed of a father-fixation, bitterly in love with her father, hating as bitterly her mother. And there was Orin, the son, the Oedipus-complex, unwholesomely in love with his mother.

Then, too, there was Adam Brant, the intruder, the half Mannon who had discarded the name of his father and taken that of his mother, who had been driven from the Mannon house by Ezra's father under the pretense of righteous indignation. Adam had come seeking revenge for his mother's death. But instead, he brought revenge upon his own head. He and Christine Mannon fell in love with each other, and then Lavinia, avenging fury for her own love of Adam, who looked very much like her father, frightened the lovers to murder her father.

Driven on by her twisted love, Lavinia unearthed two secrets: infidelity and murder. And when her brother Orin returned from war to his father's funeral, she goaded him into believing his mother a murderess. The brother, at first, who had hated his father, was quite indifferent to the murder; but when his jealousy was aroused because of his mother's love for Adam Brant, he became eager to trap her in her guilt.

The two children, following their mother when she sought to escape, traced her to the cabin of Brant's ship; and there Orin, an embittered man by his suffering in war, killed his mother's lover in cold blood. Lavinia was able to witness the murder of the man she unconsciously loved because of her jealous hatred of her mother.

The story of their deed was too much for Christine, and moaning in her despair, she went away to kill herself.

Remorse seized Orin immediately, and he cowered at the

horror of being the cause of his mother's death. Signs of moral weakness set in at once, and he was unable to face independent responsibilities that crowded upon him. But Lavinia, freed from the object of her jealousy and the torturing lover of her father, was released from mental suffering for a time.

Still the implacable leader, Lavinia strove to restore Orin to sanity, but a new and unexpected complex developed. The furies that haunted Orin consisted not only of an active madness of blood-guilt for the death of his mother, but also the transition of his fixation for her into an incestuous passion for Lavinia. She who had tried to become the wife of her father and the mother of Orin, had grown recognizably into the likeness of her mother. Orin's and her own knowledge of this, their mutual guilt, and involved relationship are the culmination of the theme which has appeared intermittently throughout the play: that the dead shall come back to haunt the living; that heredity and crime must be expiated.

When Lavinia saw that Orin could not be restored to sanity and that he would inadvertantly reveal the family secrets, she taunted him until he sought release in suicide.

After Orin's suicide, Lavinia thought she was at last free--free to marry Peter Niles and abandon herself to the warm passion she had inherited from her mother and which she had so long inhibited. She was free to stand in his

arms and beg for his immediate love. But instead of addressing Peter Niles by his own name, she called him Adam! Then she understood with horrified mind her love for the Adam who looked so much like her father, and realized her motive in hounding her mother. She sensed that wicked psychological Fate, in the shape, this time, of an incestuous attachment to her mother's lover. Then in the mourning, which so became her, Lavinia set her back on love and went into the doomed house of the Mannons to live with the dead until they should be pleased to let her lie with them. So Mourning truly Becomes Electra.

Through the whole play there persists a desire to escape impending Fate--to find some place where bitterness, disappointment and fear can be forgotten. To each character this haven of rest seems to be some island in the South Seas, where the natives are free from conventions and where love is fearless and free. Orin would have taken his mother to such an island of his dreams. Lavinia found on the island men like her father and there she found the desire to love. Brant would have carried Christine there to luxuriate in his love--and Ezra would have carried his wife there to escape the jealousies of their children. But each was destined by his fatal inheritance to self-destruction. Lavinia, the sole survivor, must drag out her days behind closed shutters and barred doors to expiate the curse on the House of Mannon.

### A Summary of O'Neill's Theme

We have traced the progress of Eugene O'Neill's art. His drama has been a celebration of the individual in conflict with something--Fate, circumstance, moral or social law, heredity--which hampers or crushes him. Whatever his characters may attempt, success or failure means little. It is the struggle that is worth while. The mistake the public makes in judging O'Neill is to assume that what he says of individuals he means to have expanded into truth about the majority or even a class. He understands that drama best deals with the individual. Through "Bound East for Cardiff", "In the Zone", and "The Long Voyage Home", O'Neill has taught us that sheer character is of prime value in the theatre, though it evokes no derisive laughter. He had revealed character as the touchstone of stark reality of human suffering. It is this passionate suffering, faintly illuminated by aspiration, that O'Neill introduced in the American drama.

To develop such passion in the theatre requires a dramatic instinct and a dramatic technique as simple as they are strong. No intricate contrivances in his plays annoy the spectator. The human heart is revealed, caught in the meshes of that most tragic fate which is character--what one essentially is and must remain.

In progressing to plays of full length, O'Neill has remained true to his principle that character must be re-



vealed, regardless of technique or expense, but his development as an artist has been untrammelled. His power of evoking atmosphere has been that of a poet. His imagination has ranged from the mystic inspiration of the high seas to the soul-destroying penury and puritanic ideals of New England, from the splendors of great cities to the peace of the Carribbean Sea. The vivid truth of his characterizations has expanded in proportion--the starved poet and mystic of "Beyond the Horizon", the aberrant stoker of "The Hairy Ape", the terror-stricken black of "The Emperor Jones", the faithful prostitute in "Anna Christie", the victim of sex suppression in "Different", the materialist in "Marco Millions", the spiritually defeated in "Desire Under the Elms", the incongruous characters of "The Great God Brown", the soul struggling for divine light in "Dynamo", the inhuman bondage in "Strange Interlude", and the Oedipus motif in "Mourning Becomes Electra".

Still in the prime of his life Eugene O'Neill bids fair to become America's greatest dramatist.

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