1973

The Failed Comedies of Eugene O'neill.

Daniel Francis Hurley

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The Failed Comedies of

Eugene O'Neill

A Dissertation

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by

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Throughout his career, Eugene O'Neill saw the universe in terms of absolute contradictions. Either man and his environment were radically spiritual and ultimately perfect or they were both degraded and disgusting. Early in his career O'Neill managed to achieve a delicate equilibrium between his idealistic demands and his realistic recognitions. He did so in plays that are ironic tragedies in which the "jokes" that fate and life play arise from the wreckage of men's dreams. These painful jokes, which are exact inversions of what the characters asked of fate and life, do not destroy the characters, not even when the joke is seen.

While O'Neill accepted neither religious nor philosophical systems that saw the world as meaningful and whole, he dealt with the absurd by granting "hopeless hopes" (as he himself called them) to the characters in his early plays. These hopes, although unfounded in either reason or faith, enable his people to maintain their tragically beautiful capacity to dream. In plays such as Beyond the Horizon and "The Straw" O'Neill gave his characters the ability to rise above even the destruction of their most cherished dreams.

For a time in the middle of his career, O'Neill wrote several plays which portray characters who absorb the contradictions of human existence into a fully sensed and ultimately comic resolution. These spiritual comedies include such generally unsatisfactory plays as The Fountain, Lazarus
Laughed, and Days Without End. These plays exposed two of O'Neill's weaknesses: his inability to write lyrically and his inability to write convincingly in a vein of philosophical or religious idealism.

Late in his career O'Neill wrote several plays that are characterized by the presence of what appears to be comedy of an elemental, convincing kind. But the easy comedy in such plays as The Iceman Cometh, A Moon for the Misbegotten, and "Hughie" slowly drains away, leaving a residue of agony. In the process of moving from a comic to a pathetic view of his characters, O'Neill achieved finally an approximation of the emotional power of traditional tragedy. And he did it while remaining essentially a philosophical nihilist.

Although the characters in these plays are almost invariably unheroic figures who have long since given up striving to force life to submit to them, their suffering and their tenuous grip on life come to have a size and strength that is much in excess of their real size and strength. O'Neill pumps them up with comic energies and then uses those energies to power his tragedy. When the characters recognize their own smallness, the audience is granted a moment or two of genuine pity and fear. Although the energies that these characters expend are spurious and although they themselves are very nearly empty shells, O'Neill makes their destinies and their pain matters of great importance, matters of considerable theatrical beauty.
CHAPTER I

THE FAILED COMEDIES OF EUGENE O'NEILL

AN INTRODUCTION

For a man who seldom smiled and almost never laughed Eugene O'Neill exhibits in his plays a consistent fascination with laughter and the comic. Even in his very early, very clumsy efforts, O'Neill views fate, that "behind-life Force,"¹ as a perpetrator of painfully ironic jokes on men and women. One of O'Neill's early successes, "The Hairy Ape," is even subtitled "A Comedy of Ancient and Modern Life in Eight Scenes." O'Neill said that the two tragic figures in another of his early plays, "Different," were "fit subjects for the highest kind of comedy, were one sufficiently detached to write it."² During a period of about twelve years (1922-1934), O'Neill wrote several plays that come close to being dominated by laughter or a comic vision or both. Laughter, in these plays, comes to be the sign and expression of a mystical grasp of the radical unity and perfection of the cosmos. When O'Neill rose from a self-imposed burial that lasted from the middle of the 1930's to 1946, he did so in order to shepherd into production The Iceman Cometh.


which he referred to as "a big kind of comedy that doesn't stay funny very long." O'Neill complained, in fact, that the cast in that first, largely unsuccessful production of The Iceman Cometh played it as tragedy too soon. In the other late plays of Eugene O'Neill, there is much the same peculiar kind of comedy in the midst of brooding darkness. A Moon for the Misbegotten, A Touch of the Poet, and "Hughie" all have much in them that is comic. And none of them functions well unless those comic elements are given full play.

O'Neill did not write traditional tragedies like those of the Greeks or of Shakespeare. The plays he did write seem to be of three kinds: ironic tragedies, spiritual comedies, and failed comedies. All three kinds involve, in one way or another, O'Neill's sense of the comic. The type that is most important, numerically at least, is the ironic tragedy. In the first ten years of his career, O'Neill wrote nothing but ironic tragedies, and irony remains a constant element in all of his work. The ironic tragedies are characterized by an envisioning of fate, in its various forms, as a "behind-life" force which plays great, painful jokes on nearly helpless men and women. These men and women are "nearly helpless,"

3 Eugene O'Neill, in Gelb, O'Neill, p. 871.

but not entirely so. In most of O'Neill's ironic tragedies, the heroes and heroines are granted at least ironic victories. Sometimes these victories involve the recognition on the part of the victim that a great joke has been played on him. The recognition is a victory of sorts. More often, the ironic victory is found in the stubborn refusal of the man or woman to surrender a dream even in the face of certain defeat, sometimes even after defeat has taken place. The victory is ironic, however, either because it leads to nothing but death or because it is clear that the victory is merely a form of madness that extends no further than the afflicted one's life span. The great victory in the ironic tragedies is won by the man who not only recognizes the joke that has been played on him, but also is able to laugh at it and at himself. Yank, the "Hairy Ape," gains such a victory. O'Neill's consistent claim is that all victories wrung from inexorable fate are ironic victories.\(^5\) They are ironic because no one ever escapes his fate and, more importantly, because no one really achieves that unity with a power greater than himself who can compensate him for the pain the fatal jokester has inflicted. Man, the dreaming animal, faces inevitable defeat because he is the dreaming animal. But his dreams and his futile struggle to realize them are what

\(^5\) Eugene O'Neill, a letter to John Peter Tochev, Nov. 5, 1919, in Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 465. O'Neill wrote: "We know deep down in our soul that, logically, each one of our lives is a hopeless hope—that failure to realize our dreams is the inexorable fate allotted to us."
gives him tragic beauty. O'Neill summarized his notion of tragedy in a letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn: "I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind--Fate, God, our 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 make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression."  

The second kind of play that O'Neill wrote seems best described as spiritual comedy. Between 1922 and 1935, O'Neill wrote a half-dozen plays that suggest strongly that a comic spirit is moving in them behind and through the apparent tragedies. During this "apocalyptic" stage in his career, O'Neill seemed dissatisfied with the ironic victories won by some of his characters and attempted instead to leap beyond space, time, and the human condition into a comic realm where all contradictions are swallowed up in some principle of unity. He achieved this vision completely in his "Roman Catholic" play, Days Without End, and partially in Lazarus Laughed and several other works.

O'Neill did not remain in his "apocalyptic" stance. He apparently abandoned it when he abandoned actively participating in the American theatre between 1935 and 1946. When the work O'Neill had done during that dozen years of seclusion appeared, it differed considerably both from the ironic

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6 Eugene O'Neill, in Gelb, O'Neill, p. 205.
tragedies and from the spiritual comedies. These last plays, The Iceman Cometh, A Moon for the Misbegotten, A Touch of the Poet, and "Hughie," are the plays upon which, along with Long Day's Journey into Night, O'Neill's reputation seems likely to rest. And these are failed comedies, the third kind of play O'Neill wrote. Long Day's Journey into Night is O'Neill's finest play and probably the finest play yet produced in America. It is not, however, a failed comedy. The threatening elements in that play are introduced too early and too unequivocally for an audience to be lulled into a comic mood. In the most powerful and moving scenes of that play, however, O'Neill employs a variety of comic situations and devices that help supply an audience with the ability to endure the agonies of the Tyrone family long enough to achieve some kind of understanding of them that goes deeper than mere emotional exhaustion.

A failed comedy is a strange kind of tragedy which derives its emotional power from a quasi-comic energy that is supplied in the play's opening scene or scenes. O'Neill's failed comedies are, in most respects, greatly superior to anything O'Neill had done before. O'Neill's early work may make him an historical footnote as an artistic pioneer; his late plays may give him a place as the foremost dramatist America has produced in her first two hundred years as a nation.

I. O'Neill's Sense of the Comic

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher-theologian,
offers perhaps the clearest description of what is meant by the term "comic" as used here. "The comical," Kierkegaard explains, "is present in every stage of life, for wherever there is contradiction the comical is present."7 And, Kierkegaard adds, "No age has so fallen victim to the comic as this." There is little doubt that O'Neill was especially sensitive to this, the "bottom side" of the comic, as Kierkegaard describes it. The contradictions that are life, Kierkegaard continues, make "existence itself . . . both comic and pathetic in the same degree."8 In O'Neill's plays, at least in his "ironic tragedies," attention is paid both to the objectively comic operations of that jokester fate and to the pathetic inability of the victim of fate's jokes to do much more than smile and endure.

Kierkegaard claims, however, that the highest comedy is the comedy of faith. In this comedy the contradictions are absolute, with the self-confessed finite being, man, on the one hand and the infinite being, God, on the other. Faith involves the absurd leap of the finite being across the bridgeless and limitless gulf to the infinite. And the greatest single absurdity for the buffoon-man of faith is that his risking everything carries with it no assurance at all that he will not lose everything. This highest kind of


8 Kierkegaard, in Sypher, Comedy, pp. 196-97.
comedy was, for most of O'Neill's career, simply out of reach. But that O'Neill intended his reach to exceed his grasp is obvious in a comment he made to Joseph Wood Krutch: "Most modern plays are concerned with the relation between man and man, but that does not interest me at all. I am interested only in the relation between man and God."9

That O'Neill was aware of the elements of what Kierkegaard called the highest comedy is clear in an often quoted statement O'Neill made in a letter to George Jean Nathan: "The playwright of today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it—the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, or to comfort its fears of death with." O'Neill added, in the same letter, that any writer who does not have "this big subject behind all the little subjects of his plays or novels . . . is simply scribbling around the surface of things and has no more real status than a parlor entertainer."10 Kierkegaard said that "no age has so fallen victim to the comic as this"; O'Neill would offer the same comment and for the same reasons: the science and materialism that were at the burial of the old God—if they did not, in fact, kill him—have only succeeded


O'Neill's avowed purpose was, then, this absurdly comic attempt to investigate the "relation between man and God." Intellectually, O'Neill invariably understood life to be a comedy, a joke; but he took his investigation of that comedy very seriously. To say that O'Neill was hypersensitive to the comic is not to say that he had a sense of humor—that sunny quality. There is little evidence of a sense of humor in his plays.

II. O'Neill's Ironic Tragedies

O'Neill's sense of the comic was further energized by his appetite for the ironic. In the bulk of his work, his ironic tragedies, O'Neill insists that men are inevitably defeated, but he also insists that the defeat comes in the form of an almost exact inversion of men's dreams and desires. O'Neill's sense of the comic and the ironic was often sad, frequently bitter, and sometimes self-pitying. In many of his plays, the laughter of his characters is not just an embattled response, but a despairing one. Dion Anthony, in The Great God Brown, speaks of "Man's last gesture--by which he conquers--to laugh!" but Dion Anthony's laughter is the sneering laughter of Mephistopheles, wallowing in the delights of disgust and despair. Even when laughter is the embodiment of a victory over fate, as it seems intended to

be in "The Hairy Ape," the victory is still ironic, for it leads nowhere. The best example of O'Neill's early ironic tragedies is, probably, "The Hairy Ape," but O'Neill's own insistence on expressing his sense of the comic in the character of Yank, the "Hairy Ape," distorts that which is noble in Yank's laughter. The "Hairy Ape" is so vulgar and so superficially amusing in speech, appearance, and behavior that he hardly seems the tragic Everyman O'Neill meant him to be. His last heroic moments are robbed of their dignity and power.

O'Neill's sense of the comic seems also to have been founded on two contradictory emotional-intuitive principles: a sense of the sublime and a sense of the obscene. O'Neill's sense of the sublime is usually expressed through his granting his characters dreams to follow after vainly. The dreams vary. Some characters dream of love, some of happiness, some of creative accomplishment, some of discovery, some of salvation. Whatever the dreams, they always exceed in scope what any of the characters can capture and make real. Early in his career, O'Neill seems to have regarded man's dreams, however unrealistic, as the motive for man's struggle to make of himself something other than "an infinitesimal incident" in the expression of those unintelligible forces that constitute Fate. In his middle years, O'Neill wrote some plays in which dreams seem dangerous, even malicious, rather than awe-inspiring and beautiful. The degree of O'Neill's ambivalence about dreams is not
clear, however, until he writes those last, searing "failed comedies." In the statements of tragic theory that punctuate most of O'Neill's career, he plumps for the tragic beauty that results from the "hopeless hopes" with which his characters invest their dreams.12

O'Neill's sense of the obscene, in tortured conjunction with his sense of the sublime, is what produces the sometimes unwieldy "power" that nearly all critics notice, even in his bad plays. If O'Neill sought tragic compensation, he did not seek it in an intellectual sense of moral rectitude nor in an intelligent, intelligible order. He sought it in tragic beauty. It should be noted in passing that the sense of the obscene is, in many ways, more certainly human than the capacity for metaphysical inquiry. As Wylie Sypher puts it in an article on comedy, "Laughter at the obscenest jest forever divides man from animal, because animal is never self-conscious about any fleshly act; whereas man is

12 Eugene O'Neill, quoted in Gelb, O'Neill, p. 336. O'Neill: "I have an innate feeling of exultance about tragedy. The tragedy of Man is perhaps the only significant thing about him. What I am after is to get an audience to leave the theatre with an exultant feeling from seeing somebody on the stage facing life, fighting against the eternal odds, not conquering, but perhaps inevitably being conquered. The individual life is made significant just by the struggle. The struggle of man to dominate life, to assert and insist that life has no meaning outside himself where he comes in conflict with life, which he does at every turn; and his attempt to adapt life to his own needs, in which he doesn't succeed, is what I mean when I say that man is the hero."
not man without being somehow uneasy about the 'nastiness' of his body."13

For most people the obscene involves a self-conscious squeamishness about the bodily functions of sex and excretion. In many of O'Neill's plays, however, this sensitivity becomes an analogue for an individual's whole attitude toward his own existence. When dreams of love and worth and creative accomplishment die, such characters find life itself to be worse than meaningless; they find it dirty, revolting, disgusting—in a word, they find it obscene. For example, when Orin Mannon in Mourning Becomes Electra realizes that his dreams of love were nothing more than romanticized hormonal yearnings, the discovery does not produce a healthy, normal understanding of sex but a revulsion that is so great that life itself becomes a filthy degrading burden to be shaken off. Larry Slade, the defeated idealist in The Iceman Cometh who hides behind a cynical, laughing mask for a time, expresses well this sense of revulsion in regard to human existence. Slade claims that he gave up on all "movements" to improve man's lot when he discovered that men are "a mixture of mud and manure."14 O'Neill's characters are usually Kierkegaardian comic beings caught up in the


contradictions of human existence. But they are almost never satisfied with a moderate course between extremes. Either love and human aspiration are divine and able to overcome all limitations of space and time, or they are the filthy coupling and wallowing of swine who can think. The emotional power in O'Neill's plays regularly comes from this "all-or-worse-than-nothing" attitude in some of his characters, particularly in his ironic tragedies. When the dream dies for an O'Neill character, revulsion at the real is as likely a result as despair over the loss of the sublime.

In O'Neill's ironic tragedies, man's reality is always unbearably mean and vulgar in comparison with his dreams. It is as if O'Neill sees in the "surviving primitive religious instinct"15 only the power to intensify man's capacity to feel disgust. It is often disgust with unadorned reality that drives men like the "Hairy Ape" and Dion Anthony on desperate quests. Dion expresses himself in a destructive Mephistophelian laughter of gleeful disgust. In Yank's case, the laughter is his ironic victory over fate's joke, and he dies before his realization that he is a "filthy [my emphasis] beast" distorts him. Yank teeters between that realization and his unwillingness to accept it.

It is this duality in O'Neill's sense of the comic, then, that produces his ironic tragedies. The conviction that obscenity and sublimity are the inseparable but contradictory parts of the comedy of life provides much of the unruly power of O'Neill's ironic tragedies. It is also the insoluble contradiction that is incorporated in O'Neill's theory of tragedy: that man's sublimest victories are drawn from the "dirty" jokes played on man by fate. The exaltation that O'Neill insisted he found in his own ironic tragedies is best understood, then, as a purely esthetic exaltation. O'Neill laid no claims to an exaltation grounded in a captive sense of moral goodness or metaphysical truth. Only in his "spiritual comedies" did O'Neill even pretend that the experience offered by his plays might go beyond the theatrically thrilling moment into the realm of metaphysics or religion. The beauty of tragedy was, for O'Neill, always the beauty of an order, hopelessly and ironically imposed on reality by characters who were themselves the victims of another order, the neatly patterned order of the jokes of fate.

III. O'Neill's Spiritual Comedies

Only in those plays referred to in this study as spiritual comedies did O'Neill attempt to show his characters achieving anything greater than ironic victories. And only in Lazarus Laughed and Days Without End did O'Neill try to follow the comic spirit into that highest level, the level of comedy of faith. In Lazarus Laughed that spirit led him into
a Nietzschean pantheism in which the contradictions of the "lower" comedy of life were swallowed up in a ground of unity. In Days Without End the principal character, John Loving, achieves comic fulfillment and release in returning to the Roman Catholic faith. In that play the contradictions in John Loving are represented by having two actors playing "halves" of John Loving—one his doubting, cynical, rational self, and the other his childlike, seeking self. Several other plays—among them Marco Millions, The Great God Brown, The Fountain, and All God's Chillun Got Wings—hint at such a comic victory, but the possibility is mixed with other, alien possibilities.

O'Neill said he was only interested in the relation between man and God, and at least briefly, he filled plays with risk-taking surrenders that seem to establish that relation. Only a God could resolve, to O'Neill's emotional satisfaction, the terrible comedy he felt man to be a part of. O'Neill recognized rationally that man was in a great insane comedy, but his emotions could only "see" that this comedy was, for individuals, an unrelieved tragedy. At least for a time, however, O'Neill seems to have become "sufficiently detached" to write that "highest kind of comedy" he could see in individual tragedies.

O'Neill did not remain in his "apocalyptic" stance, but so long as he was in it, he wrote plays that were entirely

16 O'Neill, in Gelb, p. 437.
different from his ironic tragedies. In these spiritual comedies, the victories seem real, not ironic, and they seem to lead to an increase in life and a sense of faith in the ultimately comic resolution of apparently tragic lives. This religious, mystical dimension in O'Neill's creative drive disappears about the same time he himself disappeared from the American theatrical world in 1935. When he reappeared, it was with plays that differed greatly from his ironic tragedies and from his spiritual comedies. These last plays, the failed comedies, were, in nearly every way, his best works.

IV. O'Neill's Failed Comedies

The final direction in which O'Neill's taste for and appreciation of the comic and the ironic pushed him was firmly in the direction of the absurd. But O'Neill stopped short of the absurd and rescued from that chaos an esthetic experience no longer dependent on some lurking "behind-life force" to give it its power. O'Neill seems to have exhausted, in his spiritual comedies, the emotional conviction behind even his ironic tragedies that man's hopeless hopes must have some spiritual meaning and must be at least ironic expressions of some reality far greater than man, even though that reality is unintelligible to man. The last plays of O'Neill are darker than his ironic tragedies, for even ironic victories are largely absent. There are only men and their lives; no longer is there Man and his Life. These last plays are utterly devoid of the "God-mongering" in his spiritual comedies; they are even free of his insistence in the ironic tragedies
that there is some behind-life force whose contact with man is intimate, personal, real—and ironic. As John Henry Raleigh points out, the scope of O'Neill's last plays is limited to man, and man among men. All there is nothing else.

All the complaints about the intellectual nihilism in the themes of O'Neill's last plays are fully justified. He exhibits no belief in anything. All of the complaints about the grimness of the alternatives he seems to offer men are also justified. The options for men, in those plays, are two: dreams and drunkenness, or death. Man cannot possibly face in O'Neill's late plays what the psychologists call the "reality principle." Reality is devoid of any spiritual significance, and O'Neill's characters are unwilling and unable to live in such a universe. They construct instead small, dim worlds of dreams and memories, reinforced with alcohol. Life continues, O'Neill seems to say in these plays, only because there is one last "spiritual" value in life: man's fear of death.

A mere statement of the themes that can be abstracted from O'Neill's plays after the plays are over misses entirely the greatness in the plays. They are, after all, not philosophical statements. They are dramas. And it is as dramas that they have something to offer.

17 Raleigh, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, p. 16. The phrase "God-mongering" is Raleigh's.
O'Neill offers something to place against the absurd void; he offers his plays. The experience of tragic beauty that O'Neill made such a religion of for so many years is, in these last plays, simply an esthetic experience, limited to the duration of the plays. That O'Neill could get the power he does from these dark dramas is an amazing tribute to what the man knew, not of life, but of the theatre and of the dramatic art.

All the stages in O'Neill's career are detectable in his last plays, not just intellectually but emotionally. These last plays begin by introducing a comic mood that is far more convincing than that comic mood he tried to force into being in his spiritual comedies. O'Neill introduces sets of characters and situations and patterns of action that induce a comic mood precisely because they appear to come from a comic mood. Life is lived as if comic energies were in command. None of the drunken bums in Harry Hope's bar in The Iceman Cometh seem in any danger whatever. Moral considerations do not matter. The men are simply, unreflectively, and happily alive. They laugh; they drink; they sleep; they talk; they sing bawdy songs. The minor problems that arise are quickly washed away in the bacchanalian mood of that cool, dimly lighted place. The characters themselves, with their repetitive dialogue and monochromatic memories, are as comic as Yank, the "Hairy Ape." In A Moon for the Misbegotten, James Tyrone, the drunk, and Josie Hogan, the over-sized slut, seem comic archetypes: James is
Bacchus and Josie is Cybel. In "Hughie" both Erie and the night clerk in the hotel are comic figures. Erie is a tin-horn gambler whose appraisal of himself is happily in excess of any moralist's evaluation of him. The bored clerk is drifting in a world of dreams and night-time noises. Neither seems a busy, worried, God-seeking man. In A Touch of the Poet, Con Melody and his friends are celebrating the ancient celebration of life in funny stories, laughter, and drink. There is no note of seriousness present.

The comic energies that O'Neill tried so hard to show in his spiritual comedies develop easily and naturally in the opening scenes of his late plays. The characters and the situations are puffed up into semblances of health and life with these quasi-comic energies. The audience is lulled into the mood of comic anticipation, a mood in which conflicts are washed away in the floodtide of irresistible comic energies. The beginnings in each of these plays are, of course, dramatic ploys on O'Neill's part. He is not writing comedy; he is writing a deadly kind of modern tragedy.

Each of these plays shifts gradually, almost imperceptibly, away from the impervious calm of the comic mood. O'Neill's sense of the ironic begins to show up. The "jokes" and "kidding" begin to be seen as serious attacks: the silly illusions and romantic dreams begin to be seen as bad jokes. And then, as O'Neill put it, "the comedy breaks up and the tragedy comes on." 18

Nearly all the last plays are also "memory plays in which the characters' dreams for the future are based on their memories of the past. These memories are invariably highly selective. They are, in short, lies. The agony in these last plays usually comes from the stripping away of these memories of the past by which the characters comfort themselves and reassure themselves about the future. The pain comes when the memories refuse to stand up to present pressures, or when some other character attacks the memories relentlessly (usually because his own are being attacked). At one point or another in all these plays, the principal characters must stand, stripped of the armor of their dreams and lies, and endure their own pitiless gaze. But there is also, in these plays, a return, partial or complete, to the world of dreams and lies and drunkenness.

O'Neill, by pumping up his characters and situations with a synthetic comic energy, gains power to expend in imitation of tragedy. The sense of falling and loss in these last plays feels real, but it is not. None of the characters endures a genuine "fall from grace." All simply come to realize that they are, in the words of Dion-Brown in The Great God Brown, "born broken." The ironic joke in these last plays is no longer a joke played on men by fate. Man himself is the joke.

Abstract discussions of O'Neill's last plays always make them sound cruel; the effect of the plays is not. There is a kind of humanism in these plays, which is not
connected to any religious or philosophical system. In The Iceman Cometh, for instance, all but three of the characters return to their dreamy, sodden worlds. Their return is not, however, accomplished individually. None of these dreamers can remain within his dreams unless the others assist him. There arises in O'Neill's last plays a strange kind of bond among men. By mixing "kidding" attacks on the others' dreams with reassuring affirmations of those dreams, each character manages to retrieve from the void at least a continued existence that is not starkly terrifying. Within this humanism of despair the virtues are understanding and tolerance, two of the paler human virtues. In each play, what starts as comedy becomes the tragedy of accusation and then the tragedy of defeat. All men are intrinsically victims and the creators of victims. As soon as a man is born, he begins destroying and being destroyed. O'Neill's last plays rescue from this chaotic debris only three values. One is an understanding on the part of his characters of the flawed nature of existence. A second is an understanding, not a forgiveness, on the part of one man for other men. In both The Iceman Cometh and "Hughie," understanding of oneself and others leads to a return to the reciprocal fostering of those dreams which insulate a man from the fear of death. The third value that O'Neill's last plays rescue from chaos is an esthetic pleasure for his audience in seeing beauty, even the beauty of an "ironic" order.
O'Neill's marching to the edge of the void of the absurd is not done, as it is in much absurdist drama, for the doubtful pleasure of experiencing the void, but for the sake of seeing the ordered, terrible beauty in the march itself. The ironic victory in the failed comedies is granted more to spectators than to participants. These lives that are finally seen as meaningless have been presented throughout the plays as meaningful. The controlling irony in these plays, which produces the ordered pattern in which resides the beauty, is that each man is his own joke. He is what he dreams he is; he is what he really is; and he is a cipher floating in the void.

The beauty, the tragic thrill that O'Neill finally found was found in the process and act of drama itself. The beauty and thrill begin and end within the confines of a play. But, as O'Neill himself had said, early in his career, "I don't love life because it is 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. In fact, I deny the ugliness entirely."¹⁹ O'Neill did, finally, see some beauty even in that ultimate ugliness life may possess, meaninglessness, and that beauty is captured in the process of his art. O'Neill did not, finally, give man a tragic exaltation analogous to what the Greeks or Elizabethans had, nor could he give the comic victory he sought to give. But he could and did give a beauty that was his plays.

¹⁹ O'Neill, in Gelb, p. 3.
Chaos ceases to be ugly when it is given some order, even a "merely" esthetic order. O'Neill's failed comedies provide that kind of order.
CHAPTER II

O'NEILL'S APPRENTICESHIP: 1913-1921

Between 1913 and 1921 (the date of the composition of "The Hairy Ape"), Eugene O'Neill wrote at least forty plays.1 Between 1916 (the first production of an O'Neill play in Provincetown, Massachusetts) and 1922 (the first New York production of "The Hairy Ape"), more than twenty of those plays were produced on a stage.2 O'Neill, once he discovered playwriting as an outlet, wrote with almost maniacal energy, particularly in view of the fact that he was also paying heavy tribute to Venus and to Bacchus during those years. But although he was prolific, O'Neill was anything but consistently proficient. Of the forty plays of that eight-year period, fewer than ten are impressive. Three are the sea plays, "Bound East for Cardiff," "The Long Voyage Home," and "The Moon of the Caribbees."3 These sea plays give evidence of O'Neill's ability to handle realistic techniques.


2 Jordan Y. Miller, Eugène O'Neill and the American Critic, pp. 132-44.

3 The fourth play that became part of the Glencairn cycle of one-act plays is a play called "In the Zone," a play which will be discussed later.
to write believable dialogue of an earthy sort, and to establish a mood, a sense of fate, the key to O'Neill's understanding of the word tragedy. Beyond the Horizon is the play that put O'Neill's name on the theatrical map and is often considered the first significantly "modern" American drama. Because of its historical importance, the play, like Mourning Becomes Electra, is perhaps overrated. "The Straw," a fine play which was and is, perhaps, underrated, deals with O'Neill's experiences as a tuberculosis victim in a sanitorium, though O'Neill takes an artist's liberties with biographical fact. The play, grim as it is, is probably O'Neill's best love story. Anna Christie, along with Beyond the Horizon, made O'Neill a two-time Pulitzer prize-winner in 1922. It is the favorite O'Neill play among those critics, such as Bernard De Voto and Francis Fergusson, who do not like O'Neill. O'Neill himself, after an unconvincing attempt to explain why critics and audiences misunderstood the play, regarded Anna Christie as the "most ironical joke ever play on me."\(^4\) rejected it, and did not include it in the Nine Plays volume published by Horace Liveright in 1932. "The Emperor Jones," an amazing tour de force and probably the best unified and tightest piece of work O'Neill ever wrote, is second in excellence among O'Neill's early work to "The Hairy Ape," which was a bolder, more universally appealing attempt at

dramatizing a man's search for himself. As one critic has pointed out, Brutus Jones deserved a more worthy opponent than abject terror.5 The best of O'Neill's early work and the play that is most interesting both for what O'Neill intended it to be and for what it turned out to be is "The Hairy Ape," a play which will be given close analysis in a separate section of this study. Several additional plays from this eight-year period will also be discussed.6

In the first three years of O'Neill's writing career (1913-1915),7 during which he turned out something like sixteen plays, only "Bound East for Cardiff," a one-act play that is almost a vignette, has much merit. O'Neill's taste for the comic, his sense of fate as a bad joke, can be clearly seen in another early work, a play called "The Web."

The two characteristics in O'Neill's earliest plays that are of most interest in this study are present in those early plays, even the worst of them. One is O'Neill's sense of


6 A complete listing of the works of O'Neill is difficult, but not impossible. He destroyed several of his early works and nearly all of the "cycle" plays he was working on near the end of his life. The authors listed in the first note to this chapter--Miller, Tiusanen, Sheaffer, and Gelb--supply enough information to put together as complete a listing as exists. New listings seem unlikely. A list of the works O'Neill wrote between 1913 and 1921, with comments on those plays not treated in the text of this study, is given in an appendix.

7 The authors listed in the first note to this chapter: Miller, Tiusanen, Sheaffer, and Gelb.
the comic, his recognition of the bad joke that fate plays on humans. The other, which is close to the first, is O'Neill's insistence that the operation of fate on his characters should be a thoroughgoing, exact inversion of their desires and dreams. It is not enough in many of O'Neill's plays for his characters to lose their ultimate dreams or to be cheated of those dreams they cannot live without; the characters must usually be balked at every turn, have every wish and desire turned into its opposite. Beyond this stern delight in the irony of plot or narrative, O'Neill makes a practice of adding other verbal and visual ironies as well. It is this smilingly sad insistence on the part of O'Neill that fate not only defeats a man or woman but does so in the most thoroughly "insulting" manner possible that not only makes O'Neill's conception of fate very often an anthropomorphic one, but also very often produces that neat kind of matching that resembles nothing so much as traditional, optimistic, happy-ending melodrama turned upside down. Much of what O'Neill's characters have to endure depends upon coincidences as rich in number, variety, and timeliness as those in the most laughable of old movie serials. O'Neill often gets away with this habit because his sincerity is so obvious in the plays and because he often chooses his characters from the "luckless" levels of society. Later in his career O'Neill grew at least a bit more subtle in his expression of his sense of the ironic in human existence, but his taste for it early in his career regularly led him into the
"factitious gloom" that Joseph Wood Krutch saw as no more than the opposite extreme of "unmeaning optimism." The man who, for a somber ending, sacrifices the sense of probability to effect, has not been any more realistic or honest as an artist than the man who manipulates all sorts of impossible elements of plot and character to insure a happy ending. O'Neill, particularly but not solely in the beginnings of his career, was often guilty of this kind of "rigging." He often lined up a clumsy pattern of coincidences. Even some of his later great plays like Mourning Becomes Electra and Desire Under the Elms rely on sets of coincidences. O'Neill appears to have learned to space out his coincidences and to have some grow naturally from the personalities of his characters in order to insure the heavily ironic effect without completely sacrificing the air of probability in his plays. Early in his career, his consciousness of the ironically tragic was too strong, and he had not learned to control it or hide it. The same sincerity and honesty that have garnered O'Neill the reputation as a powerful, truth-telling playwright also earned him the reputation as the most melodramatic and least restrained of major playwrights.

O'Neill's stern delight in delineating the joke that fate makes of a man or woman's every desire is easily seen in

the second play he is known to have written, a brief one-act play called "The Web" (it was first called "The Cough"). Rose Thomas, the feminine lead, is a tubercular prostitute, an unwed mother, and the "goil" of Steve, the lowest pimp in New York, who hates both her and the child. As the play opens, Steve is threatening to beat Rose, to harm the child, or to send Rose off as a tubercular and the child as a bastard. Coincidentally, an escaped convict and recent bank robber, Tim Moran, happens to have been in the next room during the past week and has overheard the threats this night. As villainy reaches its peak, Tim breaks the door down and runs Steve off at gunpoint. Rose and Tim discover their mutual victimhood and, at the same time, blossom in each other's presence. Rose because of Tim's gentleness and courage in assisting her, Tim out of respect for Rose's courage and decency. Both hear noises in the hall and suspect that it is the man Tim saw earlier and believed was a cop. Tim must flee. But first he hands Rose a roll of money so that she can escape the city, have her illness treated, and keep her child. Tim gives Rose her first good break in life. As Tim moves toward the fire escape, the dastardly Steve fires from the window at point blank range, throws the gun at Rose's feet, closes the window, and flees down the very fire escape Tim had been planning to make his exit by. Coincidentally, the police (who, coincidentally, have not covered

9 Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 264.
the fire escape) burst in to find Tim's body on the floor, the wad of money in Rose's hand, the gun nearby, and the window securely closed. The police immediately put the facts together and arrest Rose for murder and robbery, assuming, ironically, that they have found the aftermath of a "little love spat." 10

O'Neill has tried to fill in the details of the dirty trick that life has played on Rose and Tim, but he tries to make it more than the result of the oppression by the "good people," as Rose calls them, by having Rose, "in a trance," appear to be "aware of something in the room which none of the others can see—perhaps the personification of the ironic life force that has crushed her" (p. 53). Rose "speaks to the air," and cries out, "Gawd! Gawd! Why d'yu hate me so?" The police can only caution her against "rough talk" and take her away from her child, her only reason for living. O'Neill cannot resist the opportunity to put a punch-line on this joke of fate. When the baby cries, one of the policemen picks her up and croons, "Mama's gone. I'm your mama now" (p. 54). O'Neill has loaded the deck to insure that the genuinely good characters lose and the genuinely evil character wins. Neither Rose nor Tim would have been "caught" if both had followed self-interest and had not been willing to risk everything for others, Rose for her child and Tim for the two of them. The world, is, in effect, such

a bad joke that the good must suffer for being good, for dreaming generous dreams even if the plot must be peppered with coincidences to insure their downfall.

"The Web" shows O'Neill's melodramatic tendencies in full swing, but it is not much more than an exaggeration of his usual interpretation of the workings of fate, even in his mature work. "The Web" simply crowds too much together and makes the "rigging" of the play too obvious.

The same kind of insistence on the bad-joke nature of fate's operation shows up in the other plays dating from 1913 to 1915. In the only good play written in this time period, "Bound East for Cardiff" (first called "Children of the Sea"), O'Neill succeeds in supplying more poignancy and less obvious melodramatic manipulation for effect primarily because he found a poetic equivalent for the "behind-life" force that Rose had to see "in the air." O'Neill's abiding love for the sea saved him in "Bound East for Cardiff" as it was to save him many times thereafter. "Bound East for Cardiff" (written in 1914) was the very first of O'Neill's plays to be produced by that far-sighted group, later known as the Provincetown Players, that O'Neill stumbled upon in Provincetown, Massachusetts, in 1916. That summer this simple little play was presented to some sixty people crowded into Mary Heaton Vorse's wharf theatre. With an appropriate fog

11 Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, numerous references in book.
drifting up through the cracks in the floor and O'Neill himself playing a small part, "Bound East for Cardiff" initiated O'Neill's long and stormy career on a subdued and finely modulated note of somber tragedy. And O'Neill succeeds in this play in putting across his notion of the sad big joke that a man's dreams and desires play on him without resorting to wildly improbable coincidences.

The action in this one-act play is very simple. Yank hurts himself in a ship accident and is dying throughout the play. The ship, bound east for Cardiff, is halfway through a transatlantic journey and cannot turn back. Only one of the men on the ship, Driscoll, befriends him. The irony in this play arises from the extreme importance of Yank's death—to Yank, at least—seen against the background, on the first level, of the blase continuation of the ship's normal routine that counterpoints Yank's approach to death and, on the second level, of the sad, silent seas's foggy indifference to any man's death. O'Neill handles both of those sources of irony with real restraint. The one-act play begins with a cockney sailor telling a whopping lie about a black prostitute that the others listen to with "amused, incredulous faces." Driscoll, who has been taking part in the good-natured raillery, then remembers the badly injured Yank and tries to get the other sailors to be quiet. Throughout the

play the attention paid to the dying Yank takes considerable concentration on the part of the other sailors. When they are thinking of him, their concern seems genuine, even if it is a bit clumsy. But they have a great deal of difficulty remembering his condition. When three of the weary crewmen come off watch, they ask solicitiously after Yank's condition, express great concern, complain that the noise of the ship's whistle will keep them awake, then drop immediately into a deep, snoring slumber. When the men discuss Yank's condition, they stumble over topics such as the captain, whom they regard as a fool, the food, which they consider inedible, and life on the sea, which they profess to despise. Each time they try to pay attention to Yank, their conversation picks up on a single word such as "captain" or "food" or "fog" and drifts into "their sailor's delight at finding something to grumble about" (p. 481).

Yank is conscious only part of the time, and his courage in facing what he knows is coming toward him is impressive, as much because it takes him a while to find his courage as because his courage in facing the experience is admirable. Driscoll volunteers to stay with him. Yank cannot bear dying when all around him is proceeding as if nothing of significance were happening. Death does not frighten him, but the meaninglessness of death does. As Yank says, "I ain't no coward, but I'm scared to stay here with all of them asleep and snorin'" (p. 484).

The most humorous of the ironic moments in the play involves the silly captain who, when he comes to examine this
dying man, insists that Yank keep the thermometer "under your tongue, not over it" (p. 484). The captain, who is absolutely inept as a medic, promises Yank that he will "read the matter up" and send Yank some medicine. The crew has already revealed that the captain's medicine for everything is a "dose of salts." The captain, himself aware of the ludicrousness of his pose as a medical man, leaves Yank with these flustered words: "We'll pull you through all right--and--hm--well--coming, Robinson [the mate]? Dammit!" (p. 485).

Yank drifts into a reverie about having a farm, a wife, and children (a common sailor's dream in O'Neill's plays). He awakes and says, "How'd all the fog git in here?" (p. 487). There is, of course, no fog in the ship, only Yank's mind. He and Driscoll then recall all of the fights and whores and drunkenness of their shore leaves, all those things that enliven a sailor's time on shore and fill the void of tedium when he is back at sea. Now, however, the dying Yank can only fear that God will hold all that against him. What he cannot bear is the thought that all of nature seems to be out of tune with his big moment: "Why should it be a rotten night like this with that damned whistle blowin' because of the fog and people snorin' all round?" When Yank's moment of death does come, he summons up all his energy for a casual "S'long, Drisc!" As he is dying, Yank calls out, "Who's that?" When Driscoll asks him, "Who? What?", Yank's answer is teasingly ambiguous: "A pretty lady dressed in black" (p. 489). Just as Yank dies, the voice of the cockney sailor
is heard calling out to Driscoll for his assistance with some mundane shipboard task. The cockney's apparently callous indifference is nothing more than the last irony of the pattern of ironies surrounding Yank's last shipping out. Cocky has announced, "The fog's lifted," just as Yank, ironically, is dying. When the sailor realizes that Yank is dead, he can only whisper "Gawd blimey!"

The pattern of ironies that O'Neill uses in this play seems natural and unforced. The inarticulate companionship of these sailors, their inability to pay much attention to anything other than the minutiae of shipboard life, and the vast and indifferent face of nature all play together to make Yank's death the brave but ambiguous thing that it is. Only infrequently during the rest of a long career was O'Neill able to control his work as well as he did in this short piece.

O'Neill: 1916-1917

Three years passed before O'Neill wrote anything of a quality comparable to that of "Bound East for Cardiff," and again he succeeded by writing two plays that are very similar in manner and content to "Bound East for Cardiff."13 "The Moon of the Caribbees" and "The Long Voyage Home" both involve many of the same characters, much the same mood, and

13 A complete listing of the works written 1913-1917 can be found in an appendix.
the same cool appreciation for the ironic, comic workings of fate.

In "The Long Voyage Home," O'Neill's liking for the ironic is perhaps a bit more obvious than in "Bound East for Cardiff" if only because the setting is a sleazy waterfront bar in London and not the sea. Olson, one of the crewmen from the SS Glencairn, has dreamed the sailor's dream of settling on a farm, but he actually intends to do it. He has saved all his wages for the past couple of years and goes to the bar only as a farewell to his shipmates. Olson intends to avoid alcohol and women. On one level, that is exactly what he does. But Olson's basic decency destroys his dream. Although he is not drinking himself, he buys the whore he politely calls "Miss Freda" a brandy, and when she insists that he is being impolite in not drinking with her, he orders one very small "ginger beer." When one of the crew passes out, the two who are drunk volunteer to carry him back to the ship, refusing the offer of Olson, the only one in any condition to be of much help to anyone. Predictably, when the others are gone, Olson drinks the drugged ginger beer, has his pockets picked, and is turned over to the worst ship on the sea by the crooked bar owner. "The Long Voyage Home" more nearly resembles the almost excessive reliance on ironic coincidence that made "The Web" more amusing than distressing, but there is a modicum of control here.
"The Moon of the Caribbees" is perhaps O'Neill's best one-act handling of the operation of fate, but it also has, as did "Bound East for Cardiff," the sea as a background for the human behavior shown. The ship, the SS Glencairn, is anchored off an island in the West Indies. The men are both thirsty for some rum and hungry for black women. In the midst of this excitement over the women and smuggled rum sits Smitty, a handsome, polished young Englishman who spends the whole evening sadly, bitterly, ironically implying that he is above all the shenanigans of his shipmates because he is buried in the old sorrow of a love affair that went bad. The rum and women arrive. Before long a senseless brawl erupts on board, and one man lies bleeding and unconscious when it is over. Smitty, who spurned with disgust the blandishments of the native women but who accepted the rum to drown his terrible memories, is still sitting on the deck, drunk, sobbing maudlinly, and disgusted by all that has happened. The play, which O'Neill thought very highly of, is actually about Smitty, the self-dramatizing loser in love. Smitty's self-pity and maudlin bitterness is set against, in this play, a triple-layered background. The first layer behind Smitty involves the lively though senseless pleasure-seeking activities of the crew. The second layer is the commentary

14 Eugene O'Neill, in Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 383. O'Neill called "The Moon of the Caribbees" "my first real break with theatrical traditions" and "my pet play of all my one-actors."
of a man who is identified only as "Donk" (the man who runs the donkey that powers the loading equipment of the ship).

"Donk" bears a strong resemblance to other O'Neill characters, such as Larry Slade in The Iceman Cometh, whose all-knowing cynicism masks a real understanding of and sympathy for human beings. Donk regards with a "detached indulgent air" what disgusts the more refined Smitty, yet he is not just a godlike observer of other men's activities.

The third layer behind Smitty's characterization is the moonlit silent sea itself. During the entire play, the mood of nature is the same: quiet, motionless, fully illuminated. The final stage direction puts the human activity into the frame O'Neill desires it to have: "There is silence for a second or so, broken only by the haunted, saddened voice of that brooding music [the song of the blacks on shore], faint and far off, like the mood of the moonlight made audible" (p. 474). O'Neill described the effect he wanted in a letter to Barrett Clark: "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 [Smitty's] silhouetted gestures of self-pity are reduced to their proper insignificance. . . ." The "inscrutable forces behind


that O'Neill tries, even in his earliest plays, "to at least faintly shadow" are far larger and more mysterious than the wisdom of a Donk or a Larry Slade, and they work largely, almost solely, through a man's emotions. Whatever role his intellect plays, it is less an interpretive one than one involving an increase in the pain that thwarted dreams and desires produce. The man who understands that his sorrows are the result of some mysterious working of fate that he feels but does not understand is the man who suffers an additional sorrow in that recognition. But such a man also sees life whole, and as Lionel Trilling writes of O'Neill's plays, "... nothing matters if you can conceive the whole of life."18

The fourth of the plays that came to be grouped together as the Glencairn cycle is "In the Zone," which, after it proved a seventy-dollar a week success in vaudeville, O'Neill valued least. "If everybody likes something, watch out!" he said.19 And, in fact, the other Glencairn plays are far better works.

17 Sheaffer, p. 384.


19 Eugene O'Neill to Hamilton Basso, in Sheaffer, p. 383.
In the years 1918-1919, O'Neill began to be a bit more consistent. Of the eleven plays written completely or mostly during that two-year period, O'Neill himself destroyed four, of which only one was ever produced, none ever published. Of the other seven, two are fine plays, one is good, and "only" four are weak.\(^{20}\) The one play of those O'Neill later destroyed which was produced, "Exorcism," was a display, apparently, of a frankly autobiographical tendency in O'Neill that does not appear again until his late plays. The story in "Exorcism" was an objective, half-humorous treatment of O'Neill's own attempted suicide in 1912.\(^{21}\) O'Neill destroyed the play after its one performance, but Alexander Woollcott saw it and liked it.\(^{22}\) The play apparently possessed that strange mixture of comedy and darkness that appears in O'Neill's last plays. The hero of the play, a well-bred individual, is so full of disgust for himself that he tries to get as low as possible in the gutter. Finally, unable to achieve peace even at the bottom (the attempt to do so is a recurrent O'Neill theme), the young man

\(^{20}\) Check complete listing of works written 1913-1921 in appendix.

\(^{21}\) Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, pp. 208-12. Sheaffer's account appears to be the definitive one. O'Neill helped spread various largely fictionalized accounts of his suicide attempt. Sheaffer meticulously sorts them out according to known facts.

tries to kill himself with poison. The next day he awakens to discover that two of his drunken friends have saved his life and enjoyed themselves drunkenly in the process. Although the young man finds life as disgusting as ever, his brush with death has somehow revivified him, and he chooses to live.

Of the four "weak" plays, one was "Chris Christopherson," an early version of what became Anna Christie, a play that will be discussed later. A second was "Shell Shock," a play that O'Neill did nothing with and which was a minor effort dealing with a soldier who has returned from the war in a disturbed state of mind. O'Neill's ability to portray the boy's sad state in his broken, repetitive dialogue which the other characters merely react to is about all the play has to recommend it.23

The other two weak plays are worth discussing, primarily because of O'Neill's attempts in those plays to find a more immediate equivalent for this mysterious life force which constitutes fate. Both are sea plays, but of an entirely different kind from the Glencairn plays. Both "The Rope" and "Where the Cross is Made" are connected with sea-faring types, but both are "hammy" in the old school of treasure-mad sea captains and vindictive parents.

23 Timo Tiusanen, O'Neill's Scenic Images, p. 71. Tiusanen discusses the play, in some detail, from his perspective of O'Neill's development in terms of his ability to handle what Tiusanen calls "scenic images," that is, those dramatic images—unified combinations of sight, sound, movement, dialogue, etc.—that are the power in dramatic art.
In "Where the Cross is Made" Captain Isaiah Bartlett, regarded by everyone as a madman, waits for his long dead comrades to return with stolen treasure. In the climax of the play his dead mates cart the treasure in, and the captain dies of shocked delight after convincing his previously skeptical son, who in turn goes mad. O'Neill claimed that he was simply interested in seeing what would happen if he treated the audience as if they were mad by having all the characters except the captain pretend the "dead" sailors are not actually in the room. O'Neill later wrote, in something of a pique, to George Jean Nathan: "Where did you get the idea that I really valued 'Where the Cross is Made!' It was great fun to write, theatrically very thrilling, an amusing experiment in treating the audience as insane--that is all it means or ever meant to me." Finding a meaningful equivalent for fate in contagious madness (real or figurative) is an idea that O'Neill later modified and made a bit more subtle in such plays as Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra.

"The Rope" is a more interesting play because it prefigures some aspects of Desire Under the Elms, which is probably the finest of O'Neill's plays outside his last works, and because it reveals a puckishness in O'Neill that he is not usually credited with. Abraham Bentley, a physical wreck at sixty-five, in some ways strongly resembles Ephraim Cabot of Desire Under the Elms, who is ten years older in

24 O'Neill to George Jean Nathan, in Sheaffer, p. 443.
age but forty years younger in strength of body and soul. Bentley, a toothless old hypocrite who spouts Old Testament condemnations of his daughter (by a first marriage) and his son (by a second marriage), appears to be staying alive out of sheer meanness. Bentley hopes that his son, Luke, will return home to fulfill the curse the old man put on him when Luke, at sixteen, ran off with $100 of the old man's treasure trove of $1000. A noose has been hanging from a rafter in the barn since the day the boy, laughing at his father's curses and laughing at the noose, ran away to sea. The daughter also hates the old man and hopes that, when he dies, the mortgaged farm will belong to her and her drunken husband. They have a daughter, Mary, who is, like all the other children in O'Neill's plays—with the exception of those in All God's Chillun Got Wings—a repulsive, whining, stick-like figure. With that cast firmly in place, O'Neill marches Luke back into the fold, the prodigal son, who has been away at sea, has learned a trick or two, and has come back to get the rest of the old man's money. When Luke arrives, old Abraham seems, strangely enough, deliriously happy to see the boy, so happy in fact that the cynical Luke almost believes him and takes as a joke the old man's mumbled request that he put his neck in the noose. Luke goes along with the joke until he sees that the old man now appears to be absolutely beside himself in anticipation of Luke's hanging. Luke's cynical desire to get the old man's money then becomes a fury that the old man could really desire him to hang himself.
Stealing the money becomes nothing more than a symbol of the revenge he will take on the old man for being so unnatural a father as to wish his own son dead. Luke says, over and over, "Ain't that a hell of a fine old man for yuh! . . . Ain't he a hell of a nice old man for a guy to have?--and him my own father?"25

The denouement must have kept the dour O'Neill giggling to himself for several days. Mary, the revolting little girl, decides to swing on the noose after the others have gone--just because she was told not to--, and when she does, the rope falls, and tied to the end opposite the noose is--the bag of money. In this little play, the "joke" that fate is alleged by O'Neill to play on men and women is actually a joke played by O'Neill on his audience, a joke born of Edgar Allen Poe and O. Henry and in our times kept alive by Alfred Hitchcock and Rod Serling. That old Abraham should turn out to be a lovable old man with an odd sense of humor is not sufficient irony for O'Neill, and so he has the little girl pitch the pieces of gold off a nearby cliff into the sea, hollering, "Skip! Skip!" (p. 602). (Although O'Neill shows here a puckish sense of humor, this play is little more than theatrical trickery.) When the Provincetowners were involved in putting the play on in April of 1918, O'Neill feigned interest for a while, even making some cuts, an unusual practice for O'Neill then or later. But when Nina Moise, who was to

direct the play, pressed O'Neill for additional reworkings, O'Neill wrote her: "On the level, Nina, I haven't time to rewrite even if I thought it required it. I am up to the ears in getting the long play [Beyond the Horizon] in shape for Williams [John D. Williams, a producer]." It is as reassuring that O'Neill thought little of the play as it is refreshing that America's great brooding tragedian could write such a bagatelle.

The two fine plays that O'Neill wrote in 1918-1919 are Beyond the Horizon, the play that sent O'Neill on his way to fame and fortune, and "The Straw," an impressive play that did not do well then and is appreciated now only by O'Neill buffs. "The Straw," which ran in 1921 after O'Neill's reputation had skyrocketed because of Beyond the Horizon, "The Emperor Jones," and Anna Christie, had only twenty performances and has not been revived since. The good play, which will be discussed before Beyond the Horizon and "The Straw," is "The Dreamy Kid," nearly the last one-act play by O'Neill and one of his better efforts. It is also significant because it is O'Neill's first play involving blacks.

"The Dreamy Kid" involves what is, perhaps, an inherently melodramatic plot that no artist could "save" entirely. It is the story of a small-time black hoodlum called "Dreamy" who, although the police are searching for him for the killing of a white man, answers the call to come to the bedside

26 Eugene O'Neill to Nina Moise, in Sheaffer, p. 422.
of his old "Mammy," who is dying and wants to see her boy once more. In the end, the play clearly indicates that Dreamy will be killed on the spot or be captured and executed. He turns down several opportunities to escape, each time because the ninety-year-old woman croaks out a plea for him to stay. The quality of the play shows up, however, precisely in the ways that this play differs from "The Web," that early play whose plot, in its important essentials, is very similar to that of "The Dreamy Kid." In both plays, a man is called upon to place his own life in jeopardy in order to be of assistance to someone else, and in both cases the men remain past the time when escape is possible. The differences between the two plays give evidence of more subtlety on the part of O'Neill and bring up again Joseph Wood Krutch's fear that those writers who were attempting to escape the puerile bonds of the facile optimism of traditional melodrama were running the risk of falling into the equally facile pessimism of pseudo-tragedy.27

Melodrama, as distinguished from drama or, more specifically, from tragedy, involves the sacrifice of truth to stage effect and an appeal for emotional reactions that are "earned" through spectacularly sweet or unhappy events which are but little related to character or probability. If there is a core to melodrama, it is not that virtue is its

27 Joseph Wood Krutch, The American Drama Since 1918, p. 49. Krutch uses the words "unmeaning optimism" and "factitious gloom."
own reward, but that virtue is always rewarded, at least in
the last act. O'Neill was familiar with this kind of melo-
drama, "white" melodrama, if you will, since he had seen,
no doubt, performances that his father gave of Joseph
Fechter's dramatic version of Dumas's The Count of Monte
Cristo.28 In that play a wronged youth spends many years
in prison but finally escapes and, in several disguises,
wreaks vengeance on those who have despoiled him and re-
covers his rightful place and wealth. O'Neill despised the
play and all plays like it. However, as Krutch suggested
and as is obvious in O'Neill's own "The Web," it is also
possible to write "black" melodrama, which has as little
claim to authenticity as its happier sister. In "black"
melodrama, virtue is always punished, and it is because a
man is good that he falls.29 Tragedy undoubtedly falls some-
where between these two extremes.

28 As Sheaffer puts it, "Almost from Eugene's first
breath he breathed the air of the theatre, his father's thea-
tre"—and his father's acting consisted mostly, during
Eugene's childhood and youth, of performances of The Count
of Monte Cristo—some forty-five hundred performances in all.
Sheaffer, pp. 7-8.

29 Aristotle suggests that "unqualifiedly good human
beings must not appear to fall from good fortune to bad; for
that is neither pitiable nor fearful; it is, rather, re-
pellent. Nor must an extremely evil man appear to move from
bad fortune to good fortune for that is the most untragic sit-
uation of all because it has none of the necessary require-
ments of tragedy; it both violates our human sympathy and con-
tains nothing of the pitiable or fearful in it." Aristotle,
in an ordered universe, could have, of course, little use for
a view like O'Neill's that treated fate's operation as a bad
joke. Aristotle, Poetics, trans. Leon Golden (Englewood Cliffs,
"The Web" was definitely a "black" melodrama, but "The Dreamy Kid," while its situation is definitely melodramatic, comes close to escaping that tag. Dreamy does not perish because what little virtue he appears to have, love for his Mammy, gets him killed. Dreamy does seem to love Mammy Saunders, but his motivations and actions are sufficiently mixed to prohibit using the label "melodrama" carelessly. Dreamy is a mixture of good and bad—using the words with their traditional moral denotations—and it is the mixture of the two that produces his fate. Dreamy does, finally, choose firmly to stay with Mammy in spite of the fact that he can see the police gathering outside the window. But that choice is not a sacrificial one of any great purity. He is afraid of her threat to curse him if he leaves.

An interesting verbal counterpoint operates through most of the latter moments of the play. Mammy Saunders, who is drifting in and out of consciousness, tries to tell Dreamy how he got his nickname, but he listens, not to her, but for the noises of approaching policemen. And so this inherently melodramatic situation of a doomed boy at his Mammy's bedside ends not in the mutual exchange of endearing words and soft assurances, but with the two individuals on tracks of their own, with all contact a matter of prior decisions rather than present stage realities.

The two fine plays written during this period (1918-1919) are Beyond the Horizon, perhaps overrated, and "The Straw," possibly underrated. John D. Williams, who purchased
the option to produce *Beyond the Horizon*, stalled O'Neill for a very long time and became interested enough to produce it only after an important actor of the time, Richard Bennett, discovered the play on Williams’ desk, read it, liked it, and insisted on starring in it. The play, using actors and actresses who were already in plays showing on Broadway, opened with matinee-only performances in February of 1920. After the play proved to be a success, it was moved to evening showings, and O'Neill was on his way.30

O'Neill, who had the title before he knew what he was going to write about, wrote that he had initially planned "to show a series of progressive episodes, illustrating—and, I hoped, illuminating—the life story of a true Royal Tramp at his sordid but satisfying, and therefore mysterious, pursuit of a drab rainbow. . . ."31 When O'Neill's father saw the play, he went to his son and asked him, "Are you trying to send the audience home to commit suicide?"32 O'Neill's contemporaries, while some objected to the play's length or its gloom or its construction, were for the most part convinced that it was a powerful first for American drama. The play, from the vantage point of fifty years after, seems a bit too awkward and dated to merit praise as a great play.


32 Gelb, p. 408.
but it is still impressive enough to deserve comment, particularly in view of the fact that, with only a couple of early, very unimpressive exceptions, Beyond the Horizon was O'Neill's first full-length play.33

Barrett Clark, the first man to write a book-length study of O'Neill and his plays, claims that the play "is too often unnecessarily violent," and that O'Neill "had not quite the courage or the skill to let his characters develop themselves."34 Louis Sheaffer claims that O'Neill was interested in showing marriage as a trap, in the Strindbergian manner.35 Joseph Wood Krutch goes further than Sheaffer when he claims that "by presenting [love] merely as one of the subtlest traps by which nature snares a man, O'Neill turns a play which might have been merely ironic into an indictment not only of chance or of fate but of that whole universe which sets itself up against man's desires and conquers them."36 F. I. Carpenter feels that each character in the play fails because he does not recognize

33 O'Neill had tried longer plays, even very early in his career, but he apparently found them unsatisfactory since he did little with them and instead stuck to the shorter one- and two-act plays. Check appendix for listing of his early plays, with comments on those not discussed in text of this study.


35 Sheaffer, p. 420.

his true nature.  

John Mason Brown excludes Beyond the Horizon from his general objection to O'Neill's plays: that they are frequently more ironic than tragic. Brown feels that in the last scene of Beyond the Horizon O'Neill "extends his ironic chronicle" beyond the externals of the characters' lives "to give a hint of tragic exaltation." Timo Tiusanen, however, finds in the last scene a "tone of tragic irony, not of affirmation."  

The story in Beyond the Horizon is a relatively simple one. Andrew Mayo is a handsome, muscular "Son of the soil." His younger brother Robert, on the other hand, is more delicate and refined, with a history of childhood illness. As the play develops, it is Andrew who takes Robert's chance to wander off on a sea voyage on his uncle's ship and Robert who stays home to be the family farmer. The cause of the switch is Ruth, a girl whom Andrew expects to marry but who, at the last minute, decides she is in love with Robert as he, at the last minute, decides that he is in love with her. The rest of the play is a detailing of the disintegration of all three of the major characters. Robert is an inept farmer, and as the farm goes to pieces, Ruth discovers that Robert's poetry is not enough, and she comes to hate him. Robert tries,


39 Timo Tiusanen, O'Neill's Scenic Images, pp. 76-77.
in a desultory fashion, to run the farm, but his heart is
in little other than his books, his dreaming, and in Mary,
the little girl that is born to the couple. After three
years Andrew returns and Ruth has decided it was he she really
loved after all, but Andrew, in turn has long since decided
he was never in love with her. Five years later Andrew re-
turns again to find Ruth has greatly aged, her child is dead,
and Robert is fast dying of consumption.

In the last scene, then, only dreaming Robert seems to
escape the ironies resulting from switching places with his
brother. Robert is, as he says, "happy at last--free!--
free!" Andrew is a broken man, a farmer who has degenerated
into a man who gambles with the earth's produce; Ruth is
"dead" at twenty-eight, the victim of a foolish marriage and
badly timed changes of heart.

The play, then, would seem to be the story of what
happens to men and women who fail to follow their instinctive
natures: Robert should have been a wanderer, Andrew a farmer,
and Ruth a common-sense farmer's wife. Or perhaps, as more
perceptive critics suggest, marriage or even love is the
trap, since Andrew would probably have reached the same con-
clusion about "love" whether he had gone off to sea or not.

Louis Sheaffer claims that the child is "the story's
main weakness, its chief contrivance ... something to bind
husband and wife together. Had there been no child, Robert
Mayo ... could have walked out on Ruth to pursue his life-
long dream." (Sheaffer, O'Neill, p. 420.) It will be the
contention of this study that Robert's dreamy wanderlust had
nothing to do with actual geographic travels.

Eugene O'Neill, Beyond the Horizon, The Plays of
Or perhaps, as Krutch suggests, the play is really "an indictment of that whole universe which sets itself up against man's desires and conquers them." The last interpretation seems the most likely. Old James O'Neill was right.

There are several things to be examined to determine whether impractical dreamers are the only "successful" characters, and then only in death, or whether the whole play is merely a tragedy of coincidence and foolish choices. Robert's dream is the most difficult to analyze because it is most vague, but a close look at the pattern of time and season in the play, which most critics have noticed, will help to illuminate the nature of his dream. The first scene begins at sunset on a spring evening; the center of the play takes place in the hot, depressing summer months; the last scene takes place at early dawn in the fall. There is an obvious progression in the seasons, from the season of planting, growth, and life to the season of decay and death. The other pattern critics have noticed is reversed, with sunset, the end of day, coming first and sunrise, the beginning of day, coming last. Little has been made of this inversion other than to notice that it is ironic. It may be more than that.

Early in the play Robert explains his poetic nature to Ruth. It is his explanation that moves first Robert himself and then the girl to confess their love for one another.

Robert, who was sickly as a child, was often put in a chair facing out "the west window." It was out this window that Robert would look and dream, and "Somehow after a time," says Robert to Ruth, "I'd forget any pain I was in and start dreaming" (p. 89). Robert claims he used to wonder about the sea and dreamt of taking a road to it; but the Atlantic Ocean was a short distance to the east of the New England farm, and Robert's dreaming took a westerly direction. Robert tells Ruth, "Those were the only happy moments of my life then, dreaming there at the window. I liked to be all along--those times. I got to know all the different kinds of sunsets by heart. And all those sunsets took place over there--... beyond the horizon" (pp. 89-90). Robert continues regaling Ruth with the poetic dreamings of his youth and talks of the "good fairies" who lived beyond those sunsets and beyond that horizon and who often called him out to play with them, beckoning him to their home on the other side of the hills. He used to cry because he "couldn't come then..." Robert's boyhood dreaming might be safely described as a comforting death wish.

At the end of the play, Robert is on the hill overlooking the sea, and he is facing the dawn in the east. With his dying breath, Robert points beyond the hills, beyond the horizon to the east, and exclaims, "It's a free beginning--the start of my voyage! I've won my trip--the right of my release--beyond the horizon!" (p. 168).Ironically, O'Neill did not invert the sunrise and sunset in his play, for it is
Robert that is inverted. His life was simply a long night, and the release of death the beginning of day. Tiusanen is probably right: "The end is a matter of logic, not of religion; of physiology, not of metaphysics. The tone is of tragic irony, not of affirmation."43

Robert tells Andrew near the end of the play that both he and Ruth are failures, though they can lay some of the blame on God, but that Andrew is the biggest failure since he gambled with the productivity of the earth which he once used creatively. Earlier, Robert, when faced with death, promised Ruth that they would go to the city and he would become a writer. "Life owes us some happiness," Robert claimed, "after what we've been through ... It must! Otherwise our suffering would be meaningless--and that is unthinkable" (p. 150). That brief moment of hope for a new life on earth fades quickly, however, but Robert's real awareness of the immediacy of his death leads him into another hope, and it is in this hope that he feverishly exults as he dies. Robert's professed belief in the redemptive value of suffering is on his lips as he dies. He says, haltingly, "Andy--only through sacrifice--the secret beyond there--" (p. 168). Andrew, the stolid one, tries to accept Robert's version of things, but when he addresses himself to Ruth, he cannot bring himself to believe it: "We must try to help each other--and--in time--we'll come to know what's right--And perhaps we--." But his voice trails off, and Ruth sinks into

43 Timo Tiusanen, O'Neill's Scenic Images, p. 77.
exhaustion "beyond the further troubling of any hope" (p. 169).

Perhaps those critics are right who say that false romanticizing is the flaw that destroys all three characters. If each had followed an instinctive dream, all three would have been all right. Robert's case seems settled already—his dreams had nothing to do with life; they were not a form of wanderlust in the usual sense of the word. But what of Ruth's and Andrew's "true" dreams? Perhaps both should have married, without a lot of romantic nonsense, and led common-sense lives on their "jim-dandy of a place." There are two things militating against that interpretation, one within the play, the other in comments O'Neill made shortly after the play appeared.

If the dream of the farm works, then James Mayo, the father, should be an operating model of that dream. He brags on his son, saying Andy is a born farmer and that the farm, though a "slick place right now" (p. 97) is too small. Mayo feels he needs more land. If there is a "sin" in O'Neill's plays from first to last, it is the desire to possess things and more things. Moments later, in speaking of the wedding everyone assumes will join Andy Mayo and Ruth Atkins, the elder Mayo says, "I ain't what you'd call calculatin' generally, and I b'lieve in lettin' young folks run their affairs to suit themselves; but there's advantages for both o' them in this match you can't overlook in reason ["reason" is usually a dirty word in O'Neill's plays, at least reason of this, the counting-house variety]. The Atkins farm is right next to
ourn. Jined together they'd make a jim-dandy of a place . . . " (p. 98). The elder Mayo eventually curses Andrew for leaving the farm, a curse that the father takes to his grave. The acquisitiveness that eventually shows up in Andrew seems honestly come by.

Ruth's "true" dream appears to have been nothing more than to be a farmer's wife on an orderly, well-run farm. But, as O'Neill said shortly after Beyond The Horizon opened, "To me, the tragic alone has that significant beauty which is truth. It is the meaning of life--and the hope. The noblest is eternally the most tragic. The people who succeed and do not push on to a greater failure are the spiritual middle-classes. Their stopping at success is the proof of their uncompromising insignificance. How petty their dreams must have been!"  

O'Neill did not write traditional tragedies. Either he wrote spiritual comedies, such as Lazarus Laughed and Days Without End, or he wrote ironic tragedies, such as Beyond the Horizon, Mourning Becomes Electra, Strange Interlude, and numerous others, or he wrote failed comedies, such as The Iceman Cometh, A Moon for the Misbegotten, "Hughie," and A Touch of the Poet. It was only after O'Neill's savage, furious delight in the pattern of ironies in life, the jokes and tricks of fate, had been tempered that he could write those last plays. And his delight in irony was tempered, unfortunately, only by despair.

44 Eugene O'Neill, in Gelb, O'Neill, p. 5.
"The Straw," a play O'Neill wrote in 1918-1919 and which was produced, not very successfully, in 1921, is one of the more interesting of the "unknown" plays in the O'Neill canon. The play is perhaps the least ambiguous exposition of what seems to have been O'Neill's theory of tragedy, at least during the first decade of his career. The play is also an example of O'Neill's insistence on making the bad joke that fate plays on men and women fit, in exact and ironic opposition, every wish, dream, and desire of the principal characters. It is also, finally, one of the few O'Neill plays that can be seen to be touched with poignancy, that delicately modulated emotional effect that the thunderous, often ponderous, O'Neill seldom achieved.

The plot of the play is relatively simple. Eileen Carmody, a girl of eighteen, is the surrogate mother of the other four motherless Carmody children. She is also tubercular. The father, Bill Carmody, is a composite of nearly all the distasteful characteristics O'Neill could see in the lower class working Irish-American: he is mean, a frequent and heavy drinker, incredibly tight-fisted, physically repulsive, unloving, and unlovable. When the girl's illness is diagnosed as consumption, Carmody, more concerned about the savings he is putting away for his old age than about the girl's health, comes close to refusing to allow her to be treated, even when he is told that she is very seriously ill.

45 Jordan Y. Miller, Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic, pp. 112 and 142.
He gives in only when an angry doctor threatens to report him to health authorities, perhaps costing him his job. The girl is then sent to a sanitorium. In rapid succession, she is faced with the loss of her fiance, a man named Fred Nichols, and her family, who replace her almost immediately with a harridan named Brennan. At the sanitorium, however, Eileen meets Stephen Murray and proceeds to fall in love with him. Although he does not reciprocate, his cynical teasing of the girl and his sincere gratitude for her interest in his short-story writing provide the girl with reason for going on. Eventually, Murray is cured, but the girl grows worse and is soon to be sent to the state hospital for terminal patients. When Murray returns to visit the girl, one of the attendants persuades him to tell the girl he loves her in order to make her dying easier. Murray does so, and in pretending to love the girl, discovers that he really does. At the same time, the fact of her dying has meaning for him for the first time, and she reads it in his eyes. Murray is then furious that both he and Eileen have been given a "hopeless hope" (the words remained a favorite O'Neill paradox). He lies to the girl, telling her that it is he who is ill again and that he needs her to help him survive. Murray proclaims both his love and the viability of their "hopeless hope," and the play ends with the girl comforting him "in a tone of motherly, self-forgetting solicitude."^6

The principal object of the joke of fate detailed in "The Straw" is Eileen, for most of the play, but Murray is included rapidly and harshly before the play is over. Eileen is, at least in outline, perilously close to being a sentimental heroine. Early in the play, the girl's desire to live seems to be the result of her dedication to her family, even her repulsive father, and her somewhat vague plans for a future as Mrs. Fred Nichols. When she is told of the seriousness of her illness, she is unimpressed. It is only when she is informed of the considerable danger to those around her that she is persuaded to go away for treatment. Once Eileen's affliction is diagnosed, Fred Nichols makes quite clear, by his reluctance to have anything to do with the girl, that her hopes in him are foolish. The girl continues to speak to others, especially to Murray, as if her lover still both needs and wants her.

Not long after the girl is hospitalized, the infrequency of letters and visits from her family makes it clear, to everyone but the girl, apparently, that she is not needed or missed by them, either. Then Murray is cured and goes off to New York for a fine time. He writes to her for a time, but then the letters stop. In the final scene of the play, Eileen's family comes, seemingly only for the purpose of increasing the girl's misery. She is dying and no one cares, not even the girl herself. To add one more element of the ironical, O'Neill has Murray visit the girl immediately after the family leaves, and he rather clumsily makes the
girl's fate more painful by removing her last hope, that he would come to love her. Eileen never complains, never refers to her plight in a self-pitying fashion. Although biological heritage seems to have made her a likely candidate for tuberculosis (her mother died of the disease), the rest of her fate seems improbably harsh. Her "opponents," the father, the spineless, unloving fiance, the ungrateful children, the harpy interloper, Mrs. Brennan, all seem unrelievedly villainous characterizations, as if O'Neill had deliberately rigged the trick of fate being played on this sweet, naive, uncomplaining girl. But the pattern of irony is not yet complete.

The potentially melodramatic and sentimental in the portrait of the girl seems, at first, to be thrown into greater relief by the presence of Stephen Murray in the sanitorium with her. Whereas Eileen seems to be the sweet, long-suffering believer in dreams, almost a Pollyanna, Murray seems to be the cynic, the one who understands everything, believes in nothing, and places no value on dreams and hopes--his own included. Murray, on first meeting the girl, her fiance, and her family, takes it upon himself to educate her about their real natures, their unconcern for her.

Conveniently enough, Murray is a loner, a free spirit. His own parents are dead, and his middle class relatives and he have nothing in common. He has worked as a newspaper writer for ten years and prides himself on seeing through everyone and everything and joking cynically about it all. What he sees clearly when first meeting the other people in
Eileen's life appears to take Eileen most of the play to discover. Murray seems to know hopelessness well; he keeps it at arm's length with his mockery. Murray always takes a faintly condescending approach to the girl, an approach that alternates between mockery and pity.

The largest pattern of irony in the play, however, is that the girl knows about life and its hopelessness far more clearly, accurately, and deeply than Murray does. It is, in fact, Murray, not the girl's perfidious boyfriend or her family, that is the principal element in fate's cruel joke on Eileen. And it is Murray's inability to understand either the girl or himself that leads to the play's conclusion. Murray's knowledge of despair is a fraud; he has used cynicism to avoid ever having hopes that might be destroyed. The girl has more courage; she is more like the quintessential O'Neill hero or heroine. O'Neill wrote of this play: "I honestly believe my play would have a good fighting chance because it is at bottom a message of the significance of human hope—even the most hopeless hope. . . . For we know deep down in our souls that, logically [my emphasis], each one of our lives is a hopeless hope—that failure to realize our dreams is the inexorable fate allotted to us. Yet we know that without hope there is no life, and so we go on pursuing our dreams to the last, convinced in spite of our reason [my emphasis] that there must be some spiritual meaning behind
And as O'Neill also said of this play: "Human hope is the greatest power in life and the only thing that defeats death." The tragic victory that O'Neill's characters may be able to wring from the operation of inexorable fate is always an ironic victory, as was Robert's in *Beyond the Horizon*, and as will be the victory of Eileen and Murray in "The Straw." But it is a victory, and it is not won without a struggle.

In all the ways that really matter in this play, it is Murray who is the naïf and Eileen Carmody who is the wise individual. Murray thinks the girl simply does not see her

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48 O'Neill to Tyler, in Sheaffer, p. 465.

49 Without doubt O'Neill's favorite word for describing what his mind told him about existence, about fate, or about tragedy is "ironic." The irony O'Neill saw was based on a hopeless dichotomy between what men dream and desire and what they get or become. O'Neill's response to what his intellect told him was an emotional response and, for most of his writing career, that response struggled toward some kind of emotional or mystical sense of one-ness—an optimistic pursuit. Both Barrett H. Clark and Lionel Trilling could see this optimism operating in O'Neill's work. Clark claims, "I have always considered O'Neill at bottom an optimist, a yea-sayer. . . . Consider the endings of his plays [Clark is writing before O'Neill's last works]; are they not usually pointed with the expression of hope, even a hopeless hope? As a matter of fact, a good case might be made out against O'Neill for reading the riddles of life a little too easily." (Clark, *Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays*, p. 71) Trilling says, "O'Neill's faith, like Pascal's, is a poetic utilitarianism: he needs it and will have it." (Trilling is speaking of O'Neill's *Days Without End*—a "Roman Catholic" play—but he sees the apparent commitment to that faith as the natural end result of that reaching-out in O'Neill's works for some "behind-life" significance in human existence) (Trilling, "Eugene O'Neill: A Revaluation," *New Republic*, 88 (September 23, 1936), pp. 176-79).
father and Fred Nichols for the selfish beings they are, but he is wrong. She also sees the selfishness of her family in their failure to respond to her needs. And Eileen knows with far greater clarity than Murray that their relationship has been a flirtation on his part, mixed with the pleasure he takes in her interest in his work, but also that he has had no perception of her feelings until now, the last evening before his departure from the sanitorium. She says, "Remember me—perhaps you'll find out after a time—I'll pray God to make it so! Oh, what am I saying? Only—I'll hope—I'll hope—till I die!" (p. 392). These are hardly the words of an Irish Catholic peasant girl. Hers is not a faith in a kindly God, but in a "hopeless hope." The final irony in Murray's relationship to his girl is that the last hope she had, not of staying alive, but of finding whatever in life was bearable or even beautiful, he took away from her.

And Murray recognizes irony when he realizes he really does not need Eileen, and he despairingly asks Miss Gilpin, "Oh, why did you give me a 'hopeless hope!'" (p. 405). Miss Gilpin's answer seems clearly O'Neill's, at least at this stage in his career: "Isn't all life just that—when you think of it?" (p. 415). Life is, according to O'Neill's words, "logically . . . a hopeless hope," but emotionally, intuitively, it is still a hope. Murray ends with a furious proclamation, proving, at least dramatically, that a hopeless hope is a hope and is what gives energy and meaning and tragic beauty to those who struggle: "All the verdicts of all the
doctors—what do they matter? This is—beyond you! And we'll win in spite of you!" (p. 415). The victory, already wrung from fate, is a victory, even though the girl will die. As Lionel Trilling put it, in describing the emotional effect of several of O'Neill's plays, but "The Straw" particularly, "The 'straw' is the knowledge that life is a 'hopeless hope'--but still a hope. And nothing matters if you can conceive the whole of life."50

This conceiving of "the whole of life" that O'Neill incorporates into this play is not the wholeness arrived at intellectually, nor is it a religious affirmation of any traditional kind. It is an esthetically seen wholeness expressed emotionally, a tragic stance O'Neill would finally take at the end of his career without the overtones of "grace" in an affirmation like young Murray's "This is—beyond you!" But as Trilling points out in his article on O'Neill, O'Neill was not, during a large part of his career, satisfied with this kind of ironic, esthetic victory at the uncaring expense of fate. O'Neill, says Trilling, "is always moving toward the finality which philosophy sometimes, and religion always, promises. Life and death, good and evil, spirit and flesh, male and female, the all and the one . . . O'Neill's is a world of antithetical absolutes such as religion rather than philosophy conceives. . . ."51 O'Neill's "religious"


demands took him into spiritual comedies for a time during his career in such plays as *Lazarus Laughed* and *Days Without End*, but he eventually came back to an essentially esthetic understanding of the nature of tragedy in his last plays, his failed comedies. "The Straw" seems perhaps the clearest early example of the essentially religious nature of O'Neill's search and the essentially non-religious nature of his expression of that search. The "answer" contained in "The Straw" does not intellectually resolve the meaning of death, nor does it dissolve the ironic contradictions operating within and upon man. It simply supplies a roundness, an esthetic wholeness to that period that precedes death, no matter how short that period, as in the case of Eileen Carmody, may be.

O'Neill: 1920-1921

In the years 1920-1921, O'Neill wrote six plays, all of which were produced between 1920 and 1922. O'Neill considered "Gold" and "The First Man" to be artistic failures soon after they were presented. A third, *Anna Christie*, became O'Neill's least favorite play; it was one artistic child he would gladly have illegitimatized post factum. The play was a Pulitzer prize winner, but O'Neill kept it out of the *Nine Plays* volume put out by Horace Liveright in 1932

52 Jordan Y. Miller, *Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic*, pp. 113-14 and 138-44. Minor errors or omissions in Miller's work were corrected by reference to Tiusanen and Sheaffer.
that was supposed to contain what he considered his best work. The fourth play, a piece called "Diff'rent," is an interesting play, but it is probably a failure because O'Neill's taste for irony led him into a severe use of contrast that borders on the ludicrous. The fifth play, "The Emperor Jones," is world famous and has a great deal to recommend it, but it must give place to the sixth play written in this period, "The Hairy Ape," as the closest O'Neill came to writing a great play in the first eight years of his writing career.

"'The First Man,' 'Gold,' 'Welded,' 'The Fountain'--I would dismiss as being too painfully bungled in their present form to be worth producing at all," O'Neill says, in one of the handful of articles that he wrote about his plays. The tone of voice, for an artist so painfully self-conscious about his work, reminds one of the similarly cavalier wave of the hand that O'Neill gave, several years earlier, to "The Rope." That he could react strongly to criticism is indicated by his overreaction to criticisms--even favorable ones delivered for the wrong reasons--of Anna Christie, which is probably a better play than O'Neill

53 Eugene O'Neill, Nine Plays: Eugene O'Neill (New York: Horace Liveright, 1932), "A Note from the Author" at the beginning of book: "In choosing the nine plays ... which would best represent my work I have been guided not only by my own preferences but by the consensus of critical opinion, foreign as well as American. ..." Anna Christie is notable for its absence.

himself finally decided it was. But it takes very little investigation into "Gold" and "The First Man" to endorse O'Neill's own evaluation of them. "Gold" is a standard melodrama and contributes little to this thesis at hand; hence it will be dismissed.

The other disastrous play written and produced in this period is "The First Man," a play about an anthropologist-archeologist whose desire to find "the first man" makes his marriage an impossible mess. In this Strindbergian play about love, the wife tries to be absorbed into her husband and his work, but she eventually discovers that she has sacrificed her creativity to his. In rebellion, the woman becomes pregnant just when her husband is planning to leave on the expedition that promises to lead to his greatest find. Ironically, both husband and wife have delayed relaying information to one another in order to make a birthday present (it is her birthday) of their surprises. Each has picked exactly the opposite of the other's dearest wish. The wife reveals that she is pregnant; her husband reveals that he has arranged for his wife to go with him on this otherwise all-male expedition. In a scene that builds to a badly verbalized Strindbergian love-hate confrontation, each accuses the other of destroying the "us" in order to fulfill the "me." The wife, who after the deaths of their first two children fifteen years before dedicated herself without reserve to her husband and his work, seems to have some justice on her side in desiring to be more than a
research aid and an amanuensis. The play ends, ironically, with the husband losing in childbirth the wife he wants, but gaining, through his wife's death, the child he does not want. In this play, the Strindbergian war is fought to the death, with the husband unable to control his hatred for the "it" and his wife unable to bear that hatred in his eyes. In her death throes, the wife, in a dying sacrifice, asks for her husband's forgiveness in a seeming victory for the husband. It is an ironic victory, however, because, her perceptiveness dimmed by the coming of death, the wife does not seem to see or hear the husband's plea for forgiveness.

The principal strand in the play, the love-hate marital relationship, is unsuccessful, partly because Jayson, the husband, seems such a lifeless stick, an anthropological computer. It is unsuccessful principally, however, because, as Edmund Wilson and Hugo von Hofmannsthal point out, O'Neill's verbal inadequacies reduce the ambivalence in the relationship of husband and wife to banal extremes of rage and wordy protestations of love. The dialogue is, as Wilson puts it, "dreary and tasteless."

The other flaw in the play, an interesting flaw, is found in the dramatic material against which the Curtis-Martha struggle is shown. The play takes place in the

Jayson family's ancestral fiefdom of Bridgetown, Connecticut. As the Curtis Jayson-Martha Jayson saga unfolds, the balance of the family appears en masse at critical moments in the play. The whole family, with a couple of exceptions, represents O'Neill's notion of an upper-class family, clad in money, conventionality, and "family honor," all masked in hypocrisy. O'Neill's dislike of this set of characters is so strong, however, and his attempt at satire is so overdone, that these people become comic grotesques, so predictably and ignobly small-minded that they are howlingly funny. One sister-in-law, the mousy Emily, is O'Neill's idea of a malicious consumer and spreader of harmful gossip. Throughout the play, the woman speaks in half sentences, her tiny voice dying into "meaningful" silences filled to overflowing with sordid implications. In the final scene in the play, it is this little lady who brings the noble, high-flying Curtis Jayson down into the Bridgetown mud. She delivers, in three speeches that leave her exhausted, a synopsis of the family's evil suspicion (based mainly on Jayson's strange reactions to his wife's pregnancy) that his best friend, a widower named Bigelow, is the father of the child. O'Neill's intent was obviously to give Martha and Curtis, untrammeled, struggling dreamers, a background of pettiness against which their nobility and liberality could be properly appreciated. Even seen against a background of understanding friends and neighbors, the Curtis-Martha tale would still seem overdone; when it is seen against
the malicious quintessence of the "booboisie," it is ludicrous. O'Neill's sense of irony, here expressed in contrast, led him astray in this play. A family that consists of a pompous but reserved father, a pompous and unreserved brother, another brother who ducks everything to go for tennis or a drink at the club, a sister who tongue lashes the rest but contributes the juiciest part of the destructive rumors, and a sister-in-law (Emily) who is a rabid mouse, is an exercise, not in satire, but in burlesque. An overwrought and tongue-tied Strindbergian marriage combined with an unwitting burlesque of babbity of a low sort simply cannot function dramatically.

One of the most enduringly popular of O'Neill's works, Anna Christie, won for him, in 1922, his second Pulitzer prize. The play was not, however, a favorite of O'Neill's. It was a large financial success for O'Neill, and both critics and audiences liked it. Unfortunately, many, perhaps most of the important New York reviewers objected to the play's "happy ending,"56 with the big Irishman returning to marry the soiled girl, Anna Christie. A recent critic, Travis Bogard, claims that the play "stubbornly refused to evolve as a tragedy" and became instead a comedy, "almost in despite of its author's wishes."57 O'Neill was furious.

56 Gelb, O'Neill, pp. 479-80.
He was so angry about the critics' reaction that he never forgave the play. He said, soon after the play opened, "I hereby set down Anna Christie as the very worst failure I have experienced, and the most ironical joke ever played on me [my emphasis]." O'Neill added, "If it were not for the others concerned in its production, I assure you I would pray for its closing. . . . " O'Neill-haters often pick out Anna Christie as his very best work precisely because it is, as Bernard De Voto puts it, "his most effective play. But note carefully," continues De Voto, "that its effectiveness is theatrical—of the theatre, not of life." O'Neill's anger caused him to write his own explication of the play's theme for newspaper readers, an explication which will be discussed later. His anger did not die down, however, and even ten years later O'Neill became one of the few writers who ever excluded a Pulitzer-prize-winning work from a volume allegedly containing his best work. The play is a very interesting one, however, and it contains elements of those habits of thought and dramatic practice that this study

58 Eugene O'Neill to George C. Tyler, in Gelb, O'Neill, p. 481.


60 Eugene O'Neill, Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill (New York: Horace Liveright, 1932). There are later editions of the volume, but it has remained unchanged since the first edition for which O'Neill chose or—as in the case of Anna Christie—did not choose those plays to be included.
suggests were eventually honed down for the highly specialized and highly individual uses to which they were put in O'Neill's failed comedies.

The characterization in Anna Christie is, in one sense, some of the best O'Neill ever achieved. Few of O'Neill's characters are as memorable as old Chris Christopherson, Anna Christie, or Matt Burke. But it is in those characters that O'Neill came close, in some ways, to the caricatures and stereotypes of comedy and melodrama. In the original production in 1921, the actors apparently played the tragic elements strongly; hence critics faulted O'Neill for delivering a "happy ending." In a moderately successful revival of the play in the early 1950's, the actors must have played the characters more for their broadly comic values, and at least a few critics felt some of O'Neill's tragic intention was abused. O'Neill invites both distortions of his play. His characters are, in varying degrees within the play, both realistic and tragic, melodramatic and comic. And tragic fate in this play does seem to be a bad joke that turns out well.

The plot of the play is relatively simple. Old Chris Christopherson has had a life-long love-hate relationship with "dat ole davil," the sea. Years ago his wife, tired of waiting for him to return from the sea, moved with her daughter to Minnesota. When the wife died, Chris left the girl in the hands of relatives, assuring himself that she

61 Miller, Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic, pp. 286-89.
would thus be saved the fate of being involved with sailors like him. Now, fifteen years later, Chris receives word that this farm-bred girl, who is supposed to be a nurse, is coming to visit him. He sheepishly evicts Marthy, a rowdy, good-hearted old woman who has been living on his coal barge with him, and waits for his daughter. The girl comes into Johnny-the-Priest's Bar, and with her language, her thirst, and her cigarettes, makes it clear that she is anything but a nurse. The old man, however, is so overjoyed to see her and so simple that he can barely contain himself. O'Neill gets considerable comic mileage out of the disparate reactions to Anna by Chris and by the other denizens of the bar, including Marthy. The girl, who has just recovered from a siege of illness brought on by a jail sentence imposed on her for her "sins," has no affection for this old man who left her with heartless relatives who started her on the road to perdition. She has come to him hoping for a couple of weeks of rest and a few dollars to get her literally back on her feet. But life on Chris' coal barge and the old man's clumsy affection, coupled with the mysterious operation of the fog and the sea, give the girl the sense of being cleansed, reborn, of being a person with no past, only a future.

Then this same sea gives up a near-drowning victim, a hulking Irish coal-stoker named Matt Burke. Matt has never met a "nice" girl before, and he is soon head-over-heels in love. Anna, though she reacts to his advances with the fury of a devout, cynical man-hater,
is gradually won over by Burke's puppy-like response to her. There is considerable friction between the suitor and the father, however, partly because Chris hates to lose his long lost daughter, but mostly because he cannot bear the ironic possibility that, after "protecting" his daughter for so long from the life of a woman trapped by a sea-faring man, he should lose her to just such an individual. In the climactic scene, with her father and lover at each other's throats, Anna reveals her scarlet past to them. Both are furious and morally outraged, and both go off to get drunk. In the final scene, both return, Chris gently and apologetically, Matt in an ambivalent state of love and revulsion. Anna and Matt finally are reconciled to one another, and Chris grudgingly agrees to the marriage in what appears to be a happy ending. As O'Neill sarcastically put it: "A kiss in the last act, a word about marriage, and the audience grows blind and deaf to what follows."62

The three principal characters all wander back and forth between realism and comic or melodramatic caricature. Matt Burke is perhaps the most crudely drawn. He is a fearless, muscular stoker whose superstitious Irish Catholicism consists of mechanical references to God's will, crossings of himself, and an unshakable belief in chastity—for women who would be wives. Matt Burke's occupation is not the only thing he shares with Yank, the Hairy Ape. Burke is nearly

as physical as Yank, and only slightly more articulate, but he has the same strong sense of the obscene. For Burke Anna's flesh is filthy and evil outside of the narrowly proscribed boundaries of romanticized sex. Unless sex is sanctified by love and marriage, it is an offensive kind of dirt that only violence can cleanse. As is so often the case with O'Neill's characters, the flesh of man is acceptable only when it is clothed in dreams and ideals and illusions. Seen without that covering, the flesh is merely disgusting. Burke does, on occasion, have a silvered Irishman's tongue, but it is when he is using it that he is least pleasing to Anna, who has heard all that before. It is when he pays homage to the other half of the double standard, when he puts Anna up on a pedestal as the lovely virtuous lady who will make a home for him and rescue him from the loneliness and meaninglessness of life on the sea, that he is most appealing to Anna, and most disturbing. In the climactic scenes of the play, Burke escapes being an outrageous caricature by the narrowest of margins. The degree to which his delicate sexual sensibilities are offended when he discovers Anna's past is almost comical. The scene is saved from being comic because that offended delicacy expresses itself in near-homicidal rage. It is when Burke comes back looking for Anna, partly out of love and partly out of a strong desire to wipe this filth from him by breaking her into tiny pieces, that he most closely approximates comedy. He and Anna move alternately toward and away from
reconciliation, and Burke decides in her favor only when she vows love for him alone by swearing on his cheap crucifix, and even then he is not sure he can trust the elaborate curses she takes upon herself.

Chris Christopherson, in spite of the fact that he looks and talks more like a Swede than ten Swedes, may be the most realistic of the three characters and the most complex. He was, in fact, in the earlier versions of this play (called "Chris" and "Chris Christopherson") the central figure. His whole life has been a fleeing, whether he escaped the responsibility of a family or fled the sea itself by becoming the captain of a coastal coal barge. When Anna comes, for the first time in his life he seems to welcome responsibility, though it may be coupled with his own need for aid and emotional support in his old age. He blames himself for Anna's past and is the first to offer her genuine understanding after her confession. The old man seems prepared to live without being chained to his past or hers. But in the end, Chris has started mumbling again about "dat ole davil, sea."

Much of O'Neill's disappointment over the reception of his play can be understood if the reader listens to and watches the old man carefully instead of concentrating on the re-united lovers.

Anna Christie herself is a mixture of the melodramatic and the realistic. In the explanation of her past, she is presented almost as a Maggie, a girl trapped by an unjust

63 Sheaffer, O'Neill, pp. 459-64.
society into a life that unjust society regards as evil. Although she behaves as a whore, she swears never to have liked the life and reveals fairly virginal sensibilities when she reacts against Matt's referring to physical aspects of love. Her rebirth and cleansing seem authentic because when the two men turn on her, she threatens to go back to her old ways, but she discovers that her revulsion at the thought of it is even stronger than her suicidal desire to bury her misery in more guilt. In the end, Anna seems to be the one whose idealism is strong enough to overcome whatever fears the other two characters have. She is the powerful dreamer. Although Anna is not so blatant a stereotype as the "whore with the heart of gold," she is not, as a virginal prostitute, the most realistic figure in dramatic literature.

O'Neill's predilection for viewing the operation of fate as a bad joke is clearly seen throughout the play until the end, when his hints about a new set of ironic circumstances are unfortunately lost in the emotional welter of love's labors won. Chris, who puts the blame for all his failures on the sea, is, when the play opens, withdrawn from the sea. The pain that Chris sought to save his daughter and himself from comes not from the sea but from the farms and cities of inland Minnesota. Anna, whose tragic fate was a result of her father's irresponsibility, the malice of relatives, and the impossible conditions of the city, finds renewal in contact with the sea. Just when she is cleansed and healed and no longer burdened with a past, out of the sea comes Matt Burke.
whose affection for her is the first "honest" male affection she has ever known. But it is this man's love that forces Anna's past back into her present. Burke, who claims the sea is the proper arena for a man's strength, bemoans the fact that it is the roughness of sea life that has prevented him from ever attaining the home he desires, with the good woman, the children, the stability, and the love. All three of these fated creatures meet, ironically, on middle ground, on the barge which is neither sea nor land, but their pasts converge to make their futures impossibly alien. The pattern of ironies grows until the three meet in despairing, murderous conflict. Then, in the final scene that critics regarded as a happy ending, the ironies seem to melt away and the wholesome energies of comedy bring all into unity. O'Neill deserves to have his play misunderstood, but he also deserves to have his case heard.

O'Neill claimed, "In real life I felt she [Anna] would unconsciously be compelled, through sheer inarticulateness to the usual 'big scene,' and wait hopefully for her happy ending. And as she is the only one of the three who knows exactly what she wants, she would get it. And the sea outside--life--waits. The happy ending is merely the comma at the end of a gaudy introductory clause, with the body of the sentence still unwritten." The Gelbs report that O'Neill considered titling the play "Comma." O'Neill said,

in the newspaper critique mentioned earlier, "I wanted to have the audience leave with a deep feeling of life flowing on, of the past which is never the past--but always the birth of the future--of a problem solved for the moment but by the very nature of its solution involving new problems. I must have failed in this attempt. . . . No one hears old Chris when he makes his gloomy, forboding comment on the new set of coincidences, which to him reveal the old devil sea--(fate)--up to her old tricks again."

The "new set of coincidences" that Chris notices does seem, upon close reading, to involve dire potentials for the three. Burke, in his initial drunken disgust over Anna's confession, signed on an ocean-going vessel that will soon put him at sea again. Chris must be reminded of what he did as a young man--left a new family to go to the sea again--that started the chain of ironies extending up to the present and perhaps beyond. Chris himself, in his dark moment, also signed on an ocean-going vessel, almost as an act of surrender to the fate he had been running from all his life. The heaviest irony, and the most forboding, perhaps, is the fact that both men signed on the same ship, the Londonderry. It hardly seems accidental that an Irishman like O'Neill would name this ship, soon to carry this Lutheran father and Irish Catholic son-in-law, after that city in Northern Ireland where the distinction between Catholic and non-Catholic has always been--and still is--so murderously real. O'Neill, in the same newspaper analysis, added that, more importantly no one hears
Burke when, for the first time, he agrees with Chris's premonition about the old devil sea. Anna notes this agreement with alarm. Anna then brings Burke out of his "superstitious premonitions," and both drink a toast. Generally, O'Neill's expression of his sense of the ironic is so strong that audiences have little choice but to accept his dark predictions in regard to the fate of his characters after the curtain falls. In this play, that "new set of coincidences" is simply not enough to overcome the sense of power around Anna, which is considerably greater than that coming from the sea or from Anna's two little boys.

"Diff'rent," a two-act play that O'Neill wrote and saw produced, with modest success, in 1920, is a good example of O'Neill's conception of fate as somehow or other a joke. It is the story of Emma Crosby and Caleb Williams. Emma is a romantic but strong-willed lady who chooses to regard herself and Williams, her fiancé, as "diff'rent." When she discovers that Caleb, a sea captain, once had a very brief affair with a native woman on one of the South Sea Islands, she elects to remain single rather than sacrifice her dream of being different. The second act, which takes place thirty years later, shows her as an old maid who is making a fool of herself over Williams' worthless nephew, Benny Rogers. The boy treats her brutally, and when Caleb Williams, who has waited thirty years for the woman to relent, discovers

65 Tiusanen, O'Neill's Scenic Images, p. 350; and Miller, Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic, p. 140.
the nature of her foolish behavior in regard to the boy, he walks emptily to a nearby barn and hangs himself. When Benny Rogers tells her to her face that he has made a fool of her, Emma murmurs, "Wait, Caleb, I'm going down to the barn," and "moves like a sleepwalker to kill herself." 66

O'Neill's own comments on the play sound familiar: "'Diff'rent,' as I see it, is merely a tale of the eternal, romantic idealist who is in all of us—the eternally defeated one. In our innermost hearts we all wish ourselves and others to be 'diff'rent.' We are all more or less 'Emmas'—the more or less depending on our talent for compromise. Either we try in desperation to clutch our dream at the last by deluding ourselves with some tawdry substitute; or, having waited the best part of our lives, we find the substitute that time mocks us with too shabby to accept. In either case we are tragic figures, and also fit subjects for the highest kind of comedy [my emphasis], were one sufficiently detached to write it." 67 O'Neill seldom felt sufficiently detached to write "the highest kind of comedy," but he did very often write tragedies whose operation depended on a strong resemblance to a practical joke, a pattern of ironies that sometimes leaked out of the frame of dramatic probability.


The ironies of the play seem evident from a plot summary alone. There is ample use of the joke. The revelation to Emma by her brother Jack that Caleb had an affair in the past is regarded by Jack as a joke, and some form of the word "joke" is used over twenty times in the first act. The story about Caleb is regarded as a great laugh by the rest of the family, who consider such behavior normal, understandable, and morally insignificant, but to Emma it is sufficient reason to call off the marriage. The joke played by fate on Caleb Williams really is a joke, but it is a joke that is taken seriously by Emma. The second act is essentially fate's joke on Emma, who, while deploring loose morals, has changed her home to the decor of a whorehouse and paints herself up (a visual joke) in an effort to look thirty years younger. She, of course, is the butt of Rogers' joke. He was "on'y sort of kidding" (p. 645) about wanting to marry her.

The play is not a good play primarily because O'Neill's taste for the ironic led him into the fault of excess. Once he has set up the first joke on Caleb Williams, he can hardly wait to detail the second joke, the joke on Emma Crosby. He skips past thirty years during which her character was undergoing a gradual erosion. O'Neill simply relied too heavily on contrast, thus sacrificing dramatic probability. All of the characters understand the humor in the joke on Caleb, and none of them expect any man to avoid an occasional slip. Only Emma fails to get the joke. She places no moral sanctions
on Caleb's behavior; it is just that Caleb, by behaving as others normally do, is no longer "diff'rent." O'Neill makes no preparations for the change in Emma; he simply puts it forth in the second act as an accomplished fact. Benny Rogers is also part of the excessive contrasts in the play. His meanness is as excessive as is Caleb's thirty years of unchanging devotion.

One of the most widely anthologized of O'Neill's plays is "The Emperor Jones," which O'Neill wrote and saw produced in 1920. Travis Bogard claims, in fact, that "the American theatre came of age with this play." Among O'Neill's early works, however, "The Hairy Ape," with all its flaws, comes closer to being a great play than does "The Emperor Jones," even though "The Emperor Jones" is probably as close to theatrical perfection as O'Neill ever got. The flaw in "The Emperor Jones" is not in its execution, but in its conception. It is thematically too simple to be a great drama; it remains great theatre.

It is perhaps significant that Bernard De Voto, who made his dislike for O'Neill's work known when O'Neill's world-wide reputation won a Nobel prize, put "The Emperor Jones" in a class with Anna Christie and Ah, Wilderness! as "the best work that Mr. O'Neill has ever done."
De Voto's claim is that O'Neill's best plays are not great drama, but highly effective theatre. When "The Emperor Jones" is examined closely, its sharp-edged perfection as theatrical magic is obvious, but its relative thinness as drama is also clear.

There are eight scenes in "The Emperor Jones." The first and last are realistic; the six scenes in between are expressionistic. The six scenes that make up the body of the play portray the destruction of Brutus Jones, Pullman porter-convict turned emperor of a small island in the West Indies, through a combination of personal and racial memories that arouse tremendous destructive terror in him. The six expressionistic scenes are combinations of sight and sound that invite the audience to share in Jones' regression from being a controlled, rational individual to dissolving into that molten mass of racial memories from which he, as an individual, has come.

The odd thing about "The Emperor Jones" is the nature of the central figure. Although he does experience the kind of destruction that O'Neill claimed to see as the inevitable lot of all human beings, he is unlike the usual O'Neill hero. Brutus Jones is one of the strongest of O'Neill's characters, but he is without that capacity to dream self-destructive dreams, which O'Neill consistently claimed as the glory of man's tragic yet beautiful nature. Jones is, until the nightmares of his own mind and those that are rooted in the race destroy him, an utterly practical man. As Edwin Engel
suggests, the destruction through fear of such a man as Brutus Jones demonstrates "that instinct, emotion, necessity must triumph over man's best laid plans, his free will, his reason. . . ." However, as Engel also suggests, "It would seem that he [Jones] deserved a worthier adversary than abject terror." O'Neill gave Brutus Jones his ironic victory over fate in the form of Jones' "style." Although this tough, realistic, amoral individual is reduced to a gibbering black Baptist begging forgiveness for his sins, he is allowed to die by silver bullets. Jones told the superstitious natives that he could be killed only by silver bullets, and they believed him. But they also went to the trouble of melting down money to make silver bullets. Jones is killed offstage by the native soldiers in the last scene of the play, but he was already gone. The killing of his body is anti-climactic. When Jones appears on stage dressed in the regalia of a Lodge member, O'Neill is careful to tell us that he is able to carry off this ridiculous grandeur, that his face reveals strength of will, self-confidence, and intelligence. Jones is a classically amoral, clever rogue. But the irony that O'Neill sees operating in all men's lives operates in this play, too. Jones, the practical man who manipulates others by his understanding of their weaknesses, their cowardice, and their superstition, himself falls prey to all that is

72 Engel, p. 51.
non-rational in his makeup. By the time Jones' multiple visions are finished, there is nothing left of the shrewd individual who has lived by his wits. The speed and thoroughness with which O'Neill strips Jones of his pretensions to rational control of himself and his environment increases the irony of the emperor's tragedy.

Jones regards himself as superior to all around him—to Smithers, a cockney trader who first employed him when he arrived on the island, and to his subjects, the "ign'rent bush niggers." He leaves Smithers' trading post to journey through the woods to the other side of the island to a waiting ship, an escape to the money he has extorted from the natives and put in a foreign bank.

O'Neill uses every theatrical effect, aural and visual, at his disposal to portray the destruction of Brutus Jones. Jones is stripped of his emperor's clothing, a little at a time, until he is wearing a piece of cloth no larger than a "breech cloth." The kind of phantasm that Jones sees grows progressively deeper and more terrible until finally Jones seems almost to cease being Brutus Jones in paralytic fear. The drum, which begins beating at a rate close to normal pulse rate, picks up speed and volume until it sweeps everything before it. The depths into which Jones penetrates grow greater in each scene; the degree of light grows progressively less. And Jones grows progressively more hysterical in the grip of fear.

In Jones's reactions to the fantasies he sees there is a mixture of rationality and unthinking terror, a useful anger or fear and a superstitious "religious" dread that paralyzes him. The respective amounts of these ingredients change rapidly, with unthinking terror and superstitious dread coming to completely dominate Jones's reactions to the last two of his visions.

In Jones's first encounter with the irrational, he is at the edge of the forest, having traveled across a plain to reach it. While his back is turned, "LITTLE FORMLESS FEARS" rise up out of the darkness behind him and emit "a tiny gale of low mocking laughter like a rustling of leaves" (pp. 189-90). Jones reacts just briefly in unthinking terror, but immediately thereafter he threatens with his revolver and then fires. When the apparition fades away, Jones attempts a rational man's explanation of what has happened: "Dey was only little animals ... Sho', you fool nigger, what you think dey is--ha'nts?" (p. 190). The sound of gunfire and the heft of the revolver reassure Jones and his next thought is prudential. He assumes the natives have heard the shot and thus have some idea of where he is. Jones pushes fear away from him "with manful resolution" and "plunges boldly into the forest" (p. 190). But the drum-beat, which comes to express and to be Jones's growing hysteria, increases in tempo, and this first experience with these projections of his fears is the last time Jones's reason and consciousness have the upper hand.
The next two apparitions Jones has involve personal memories, and both involve crimes of homicide in Jones's past. And he is moved to fire his gun again—this time at the ghost of his victim, a black crap shooter. When the specter disappears, Jones is more relieved that it is gone than he is interested in an explanation. In his second apparition he relives his killing of a white prison guard, but this time he grants full reality to the specter, with no thought of a rational explanation. After these two visions Jones is able to recover somewhat by taking on the semblance of a breast-beating black Baptist confessing his sins to the Lord. But after his next apparition, being sold at a slave auction and shooting the auctioneer, his fear shifts from one based on his own actions to something far less personal, far more elemental. Jones's mind is now prey to the fears that are part of the whole experience of his race. And his recovery from this, unlike the recovery from his earlier visions, is not rational at all. He rushes off into the darkness "crying with fear" (pp. 197-98).

By Scene Six Jones, thoroughly rattled, suddenly finds himself on a slave ship, wailing with others, joining in this sub-rational response to terror and misery. This time there is no gunshot, only the return of darkness and the sound of Jones running off.

Jones enters his last scene, still wailing the despairing cry of the slaves and for the first time in the beginning of a scene, he is not in control of himself at all: "The
expression on his face is fixed and stony, his eyes have an obsessed glare, he moves with a strange deliberation like a sleep-walker or one in a trance" (p. 200). Jones is now completely absorbed into those insane energies of fate--biological and psychical--which O'Neill claimed it is man's tragic glory to struggle against, to struggle "to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression."74

Jones is in this state when a "Congo witch doctor" appears from behind the tremendous tree. He watches, completely hypnotized, then joins him in a dance, the whole spirit and meaning of which has become his spirit. This ritual seems deeper and more elemental than the despairing but emotionless dirge of the slaves, and it seems about to end with the sacrifice of one Brutus Jones. The witch doctor calls up a river god in the form of a crocodile. Jones's reaction is not that of a savage in contact with elemental forces exercising themselves on an individual psyche, but, ironically, that of a black Baptist, that singularly Western anomaly combining the savage with a superstitious overlay of a sectarian religion. Jones, drawn toward the crocodile in spite of himself, can only moan, "Mercy, Lawd! Mercy!" (p. 201). As the crocodile moves more of its bulk out of the river, Jones continues to squirm toward him, drawn toward that senseless destruction of the conscious individual

that O'Neill saw as, willy-nilly, the end result of the operation of fate. Jones has only enough strength left to moan the abject prayer, "Lawn, save me! Lawd Jesus, heah my prayer." Then, as the stage direction puts it, "In answer to his prayer, comes the thought of the one bullet left him" (p. 202). Jones fires; the apparition dissolves. For the first time in the whole series of apparitions, however, Jones is exhausted and motionless: "Jones lies with his face to the ground, his arms outstretched, whimpering with fear . . ." (p. 202).

The answer to Jones's prayer does seem to offer Jones a victory of sorts over the forces that have bedeviled him, but the victory is a thoroughly ironic one. Jones is not overwhelmed— at least he is not obliterated— by the crescendo of dark forces that have attacked him from within, but neither does he have the energy or the means to fight or flee. He has wandered all night in a circle and will be shot by the natives almost at the exact spot where he entered the forest. Smithers is impressed that Jones died in style in the way that he had wished, by silver bullets. The irony, of course, is that he did not die by his own hand. Even that minimal control of his life involved in ending it has been taken away from Jones— "in answer to his prayer," ironically. While he lies whimpering on the ground, that control is given to "de low-flung bush niggers" he despised. And although the "revengeful power" that has surrounded Jones is "baffled" by his last shot, Jones's victory leads to nothing but death.
And even that slight victory comes from Jones's superstitious Baptist faith, from that white man's God of whom Jones has boasted, "I'se after de coin, an' I lays my Jesus on de shelf . . ." (p. 185). O'Neill seldom stripped his characters as thoroughly as he did the Emperor Jones, who was deprived of his clothing, his emotional control, and finally his individuality.

The ironic victories that O'Neill regularly gives his heroes and heroines are of several kinds. Robert Mayo, in *Beyond the Horizon*, dreams his meaningless dream right up to his death. Stephen Murray has his "hopeless hope" in "The Straw." Yank, in "The Hairy Ape," has what comes to be, perhaps, the fullest though grimmest of victories in O'Neill's early plays. Yank, a thoroughly stupid man, is allowed to see and understand rationally the fact of his hopeless situation, and Yank also reacts to that understanding emotionally, partly in anger, partly in despair, but finally in self-mocking laughter. Jones, the rational, practical man, has no understanding of what is happening to him; he is only allowed to feel his destruction. "The Emperor Jones" is perhaps the "cruellest" of O'Neill's plays. John Mason Brown complains of O'Neill's irony that "it does not rise above the pain or exult in the manner of tragedy. It asks us to smile in a sad way at the savage joke that gods play on men. . . ." 75 The thoroughness with which Jones is ground up in the joke fate has for him seems the play's flaw. It is for this reason.

75 John Mason Brown, *Dramatis Personae*, p. 46.
among others, that this study suggests that while "The Emperor Jones" is technically better executed, more finely unified in effect, "The Hairy Ape" is still the better play. O'Neill's seeming glee in detailing the ironic workings of fate seldom leaves him with no visible sympathy or admiration for his own characters, but such would appear to be the case with Brutus Jones.
CHAPTER III
"THE HAIRY APE"

O'Neill wrote "The Hairy Ape" in a burst of creative energy that carried him through a first draft in less than three weeks in 1921.\(^1\) The play was produced in 1922 with considerable success. Even twenty years later, O'Neill, in response to a request that he name his favorite play, listed "The Hairy Ape" alongside The Iceman Cometh, which was just then in production.\(^2\) Critics do not generally share O'Neill's fondness for the play. When it was first produced, this lively tale of an ape-like stoker on an ocean-going vessel was viewed by many as O'Neill's proletarian play. O'Neill explained in an interview that the play was not a piece of propaganda, but the story of an Everyman (but a man, too) who could not achieve in modern industrialized society a sense of belonging.\(^3\) Recent critics have seen the play as O'Neill wished but have tended to fault him for using Yank as a symbol. H. E. Woodbridge claims that Yank,

\(^1\) Travis Bogard, Contour in Time, p. 240.


\(^3\) Gelb, O'Neill, p. 499.
"a sort of modern Caliban," is reduced to a symbol and leads O'Neill into melodrama. John Gassner, however, continues with the assumption that the play was meant to be some kind of socio-economic-metaphysical exploration and so faults O'Neill for having written "a highly original and provocative but muddled work." Richard Dana Skinner comments perceptively that the play is not propaganda of any kind but is the story of a man who found the burden of being human unbearable. The "very possession of intellect itself," says Skinner, is what constitutes Yank's agony, and so the play is about "the tragedy of being born a man." John Henry Raleigh sees the play as an example of O'Neill's desire to seek out and express man's relationship to the universe, to God. It is a play about "belonging," as O'Neill said it was, claims Raleigh.

"The Hairy Ape" is of interest for two reasons. First, it is perhaps the most interesting example of O'Neill's early ironic tragedies. Secondly, the play strongly resembles, in both theme and manner, O'Neill's best works.


his failed comedies. The flaw in the play is that O'Neill let the comic energies in this play of tragic intent and meaning develop too fully and too long. When those energies are finally expended, they are released with such suddenness and violence that the expenditure is itself ludicrous. For seven scenes, Yank is, in spite of the objectively terrible things that happen to him, a gigantic comic figure. At the end of the eighth and last scene, the comic in Yank is suddenly converted into tragedy. The switch in direction is too abrupt. In his failed comedies, O'Neill was able to get maximum power from the comic by building it up rapidly and then allowing it to slowly leak away until its eventual exhaustion resembled, in effect, the exhaustion of traditional tragedy. In "The Hairy Ape," however, O'Neill's use of the comic was simply not well enough controlled to enable an audience to absorb it and then see it slowly drain away. When O'Neill tries in the eighth scene to squeeze some tragic nobility out of the buffoonish ape-man he has delighted his audience with for seven scenes, it is too late.

Yank (Robert Smith) is a stoker on an ocean-going ship. He is a gigantic man whose body is thoroughly at home with violence and hard labor. He has an unshakable confidence in his place in the scheme of things: he is the power that moves the world. All of his co-workers defer to Yank's pre-eminence except Paddy, a shriveled little Irishman who remembers the lovelier days when wind-driven ships welcomed man into a unity with nature. Mildred Douglas, the daughter of
the ship's owner, a steel king, visits the stoke-hole to look at the "other half." When she sees Yank, she can only murmur, "Oh, the filthy beast!" The girl's reaction to him shatters Yank's happily ape-like existence and sends him off through a series of adventures in which he attempts to recover his sense of belonging. He tries to attack Mildred's class and ends up in jail. He tries to join the IWW and is thrown out on his ear as a stupid informer. Yank finally goes to the zoo and attempts to join forces with a gorilla in order to get back at his persecutors. The gorilla, in the scene in which Yank seems to become a mere symbol, crushes Yank to death. In his dying speech, Yank proves himself an heroic figure of sorts, but the play ends on a confusing note. The mood of the play has been largely comic; Yank's death seems tragic. Yank has a victory of sorts in the end. This incredibly stupid man seems finally to have some understanding of himself and his nature as a man, but this recognition leads nowhere but to death in an animal's cage.

There are numerous flaws in "The Hairy Ape" that may prevent even a perceptive audience from realizing the theme. A criticism that is often made of the play is that O'Neill created a vivid, believable character in Yank but then sacrificed that character by making him, in the end, a mere symbol.

Yank is allowed to grow out of a play that is, dominantly, something other than realistic, but then he is sacrificed to what seem to be thematic demands. O'Neill himself made it clear that the play was not meant to be either entirely naturalistic or entirely expressionistic, but instead, as he put it, to run "the whole gamut from extreme naturalism to extreme expressionism."\(^9\)

The opening scene of the play offers a demonstration of the mixed nature of this play, a mixture of expressionism and naturalism that will be again employed in *The Iceman Cometh*. Everything about the first scene of "The Hairy Ape" is expressionistic, with the exception of the characters Yank and Paddy, and, possibly, Long the Communist. In most of the scenes during the play, Yank is realistic but his surroundings are expressionistic. In the forcastle of the ship, the impression given by the low-ceiling room is that of a cage. In the stokehole lighting is provided only by the lurid fires from the ship's boilers, thus creating a hell-like atmosphere. When Yank goes to Fifth Avenue in search of Mildred Douglas, the people who pass him are like puppets, and the store windows are filled with objects with large, blinking price tags. With only a few exceptions, all of the characters in the play are representative types rather than realistic characters. Yank's fellow workers, although their dialects represent most western nationalities, are not

\(^9\) O'Neill, in Gelb, p. 490.
given specific identities but operate as a kind of chorus. Yank remains largely realistic throughout the play in spite of his surroundings and in spite of his own comic appearance and behavior.

There are several things included in O'Neill's stage directions which many critics have ignored and which help the analytic reader to understand why O'Neill was disappointed that his audiences did not see that Yank is "yourself, and myself ... every human being." O'Neill subtitles his play "A Comedy of Ancient and Modern Life in Eight Scenes." The play appears to be about the evil spiritual effects of the rise of industrialization and capitalism. Why then call the play "A Comedy of Ancient ... Life"? It appears that what O'Neill attempted to represent on the stage was not just a "comedy," however ironic, which modern changes in economic and social organization have produced, but a more universal kind of "comedy" that embraces both man at his initial awakening to himself and man in his modern, "highly developed" form. O'Neill goes out of his way not only to make an explicit comparison of the stokers to the "Neanderthal Man," but also to exaggerate the men's ape-like posture, ape-like arms, and ape-like hands and faces. O'Neill further universalizes these creatures by asking that the men, although they represent the "various civilized white races," be all "alike" (p. 207). What O'Neill represents

on the stage, then, is men who are both ancient and modern men.

Yank, who at first represents to the other stokers "a self-expression, the very last word in what they are, their most highly developed individual," comes to be a self-conscious, thinking individual apart from that comforting, unified mass of men. He will later say of the other stokers, "Dey're all dead to de woild" (p. 246). He will lose his place in that meaningful, but exceedingly simple society where there are "men, shouting, cursing, laughing, singing—a confused, inchoate uproar, swelling into a sort of unity, and meaning ..." (p. 207). Yank, because he grows beyond the other stokers and because he is not delayed in his search for what he is or where he belongs by getting himself tangled up in movements or causes or social or economic systems, grows beyond the "modern" men he encounters. The rest of the play is in fact, a series of confrontations between Yank and the rest of mankind in its political, social, and economic levels and institutions. In each case, Yank examines a movement or class and then rejects it as having no answers to his questions. He goes, however circuitously and slowly, to the essence of what human is.

The stokers, from whom and with whom Yank has his identity are, as near-animals (O'Neill compares them with gorillas), an anachronistic "primitive survival society,"
almost man in embryo. They coarse group behavior is stressed and they laugh at Yank for valuing thinking. There are even occasions when these stokers become, not primitive men, but machines, their chorused voices being compared to phonograph horns and their labor, rhythmic—"a mechanical regulated recurrence" (p. 210). Thus, when Yank leaves that crew, both literally and metaphorically, he moves outside and beyond his place in that primitive ("ancient") society and beyond any possible role he might have as the machine-like worker in an industrialized, capitalistic ("modern") society. Although Yank does make some vague attempt to get involved with the worker movement, he does so as an individual whose mission is not sociological, but personal.

The flaw in O'Neill's mixed use of the crew of stokers lies in the probability that even a good audience is likely to allow the two temporally distinct ("ancient" and "modern") aspects of that crew to coalesce into one, that of the

11 William Glasser, "The Civilized Identity Society: Mankind Enters Phase Four," Saturday Review, February 19, 1972, pp. 26-31. The stokers seem to be the kind of society, the earliest human society, to which Glasser attaches the label "Primitive Survival Society": "For three-and-a-half million years, man's major preoccupation was to survive—in an environment that was constantly rigorous and often hostile. For the species man to survive, human cooperation was necessary" (p. 27). The next phase, which the stokers have not reached, involves man's attempts, in a less hostile environment, to use "rituals, symbols, and religion as ways in which to identify himself" (p. 28).
stereotypical low-class, abused, dehumanized, deprived and depraved WORKER. The error is O'Neill's, since it is asking too much of an audience to insist that they analytically connect his sub-title to multiple stage directions. Although the play remains a spectacular one, O'Neill's over-reaching his audience causes the scope of the play, both in terms of time and in terms of character, to be interpreted more narrowly than he had intended.

Regarding Yank's dilemma in particular, the usual "outs" available to the bulk of men are not available in "The Hairy Ape" to Yank. He describes himself as lacking in love (since he grew up without any and feels no need to give it) and in religion. Thirdly, he has lacked until now a sense of beauty. But ironically, even his new awareness of the existence of beauty pains him since it seems a part of an alien world.

In fact, after Yank realizes even commercial beauty in that scene on Fifth Avenue, he reacts against it in that peculiarly human mode that comes closest to being purely animal—the obscene. He calls out to a passing woman, one of the gaudy marionettes, "Hello, kiddo . . . Got anything on for tonight? I know an old boiler down to de docks we kin crawl into" (p. 237). It is precisely the sense of the obscene that was awakened in Yank when Mildred Douglass, pale daughter of the Steel Trust King, called him a "filthy beast" and covered her eyes to shut him out. When Yank's fury at the insult reaches its peak, he expresses it by repeating over
over, "She done me doit!" (p. 230). Yank's predicament—his awareness of the fact of beauty, order, cleanliness thrown against his awareness of the "fact" that he is somehow a dirty thing reminds one of Lemuel Gulliver's predicament in Book Four of *Gulliver's Travels*. Gulliver is revolted by the Yahoos (although he is burdened with the horrible suspicion that he and all other men may well be Yahoos), but he is unable to identify with the Houyhnhnms, partly out of humility, but mainly because the Houyhnhnms themselves consider him a Yahoo. Gulliver, unable to bear the tension of being stretched between the unattainable and the unendurable, goes mad. Yank, with the same keen sense of the obscene is not a "filthy beast" as Mildred calls him. Or is he? He tries to eliminate the tension by an explosion of physical action. His bumping and pushing and punching have no effect on the people of Fifth Avenue. Yank's awakened intelligence supplies him only with a sense of his own "dirtiness." His animal-like attempts to relieve himself of that feeling of "dirtiness" are in vain. So long as he can think, Yank remains tortured with the thought that he *is* and is *not* an animal at the same time. Other people, such as the mechanical puppets on Fifth Avenue, only increase Yank's agony by their complacent acceptance of what they are. He can no more get these people to pay attention to him than Gulliver could persuade the Houyhnhnms to keep him, a Yahoo, long in their company. Gulliver, in refusing to accept that mid-point that man occupies between the rational, the spiritual
and the bestial, refuses to accept what he, as a man, is
and is driven mad. Yank is enraged at being called a dirty
animal, yet he is unable to understand those "superfluous,"
non-physical things such as love, which he has no comprehen-
sion of at all, and beauty, which he understands only well
enough to know that it somehow has nothing to do with him.
He continues his battle against what he regards as an attack
on the very heart of his dignity.

Thus O'Neill has demonstrated areas in which Yank's
nature is "deprived." He is, by upbringing and disposition,
impervious to love and religion and beyond any meaningful
relationship to beauty. It is just such deprivations which
prevent audiences and readers from identifying with him.

O'Neill has provided Yank with several possibilities
or alternatives for escaping the problem of who he is. If
the audiences are identifying with him at all, they would
realize also these options, ways to hide from the burden of
personhood. These escapes, all of which Yank rejects, are
Paddy's dream world, the union movement, the stokers' world,
and the world of the affluent. These will be analyzed
briefly.

Paddy offers an escape from the brutality of the stokers' world, but his escape is a kind of romantic atavism. He
speaks, with "a sort of religious exaltation" (p. 214) of the
days of the clipper ships. In a lyrical speech that reminds
nearly everyone who reads much of O'Neill's work of the
speeches given by Edmund in Long Day's Journey into Night,
Paddy speaks of the sense of physical and emotional unity he experienced while working aboard the clipper ships. But Paddy's exaltation is only a matter of memory, and the memory requires considerable alcohol in order to be active and comforting. The siren call of memory and dreams is given place in this play, but the precariousness of Paddy's situation is made quite clear as he withdraws into a befogged drunkenness. Yank notes, "Fog, dat's all you stand for" (p. 217). Fog, O'Neill's favorite physical phenomenon and symbol of man's position, is both a means of escaping an awareness of the personal and social burdens of life and self and a symbol of doubt and despair. In this play, however, Yank rejects Paddy's fog of drinking and dreaming.

Another escape is represented by Long, the Communist, who seems to be the representative of that hope that individuals bound together in a common cause can somehow achieve at least a group identity and sense of purpose and meaning. The thoroughness with which Long and his ilk are cast aside, however, makes it quite clear that movements are nothing more than a return to the kind of primitive survival society in which individuals submerge their individual identities in some larger group. Yank has done that already with the other stokers and can see no benefit in doing it again. On Fifth Avenue Long tries to prevent Yank from taking action against Mildred Douglas's "clarss," and Yank gives him a contemptuous push. Long's cowardly attempt to define himself within the security of a system
of "clarss" distinctions which are, in Yank's mind, based on meaningless distinctions of wealth and social position, prompts Yank to get rid of him.

Later, when Yank comes in contact with one element, an IWW local, in the structure of this great class struggle, he is himself physically rejected. But he has come to them, not to be a member of some group larger than himself, but merely because he feels they may be able to give him an opportunity to operate on his own. O'Neill handles the staging of the scene in which Yank goes to the IWW local with great care in order to make the inadequacies of "movements" quite clear. Yank comes to this place in search of his own mysterious self, his "soul." What Yank finds is a room that is as "decidedly cheap, banal, commonplace and unmysterious as a room could well be" (p. 245). There is no way Yank could find what he is looking for--himself--in this place. Yank approaches the building "cautiously, mysteriously" (p. 245) as if it were somehow a church, a place of mysteries and revelations. It is not, and when a local official mistakes Yank's enthusiasm for blowing up things for a cop's attempts to infiltrate the organization, he has Yank thrown out the door. The secretary laughs in Yank's face, "Hey, you Joke!" (p. 247). Yank, angered at first, comes to realize those men have no answers for him, no explanations of him that will enable him to carry out meaningful action. He rejects any of the political-economic movements that would create a temporal workers' paradise. Such movements, even if successful,
answer only those limited physical hungers that can be easily sated. Yank's hunger is without such limits: "Dis ting's in your inside, but it ain't your belly. Feedin' your face--sinkers and coffee--dat don't touch it. It's way down--at de bottom. Yuh can't grab it and yuh can't stop it. It moves and everything moves. It stops and de whole world stops" (p. 250).

A third group Yank might have sought membership in is the stokers. Previously he had found with them a sense of unity, purpose, and identity, but now they offer him nothing more than a brutal version of Paddy's fog, a dogmaless version of the worker movement. Yank could, perhaps, have gone back to that world, but he would have had to surrender that identity that had made him the "very last word in what they are," and more. Yank, precisely because he develops a self-consciousness, cannot go back to that physical unity. The physical hell of the stokehole is exchanged for the hell that is Yank himself, a hell that is present to him even amid the physical beauty of the upperworld.

A fourth escape--besides Paddy's reveries, the labor movement and the stokers--is the world of wealth and position. Although belonging to the upper class is not a factual option for Yank, he could share in it in his dreams and desires should he choose to. He does not, of course, as has been demonstrated. Mildred Douglas and her aunt are disposed of in the second scene of the play as "incongruous, artificial figures, inert and disharmonious" (p. 218). Mildred admits
to lacking vitality. In fact, both her aunt and Yank compare her to a ghost. The others of Mildred's class are treated even more satirically than Mildred, who asks for, and perhaps receives, credit for "some sort of groping sincerity," some desire "to be sincere, to touch life somewhere" (p. 219). The people on Fifth Avenue evidence "mechanical unawareness." They are upper-class equivalents of the stokers, but they lack even the admixture of animality that makes the stokers a combination of beast and machine. Yank at first desires to attack those individuals directly and singly, but later his search takes on increasingly larger dimensions, becomes less personal and more metaphysical in scope, though it remains physical in its planned execution. (Yank plans to dynamite everything made of steel, especially jails and cages.) Even if Mildred's kind have taken something away from Yank, he seems aware in his own way that they do not have it themselves and do not know what it is, but are to be treated just as a dumb alien force. They are "stiffs laid out for de boneyard" (p. 238). In summary, Yank might have escaped his fate in various ways. His refusal to do so can only bring him admiration from a sympathetic audience.

Travis Bogard claims "The Hairy Ape" is a flawed play primarily because O'Neill, "in his choice of endings . . . veers away from either of the possibilities of the social problem play." The play's ending, Bogard concludes, is "at best

12 Bogard, Contour in Time, p. 250.
ambiguous" since O'Neill opts for neither a "positive, revolutionary ending" nor an ending that portrays society as villain and the individual as victim. Bogard's view assumes the play is a "social problem play," which it is not, and thereby he fails to see the significance of Yank's struggle, not against economic or social systems but against a cosmos which gives no man a full sense of belonging. The main flaw in "The Hairy Ape" which distorts the significance of Yank as Everyman is actually O'Neill's overemphasis of the ludicrously comic in both character and setting. As O'Neill was fond of pointing out in many of his earliest plays and in not a few of his more "mature" works, life is best seen as some kind of poor, ironic joke played on mankind by a malicious, or even indifferent, god or cosmos, or by man himself. The difficulty in many of these plays is that O'Neill took an almost Mephistophelian pleasure in the mechanics of the joke itself, and as would any "comedian," he sometimes lost control of the distinction between comedy and mere vaudevillian slapstick. In "The Hairy Ape" O'Neill's exaggerated handling of the contradictions which crucify the Everyman in Yank produces so much superficial visual and aural comedy that the tragedy he had hoped to develop out of the bad joke that was being played on Yank—and the bad joke that Yank himself was—is blurred, distorted, overwhelmed. No audience is to be blamed for seeing "The Hairy Ape" as a pathetically comic proletarian melodrama couched in a

13 Bogard, p. 250.
Spectacular framework of highly effective "stage business." O'Neill eventually learned to control his use of the comic, not as a counterfoil for the tragic, not as an end in itself, but as an emotional ground out of which he could produce something like the power of a traditional tragedy. In "The Hairy Ape," that kind of control is lacking and the lack of it is all that keeps "The Hairy Ape" from being as great a play, on a smaller scale, as The Iceman Cometh.

Yank is the central figure in "The Hairy Ape"; he is the prime glory in the play (O'Neill did not create many similarly well-drawn characters until his last plays); and he is the focus of O'Neill's failure. Yank's suffering is obvious, and he does die, but his nobility and heroism are so thoroughly buried in his superficially comic nature that his moment of achieved nobility—when he pulls himself erect in the gorilla's cage and laughs at himself—is hollow, even foolish. That O'Neill had some difficulty in deciding how to dispose of his character is clear. In O'Neill's first handling of the story, a short story sent to Metropolitan, Yank was apparently allowed to join the IWW as a resolution of the dilemma he had gotten into. The editor who wrote O'Neill (and, apparently, O'Neill himself) found this a highly unsatisfactory ending for so tormented a character as Yank. It was, in essence, a political solution to a

14 Carl Hovey [editor of Metropolitan], in letter to O'Neill quoted by Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright, p. 389.
metaphysical or even a religious problem. O'Neill's dramatic version, however, lost to ludicrousness what it had saved from banality.

Yank is, physically, a comic caricature. He is more ape-like in stature, posture, musculature, facial composition, and truculent manner than the rest of the stokers put together, and his appearance further degenerates as he becomes dirtier and more slovenly, with a clumsy bandage wrapped around his head. There is also the visual joke when he, black-faced, repeatedly assumes the posture of Rodin's "The Thinker," ironically, the same position taken by the gorilla at the zoo. What gets lost in all this visual comedy is the fact that Yank, rather than becoming more animal-like, becomes less animal-like as the play progresses. He stops eating and drinking after the scene with Mildred Douglas, and only once in the balance of the play are those activities even mentioned in connection with Yank. He becomes, in effect, something of a holy-man-searcher who fasts and keeps himself covered in ashes, all in connection with his pilgrimage. In a play, however, the visual will almost always take precedence over the merely verbal, and it will usually obliterate the unspoken.

Yank's physical activities, culminating in the crunch of the gorilla's hug, also have too much of the visually ludicrous in them. When Yank goes out in the Fifth-Avenue sunshine in search of Mildred Douglas and her "gang," the "gaudy marionettes" are so unaffected by Yank's presence
that when Yank attempts to shove and bounce these little effete figures about, it is Yank who "recoils after each collision" (p. 238). The scene must be, unfortunately, uproariously funny to watch, a classic case of an incongruous reversal of expectations, a complete reversal of the normal cause-effect relationship between bodies of disproportionate size and strength. It is, thematically, the insult piled atop the injury done Yank by Mildred Douglas, but it is, dramatically, a moment of Soupy Sales high-jinks. Even Yank's incredible physical prowess (which is, for a time, the substitute O'Neill gives him for the usual panoply of heroic characteristics, such as intelligence and moral sensitivity, physical dignity and eloquence) is completely removed from him as he pulls in vain on a curb and then a lamp-post. He is reduced to the "size" of a monkey, leaping aimlessly about, pulling and hauling on the immovable. A comment by Henri Bergson seems to apply here: "Any incident is comic that calls our attention to the physical in a person, when it is the moral side that is concerned." 15

The comic in Yank is not limited, however, to his physical appearance or his physical actions. It is when Yank speaks that he becomes most ludicrous, like an ape that walks and talks. His imitation of human thinking and speaking, all emanating from an ape's form, is O'Neill's greatest comic

accomplishment, but, regrettably, it is also what makes it almost impossible for anyone to grant to Yank the dignity he earns in the climactic scene.

Timo Tiusanen perhaps best describes how Yank's speech befits him as an inarticulate character: "Yank's utterances proceed in small circles, as it were, repeating the same sentence structure or the same phrase at short intervals. He speaks as if through a wall of language difficulties; every so often he has to go back, to gather more speed with the help of a phrase which has already burst wondrously out of his mouth." 16

Edmund Wilson, writing of "The Hairy Ape" in its printed form in 1922, finds that when O'Neill "gets a character who can only talk some kind of vernacular, he begins to write like a poet." 17 Wilson, who feels that the dialogue O'Neill assigns to his "non-illiterate characters" is "raw and prosaic," claims that Yank's speeches have "a mouth-filling, rhythmical eloquence very rare in naturalistic drama." 18 Whatever virtues Yank's speech may have as naturalistic poetry, however, it effectively removes Yank from any possible identification by the audience and contributes to the comic aspect of his character. Moreover, it is through his speeches that the audience comes to

18 Wilson, p. 465.
understand just how slowly his mind is working. In one
instance he reacts to an insult sixty words of conversation
later. On another occasion an insult dawns on him after
seven pieces of dialogue, some one-hundred and twenty words,
and even then Yank gets it confused. (Mildred Douglas did
not call him "Hairy Ape," Paddy did.) It is in his conver­
sation about Mildred Douglas that the painfully slow and
circuitous movements of his mind are most obvious, for it
is only with extreme difficulty that he comprehends the
nature of her affronts.

The final scene in the play, the scene at the zoo, has
been objected to by nearly every critic who has seen or read
the play. Most object to O'Neill's reducing Yank to a sym­
bol who is then killed by a symbolic-seeming gorilla. The
excess, and again it is an excess in the direction of the
comic, seems, however, to be less in O'Neill's choice for
the means of Yank's death than in the manner in which the
gorilla behaves. It is not so much that a dumb animal is
Yank's executioner, but that the animal is almost a mirror
image of Yank himself until the last minute. The gorilla is
not a gorilla, but a minimal version of Yank himself, a Yank
of an earlier, semi-human kind.

The scene, as the stage directions indicate O'Neill
wants it played, resembles, in part, the classic comic
routine of the Marx brothers—the mirror-image romp.\textsuperscript{19} Yank and the gorilla, who is in the posture of Rodin's "The Thinker" when Yank arrives, begin their conversation by staring at one another. When Yank comments "with genuine admiration" on the gorilla's physique and his "punch in eider fist," the animal, "as if he understood, stands upright, swelling out his chest and pounding on it with his fist." When Yank asks, "Ain't we both members of de same club—de Hairy Apes?", the two of them again stare at each other. When Yank asks the gorilla how he feels when "de white-faced, skinny tarts and de boobs what marry 'em—[stand in front of the cage] makin' fun of yuh, laughing at yuh, gittin' scared of yuh—damn 'em!", the gorilla reacts to these stimuli (which are suspiciously like those experienced by Yank) just as Yank had done. Yank "pounds on the rail with his fist," and the gorilla "rattles the bars of his cage and snarls." When Yank says, "Tinkin' is hard," the gorilla "growls impatiently." When Yank tells the gorilla, "You belong!", the gorilla "growls proudly." Finally, when Yank asks the gorilla if he would like the chance to "wind up like a sport," the gorilla "roars an emphatic affirmative" (pp. 251-54). It is only after Yank has opened

\textsuperscript{19} In \textit{Duck Soup} the husband (Harpo) and the interloper (Groucho) are both dressed in a long nightshirt and a nightcap when they meet in a doorway. The interloper, to avoid detection, mimics every move made by the husband in an extended pantomime.
the cage door and resumed his self-mocking tone that he and the gorilla cease to communicate. The painfully human self-mockery in Yank's voice is, apparently, what puzzles and then enrages the gorilla. It is almost as if Yank has now taken the place of his mockers, Paddy and Mildred Douglas, and is unintentionally insulting this gorilla "in some unknown fashion in the very heart of his pride." That Yank is a creature capable of self-mocking laughter is an insult to the gorilla, who is not. And the gorilla, by responding to Yank and by paralleling Yank's actions and emotions, provides a parody of Yank. The involutions in theme by this time can only be seen as ludicrous since Yank is robbed of everything that could have made him an Everyman.

O'Neill himself expressed disappointment that his audiences did not see Yank as Everyman, yet after the preceding discussion of Yank's comic romp with a gorilla, the difficulties of such identification are obvious. Still, O'Neill insisted that "the whole play is expressionistic. Yank is . . . every human being."20 In spite of the movement of the play, that is, the gradual stripping from Yank of all those connections and relationships that might allow him to "belong," Yank is actually growing all the while toward his fullest stature as a man. What Yank comes to see, in his own stumbling, almost inarticulate, but absolutely incisive way, is what the irreducible sense of humanity is. His

20 O'Neill, in Gelb, p. 499.
self-mocking laughter at the end of the play can only come from a human being fully aware of himself—or from a god. The limitless "hunger" he has discovered in himself and the limitations that others have progressively made Yank aware of in the economic system, the political system, the social system, the whole system of systems, are brought crashing together in Yank's personality in that last scene, and HE HOLDS THEM ALL TOGETHER WITH HIS SELF-MOCKING LAUGHTER. Yank, crushed by the gorilla's embrace, pulls himself up by the bars of the cage, telling himself, "croak wit your boots on!" (p. 214). Then, in the manner of a circus barker he invites everyone to come see this singular anomaly, the "Hairy Ape." Yank has thus achieved the duality of any "rational animal": he has some knowledge of the infinite in his hungers and he has seen the finite nature of what is within his grasp in the "real world." Yank acknowledges both, and, because they are contradictory, "rejects" both. And it is this subtle embrace of the infinite of man's desires and rejection of the finiteness of his grasp which makes Yank Everyman.

In summary, then, Yank is a tragic figure; he is Everyman. But he is more obviously, perhaps, comic. O'Neill's attempt to pump tragic significance in two minutes of stage time from a character who has been spectacularly interesting because he is so comic is a task no playwright could carry out. The comic in Hamlet is subsumed in more serious aspects of his character long before the final actions. The comic in Lear
is thoroughly tempered by Lear's disastrous effects on those around him and on his kingdom. Yank is alone from start to finish. He gains stature when he mocks himself (he is most fully, heroically, and recognizably human when he does it), but he has been too thoroughly mocked by his own antics, by the framework of the play, and by the conditions under which he is allowed finally to stand fully erect. Bergson suggests that one's response to the comic, laughter, involves a "momentary anesthesia of the heart." In this play, unfortunately, O'Neill so thoroughly anesthetizes the heart during the play that the audience is too groggy to see and feel either Yank's heroism or his tragedy. Laughter may not be, as Charles Lamb would have it, some kind of overflow of sympathy or, as Thomas Carlyle would have it, the sign of an affectionate nature. But laughter does accompany, or even produce, a temporary euphoria that is beyond all pain. And tragedy cannot exist beyond pain.


22 Sypher, p. 204.

23 Ralph Piddington, The Psychology of Laughter (New York: Gannett Press, 1963), p. 129. Piddington says of laughter, "Physiologically it induces a condition of euphoria, which reinforces the belief that everything is exactly as it should be; psychologically . . . . it breaks up every train of thought and so prevents the possibility of change in social evaluations from so much as coming to consciousness. By an assertion of euphoria, laughter prevents the arousal of the condition of dysphoria which a ludicrous situation [if taken seriously] might otherwise produce."
Between 1922 and 1934 O'Neill wrote thirteen plays. Seven of them can be labeled spiritual comedies because they possess, in varying degrees, a tendency to resolve otherwise tragic contradictions in a comic sense of unity and health. In The Fountain, "All God's Chillun Got Wings," Marco Millions, and The Great God Brown, the moment of comic-religious ecstasy is momentary and fragile. In Ah, Wilderness!, the unifying comic mood is gentle but all-pervasive. In Lazarus Laughed a fully developed comic vision is incorporated in the title character, the risen Lazarus. In Days Without End the achieving and expressing of a comic vision of existence appears to be the whole intent of the play. The seven plays differ markedly in length and manner, but the quasi-religious drive toward a life-giving resolution of all contradictions in existence is apparent in all of them. The excellence of these plays is not measured by

the degree of "success" with which the search for a comic vision culminates. In fact, criticism both contemporary and recent has tended to rank the plays in an inverse proportion to the fullness of the comic vision contained in each. Only Lazarus Laughed, the only full-length O'Neill play that has never had a fully professional production, elicits widely divergent estimates of its worth. For that reason Lazarus Laughed occupies the last position in discussing the spiritual comedies rather than Days Without End, the most "perfect" example of the type.

The Fountain, O'Neill's version of the Ponce de Leon story, written in 1921-1922, is the first of O'Neill's plays in which the mystical satisfaction of the central character seems intended to be real rather than ironic. "All God's Chillun Got Wings," O'Neill's 1923 "race" play, strongly resembles O'Neill's ironic tragedies, but there is some hint that what Jim Harris, the black man married to a white woman, experiences is genuine religious ecstasy, and not merely fevered romanticism. Marco Millions, written in 1923-1925, is a mixture of heavy-handed satire and a vaguely oriental kind of romantic mysticism. The Great God Brown, written in 1925, is a harsh play, but the deaths of its principal characters, Dion Anthony and Billy Brown, are marked with a kind of comic-religious energy and sense of resolution. Lazarus Laughed, written in 1925-1926, is the wildest example of O'Neill's "universe-mongering" and "God-mongering\(^2\) tendencies.

\(^2\) Raleigh, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, p. 16.
Ah, Wilderness!, written in 1932, is O'Neill's only well-known "standard" comedy. It is perhaps significant that the man dreamed this play in one night and took time off from his struggles with Days Without End to write it. The last of O'Neill's spiritual comedies, Days Without End, is a play with a specifically Roman Catholic comic resolution of life's contradictions. After Days Without End O'Neill never returned to his religious quest. That aspect of his creative personality appears to have burned itself out in the spiritual comedies.

It should be made clear at this point that O'Neill did not spend a twelve-year period being a spiritual comedian. In fact, along with these spiritual comedies, O'Neill was also writing the darkest of his mature ironic tragedies. Welded, a poor play about marriage in the Strindbergian manner, followed directly after The Fountain. Strange Interlude was written immediately after Lazarus Laughed, and Desire Under the Elms was written just before it. Mourning Becomes Electra, in many ways the darkest O'Neill play outside the last plays, was written in the years right before O'Neill tackled Days Without End. That O'Neill was almost hypersensitive to the comic in life, which is also pathetic, seems clear in this kind of thematic schizophrenia that exhibits itself in his vacillation between religious ecstasy and secular despair in the years 1922-1934.

3 Bogard, Contour in Time, p. 355.
For the most part, due to some general flaws in O'Neill's artistic makeup, O'Neill's spiritual comedies do not get high marks as drama from most critics. O'Neill was never capable of high flights of lyrical poetry because he did not have the lyric poet's verbal gifts. Yet his spiritual comedies demand just such poetry. Also, O'Neill, in these purportedly mystical plays, often resorts to internal exegesis, as if he did not trust the spirit evoked by the plays to be sufficiently convincing. Most of the spiritual comedies appear to be, in fact, whistling in the dark on O'Neill's part, not because he is trying to put something over on his audience he does not himself believe, but because he simply cannot make the spiritual ecstasy color the action in these plays. The spiritual element does not transform "ordinary" existence so much as it simply avoids it. In trying to view life from a radically spiritual point of view, O'Neill tended to lose track completely of that kind of physical naturalness that the more convincing mystics in Western literature, such as Whitman, Thoreau, or William Blake, are capable of. O'Neill shows in these plays a desire to deal with contradiction by obliterating it, almost in an act of the will. Yet he constantly picks away at his own spirituality by having one or more characters constantly questioning the reality of the comedy of faith that is allegedly being experienced. Unfortunately, all too often their questioning is more convincing and moving than their eventual celebration.
The other flaws which show up in the spiritual comedies—in degree and number they are more serious and more frequent than the flaws in his ironic tragedies—are of several kinds, some of which arise because of the special nature of the individual spiritual comedies. These will be discussed at the appropriate time. In general, one dramatic flaw in nearly all of these spiritual comedies is their size and their scope. O'Neill had a fondness for delving into the reality behind the timidities of space and time by dealing with great hunks of both space and time. Three of the spiritual comedies, Lazarus Laughed, The Fountain, and Marco Millions, slice off generous pieces of the past, cover large portions of the globe in their travels, and pile up diverse cultures in large, unwieldy heaps. Aside from a certain amount of looseness, the unfortunate result is that much in the plays comes across to an audience as intellectual outlining, not emotional or mystical understanding. Several critics have remarked that much of what O'Neill uses in these plays is the result of rather superficial reading on his part.\footnote{Tiusanen, O'Neill's Scenic Images, p. 129.} In his attempt to enlarge the scope of his spiritual comedies, he often forces his audience to take his superficial handling of Oriental religions, for example, in a superficially intellectual way. In spiritual comedies, it is best if the mind is left to its own devices while the soul is transported to other realms. The discretionary operation of the mind, rational examination, is invariably fatal to the
dramatic authenticity and spirit of the mystical. When O'Neill invites engagement of the mind, he risks losing whatever religious enthusiasm he engenders in his audience.

"The Fountain"

O'Neill wrote *The Fountain* in 1921-1922 and saw it produced, not very successfully, in 1925. By 1932 O'Neill numbered the play among those which he considered "too painfully bungled in their present form to be worth producing at all." The play appears to be an ironic tragedy until the end, when it becomes a pantheistic hymn to "Life" that is not matched until *Lazarus Laughed*. Juan Ponce de Leon is roughly cast in the mold of the historical soldier-adventurer who fought the Moors, made trips to the New World, and allegedly died while searching for the Fountain of Youth. O'Neill's Juan, however, is O'Neill's Juan. John Henry Raleigh best sums up both contemporary and recent critical opinion of *The Fountain* when he says that it is a "blend of history, romance, shallow characters, and stale rhetoric." The plot of the play is a bit unruly, but not very complex. The form of the play, if not its mood, resembles the two-part form of "Diff'rent," that two-act "joke" on Emma Crosby and Caleb Williams. *The Fountain*, in three "Parts"


6 Raleigh, p. 39.
and eleven scenes, is longer, but it involves the same skipping over a number of years to get after the two halves of fate's joke on the principal characters. Juan, in his youth, rejects the love of Maria de Cordova, the wife of a fellow soldier, because he prefers seeking secular glories for himself and Spain. In the meantime, though, he must duel Maria's suspicious husband before all is forgiven. Juan goes off with Christopher Columbus in search of Cathay. After twenty years of adventures while serving the crown, he is compelled to give up his secular dream of combining conquest with tolerant rule. He has seen too many abuses of natives by looters and churchmen. At fifty-five he falls in love with Beatriz, Maria's eighteen-year-old daughter, and begins seeking desperately after twin goals: Cathay and his lost youth. He is eventually taken to Florida by an Indian, Nano, but he is tricked and ambushed at the very moment he is sampling the supposedly miraculous waters of the fountain. He is left for dead and while lying there receives a series of visions that draw him into a state of pantheistic identification with the recurrent manifestations of Love, which constitute God. Six months later back home in Spain, Juan dies praising his identification with this mysterious and comic force which loses nothing by saving nothing, spending all in the cycle imaged in the fountain itself: water rising and falling and rising again. The essence of Juan's experience of the divine is very much like that which Lazarus will recommend in Lazarus Laughed. No man
survives ultimately as Christians desire, with ego intact. All are absorbed into the great laughing, loving, outpouring cycle of nature's becoming, her beauty.

Although the ecstatic moments are more windy than lyrical, O'Neill's handling of the religious element, or the comic element, if you will, is of interest. It is significant that Juan's "religious" experience occurs six months before his death. Similar experiences in plays such as *Beyond the Horizon* and "The Straw" are not followed by continued existence, but by death. Juan's experience not only makes his last months satisfying, it is also repeated at the moment of his death. O'Neill seems to be trying to make the experience seem more religious than pathological.

The flaws in the play are those elements that make an obvious attempt on O'Neill's part to write a spiritual comedy which answers man's questions and resolves the contradictions that torture him. Juan falls in love with Beatriz, but he sees no more in her eyes than the kindly pity her mother, ironically, had seen in his eyes when she loved him as a young man. Juan allows the patent granted him by the crown to renew his search for Cathay, to go unused and his governance of Puerto Rico to slide into chaos while he tortures Nano, the Florida Indian, to find the location of the fountain of youth. Juan's torturing of the Indian is the one genuinely ignoble act he is guilty of during the play, and it is his love for the girl and his desire for his lost youth that drive him to it. Finally the
Indian, in hopes of revenge, pretends to lead Juan to the fountain.

A fault in O'Neill's work that is no less harmful for being deliberate is his habit of abruptly turning his characters into symbols. Making Yank a symbol at the end of the play harmed "The Hairy Ape," and the same procedure in this play does not help. For Juan, Beatriz is not just a nubile young body to lust after as one critic complains she is. To this latterly awakened soul, Beatriz is "the Spirit of Youth, Hope, Ambition, Power to dream and dare, Love and the Beauty of Love!" As Juan kneels by the fountain at last, he does not pray to an eighteen-year-old girl, but to a symbol, believing her spirit is "everywhere and nowhere--part of all life but mine!" (p. 436). It is at this point that fate's joke on Juan becomes obvious to Juan himself: "I am a spectacle for laughter, eh? A grotesque old fool!" (p. 436). He is. But by the end of the play he sees himself as a symbol: "One must accept, absorb, give back.

7 O'Neill said he was "always, always, trying to interpret Life in terms of lives, never just lives in terms of character." The implication of O'Neill's remark--an implication that is made explicit in many of his plays--is that his characters are regularly seen as symbols of realities of far greater importance than one human life. O'Neill's remark is found in a letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn, quoted in Sophus Keith Winther, Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study, enlarged ed. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), p. 219.


It is in the tenth scene of the play that O'Neill's reaching for the perfection of the comic circle becomes almost silly. As Juan lies by the fountain, bristling with arrows, he sees a lengthy vision. He curses himself for having looked at his reflection as he drank from the fountain: "Why did I look? I might have died in my dream" (p. 438). But Juan's victory over fate's joke is to be superior to the feverish ones of Robert Mayo in Beyond the Horizon or Eileen Carmody in "The Straw." Juan prays briefly to the Christian God, asking for a sign that there is meaning in the universe. He then "laughs with scornful bravado": "Nothing!" But his vision begins at that moment.

The first figure Juan sees resembles what Yank in "Bound East for Cardiff" saw—a pretty lady, who he thinks is death, dressed in black. Then he hears Beatriz's voice singing the song that has punctuated the whole play, first sung by a conquered Moor, then by his friend Luis de Alvaredo, and now by Beatriz, the symbol of all beauty. The quality of the song indicates one principal reason for the play's failure:

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 (p. 439).

The poem is not mawkish or badly overdone; it is just too
predictable in its imagery to be beautiful. Even though the essence of mystical insight is, by its very nature, incommunicable, its beauty is probably not. If the poetry O'Neill used had a beauty of its own, then at least an emotional equivalent of the mystical ecstasy could have been transmitted to an audience. But it simply does not happen. The same complaint fits O'Neill's other spiritual comedies. The language, the alleged poetry, is pedestrian. As John Henry Raleigh says, "One can almost generalize to the point of saying that whenever O'Neill attempts an affirmative and unifying statement about the meaning of life . . . he invariably fails, falling into verbosity and vagueness."\textsuperscript{10}

The rest of Juan's vision consists of a further awakening. He sees in his vision representatives of the major religions of the world and comes to understand it all: "All faiths--they vanish--are one and equal--within--" (p. 441). One step toward that final comedy of faith undoubtedly involves a surrendering of sectarian differences in doctrine, and so O'Neill has Juan, the nominal Christian, arrive at this unearthly wisdom. The final step to enraptured unity occurs when an old Indian woman approaches the fountain with a water jar. Juan first berates the woman as a "Damned hag!" (p. 441), but then he moves beyond his personal despair to a great compassion. When he takes the woman's withered

\textsuperscript{10} Raleigh, p. 218.
hand, she becomes—Beatriz! Juan's ecstatic recognition is couched, however, in clumsy prose that has more in common with The Count of Monte Cristo than with the poetry of religious ecstasy. As the apparition fades, Juan is heard, "sobbing with happiness," "O God, Fountain of Eternity, Thou art the All in One, the One in All--the Eternal Becoming which is Beauty!" (p. 442). O'Neill's ironic tragedy becomes, in this speech, the song of spiritual comedy in which fate's jokes on man become the Beauty of the "All in One, the One in All." The fact that O'Neill has to depend upon sentence fragments, exclamation points, and uppercase letters gives an indication of the limitations of his verbal skill; his poetry does not move his audience.

As Juan's friends come to get him, he rises up and speaks these words: "Light! I see and know!" His friend, Luis, the Dominican priest, then speaks one of O'Neill's worst lines: "It is the dawn, Juan!" [my emphasis]. Juan replies--"exultantly"--"The dawn!" (p. 443). Six months later, in a monastery in Spain, Juan's death comes, accompanied by another ecstatic experience. The body of the play seems tragic, but the ending is spiritually comic.

"All God's Chillun Got Wings"

The next play that O'Neill wrote, in 1923, was "All God's Chillun Got Wings." It is an ironic tragedy in most respects, but it has in a religious element that makes it different from the other ironic tragedies O'Neill wrote.
The play is an interesting one from many points of view.
It is O'Neill's most fully developed "race" play, one that impressed both Edmund Wilson and T. S. Eliot. It is also an interesting combination of realism and expressionism.
The element in the play that is of most interest in this study, however, is the spirit of the comic that seems to be moving behind the tragic ending.

Jim Harris, a black would-be lawyer, marries a white girl, Ella Downey, who is torn between wanting him to succeed in passing his bar exams and wanting him to remain her social inferior. When he fails in his last effort to pass the exams, due to a built-in feeling of inferiority in competing with white students, he and Ella quarrel. Yet in spite of her prejudice against him, he still loves her. In a brief moment of lucidity, Ella asks, "Will God forgive me, Jim?" Jim's answer contains that despairing recognition of the bad jokes played on men--this time by God--that is common in O'Neill's ironic tragedies: "Maybe He can forgive what

11 Edmund Wilson says, "All God's Chillun Got Wings is one of the best things yet written about the race problem of Negro and white and one of the best of O'Neill's plays." Edmund Wilson, "All God's Chillun Got Wings and others," New Republic, May 28, 1924, rpt. in Cargill, Fagin, and Fisher, ed., O'Neill and His Plays, p. 466. T. S. Eliot's praises of the play are recorded in Raleigh's, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, pp. 117-18. Eliot's article in The Criterion, April, 1926, praises the play because it reached the "universal problem of differences which create a mixture of admiration, love, and contempt, with the consequent tension." Eliot considered the ending--perhaps predictably--"magnificent."
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."12
Jim's recognition seems as dark as those recognitions that
will come in O'Neill's blackest ironic tragedies. But the
play does not stop at that dead end. Ella confesses that
she has used various tricks to prevent Jim from studying and
passing the exams. He, ironically, wanted to pass to make
himself worthy of her love. Ella then falls into an insanity
that takes her back to her childhood, and Jim tries to oblige
by playing children's games with her. When this demented young
woman tells him that he is all she has, the tone of the play
changes radically. This young man who questioned the goodness
of his God "suddenly throws himself on his knees and raises
his shining eyes, his transfigured face," and says, "Forgive
me, God--and make me worthy! Now I see your Light again.
(He begins to weep in an ecstasy of religious humility)
Now I hear your voice! 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!" (p. 342). O'Neill has done
nothing in this play to shade Jim's religious nature with
the mania that so often infects his "Christian" characters.
Jim's desire to be of service seems genuine, mostly because
he seems to understand what he is saying and doing. And Jim's

12 Eugene O'Neill, "All God's Chillun Got Wings," in The
Plays of Eugene O'Neill, II, 340.
suffering seems purposive rather than meaningless. He has become a child—but out of love. When Ella asks Jim to come play, his reply is left untouched by irony in a fashion that is atypical of the ironic O'Neill: "Honey, Honey, I'll play right up to the gates of Heaven with you" (p. 342).

"All God's Chillun Got Wings" is, for all but a minute or two, a bleak ironic tragedy. It is the minute or so at the end of the play which seems to suggest that O'Neill sees a comic spirit, which is, behind the apparent tragedy of two ill-matched human beings, operating in an ultimately benevolent, ordered manner. There is no more than the suggestion of such a spirit, however; the bulk of the play's emotional effect derives from everything outside of Jim's moment of selfless exaltation. That one moment, however, makes this play something of a bridge between O'Neill's ironic tragedies, in which none but temporal and ironic victories are possible, and his spiritual comedies, in which the radically perfect oneness of things makes victory and defeat irrelevant concerns.

"Marco Millions"

O'Neill claimed, at various times, that he never forced an idea for a play, but simply took it as far as it would go and then left it alone until it forced itself upon him again. As he put it, "I always let the subject matter mould itself into its own particular form and I find it does this without my ever wasting thought upon it. I start out with the idea
that there are no rules or precedents in the game except what the play chooses to make for itself . . . I usually feel instinctively a sort of rhythm of acts or scenes and obey it hit or miss." O'Neill's remark sounds like the popular conception of the nature of an inspired writer, the vates. In O'Neill's case this romantic surrender to non-rational forces sometimes led him into strange varieties of structure, length, and manner. In *Marco Millions*, written in 1923-1925, that surrender appears to have produced a work that can only be described as whimsical.

John Henry Raleigh ranks *Marco Millions* above *The Fountain*, but that amounts to damming with faint praise. Timo Tiusanen sees O'Neill's original intention to make two plays of *Marco Millions* as the cause of the play's ungainly mixture of satiric and romantic-mystical effects. John Mason Brown objects to the ponderousness of O'Neill's attempts


15 Tiusanen says that the play was originally designed "as two separate plays, to be presented on two consecutive nights. . . . Even though the idea was later rejected, it left its mark on the play. Act I could be entitled 'Marco's Travels,' the rest of the piece, 'Kukachin's Love.' The prologue was presumably added to bind the two halves together, but it serves only to open the action in the wrong key. . . ." Tiusanen, *O'Neill's Scenic Images*, p. 137.
at satire.\(^{16}\) Edwin Engel says the play causes "satire and tragedy to clash . . . in burlesque" because of O'Neill's insistence on "gratifying tendencies that are inimical to satire: sentimentalism, pathos, romance."\(^{17}\) The play had a run of ninety-two performances, but it was neither a critical nor a popular success. (The fact that *Strange Interlude* also was running in early 1928 suggests an explanation for what popular success *Marco Millions* did have.)

*Marco Millions* is partly a vast sprawling historical pageant dealing with the first extended contact between Eastern and Western cultures in the late thirteenth century. But it is also an involved, almost abstract satire of Western mores and cultural values as well as a specifically American satire of twentieth-century Babbitry, which becomes, at times, burlesque, even good-natured buffoonery. And, of most interest in this study, it is a mystical work dealing with a theme that suggests the mysticism in *Lazarus Laughed:* "Death is dead!" But the play is also, in some ways, a powerful tragedy, containing one of O'Neill's most moving scenes dealing with the subjects of death and grief.

The plot of the play is somewhat involved. It is basically the story of the Venetian explorer-merchant, Marco

\(^{16}\) Brown says of O'Neill, "His satire is colored by a wit that has no skill in parrying but that strikes out with heavy and downright blows." Brown, "Marco Millions," *Theatre Arts*, March, 1928, rpt. in Cargill, Fagin, Fisher, p. 181.

Polio and it traces his development from a somewhat roman-
tic adolescence into an absolutely complacent, soulless,
bourgeois middle-age. His contact with the mysterious East
does nothing for him except to give him the opportunity to
make his "millions"—hence the title of the play.

Marco travels extensively with his father and uncle.
He is, for almost two decades, an official in the government
of Cathay largely because the Kaan is amused by his shallow-
ess, and by his certainty that he possesses an "immortal
soul." Much to everyone's amazement, including Marco's,
the granddaughter of the Kaan, Kukachin, falls in love with
him, although she is soon to marry a Persian monarch. The
Kaan gives Kukachin a chance to reach Marco's soul by asking
Marco to take her on the two-year voyage to her future hus-
band. She finally stops loving Marco, however, and later
dies. He returns to Venice to marry his childhood sweet-
heart Donata. The comic highlight of the play is the ban-
quet given by the Polos to celebrate Marco's return. At
the banquet Marco, who intended to give no speech, launches
into a lengthy peroration about the silk industry, but his
words are gradually drowned in the rising crescendo of eat-
ing sounds until only the word "millions" can be heard.
This scene is followed immediately, however, by the Kaan's
agonizing over the coffin of his beloved granddaughter. The
play apparently ends with this wise and good old man weeping
over the casket of the girl.
The shape of the play suggests what a romp it is. It has a prologue, an epilogue, three acts, and eleven scenes. Territorially, it covers a third of the populated surface of the world and a considerable portion of the seas as well. Every culture and religion in that part of the world is represented. In the penultimate scene of the play representatives of all these religions are asked by the Kaan to come to grips with the problem of death. None are able to say more than "Death is."

The play is so much of an extravaganza that it must be approached from four different directions in order to make clear what role is played by the mystical part in it, which makes it, at least partly, a spiritual comedy. The first element is the satire. The satire, in many places, becomes the second element, the burlesque, and even, at times, good-natured buffoonery. The third element is the tragedy in the play, which involves the death of the princess and her grandfather's sorrow. The fourth element is the romantic-tragic which becomes, in the end, the mystical.

O'Neill was a poor satirist throughout his career. He was never sufficiently committed to a set of values that could be conceptualized or articulated to enable him to be a moral satirist, desirous of producing change. He was not enamored of common sense, either. He objected to things because he felt they were "ugly," not because he felt they were irrational, immoral, foolish, or ill-mannered.
His satire in other plays is always directed against those who do believe in a system of values, whether the "common sense" values of the materialistic classes or the religious values of sectarian groups, especially the puritanical ones. O'Neill objected to complacent materialism and religious fanaticism, but his reasons for objecting were esthetic rather than moral or intellectual. His satire is almost always Juvenalian in its intended bite, at least it is when it does not degenerate into abuse or the overblown and harmless "attacks" of burlesque. In Marco Millions O'Neill employs the whole range of the comic from serious satire, through extravaganza, to the comedy of mystical faith. This vast array of effects and apparent intentions does not hold together.

O'Neill's satire is mildly amusing, but in the end it seems pointless. Marco Polo represents too many things to be an effective focus for satire, and he is often too obviously enjoyed by his own creator. As Marco and the elder Polos pass from one court to another and from one culture to another, the satirical elements remain constant. Marco encounters in each place a semi-circle of persons of all ages, some sly merchants, and a prostitute. And in each place his better qualities degenerate as he gradually becomes a clever, mercenary, human calculating machine who is, at the same time, a buffoon whose sole function in the service of Kublai Kaan is that of court jester. At other times Marco becomes the embodiment of twentieth-century
America's social, religious, economic, and political values. He subordinates religion to business, but his sense of Christian superiority makes him immune to any suggestions from "superstitious" individuals who take religion and life seriously. In his role as mayor of a city in China Marco achieves full democratization by taxing everyone equally, including beggars, and by passing a law that everyone must be happy or go to jail. He founds his own businessmen's organization, the "Mystic Knights of Confucius," whose members wear a uniform that is a combination of all ludicrous uniforms. When Marco tires of being mayor, he creates a bureaucracy of five hundred committees to govern the city.

The specifically American elements in O'Neill's satire are not very specific. They are often swallowed up in a more general satire which compares, unfavorably, the Western habit of action without reflection with the Eastern penchant for contemplation without action. And this satire is absorbed into an even more general one whose contention seems to be that the mass of men everywhere have four things in common: greed, bigotry, war, and sex. This is a bit too general to be effective satire.

O'Neill seems to have read Swift as well as Sinclair Lewis, for Marco's two most outrageous suggestions involve the use of the powder in children's fireworks in giant cannons and the use of paper money, whose only value is in a ruler's claim that it has value. Marco thought of the new use for firecracker powder when he saw a little boy who had
blown off half a finger with a firecracker. Marco computes the savings involved in the use of the giant cannons in the war-to-end-wars by valuing human lives at ten yen each and multiplying by ten thousand, the usual number of men expended in seizing a castle.

The satire, even of the broadest kind, becomes buffoonery when Marco is brought close to the romantic character in the play, Kukachin. In one of the funnier scenes in the play, Marco discusses at great length the princess's condition as their boat rests in the harbor of her Persian husband-to-be. Kukachin is speaking of love; Marco Polo is speaking of physical health. Even staring deep into her eyes as she makes of herself a gift to him affects Marco Polo very little. He is moved once, briefly, but he is drawn quickly back to himself when his uncle, counting money, reaches a "million!"

O'Neill claimed tragedy enters when a man has a soul. Marco has no soul; hence only comedy can come out of his characterization. Edwin Engel claims that it is "tragically ironic" that Kukachin should fall in love with Marco Polo, "perhaps the most disagreeable character in all of O'Neill's plays."

Harry Slochower is undoubtedly closer to the truth when he says, "One of O'Neill's characters, Marco Polo, does begin and end in innocence." "Marco, continues Slochower, "lives in the immediate present, has no imagination

18 Engel, Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill, p. 143
for love or death, has no secrets and no fears, knows no passion or loneliness." Slochower maintains that because Marco "lacks the Faustian metaphysical desire, he is also incapable of Mephistophelian plotting. Because he has remained 'pure,' he can be neither spiritual nor treasonable." 19 Marco's "innocence," his "purity," is the innocence and purity of the bird of prey or the sharp rock. He is incapable of malice because his innocence and purity are the innocence and purity of the baby or the mental defective.

A third element in the play—besides satire and buffoonery—is tragedy, evidenced most clearly in Kukachin and her grandfather. Throughout the play, Kublai Kaan seems the wisest and humblest of men because he is the ironist and the pretended "fool." He reveals the ignorance and buffoonery of the demi-man, Marco Polo, by pretending to take him seriously when all the while he is laughing at him—that is until it seems that Kukachin may be in love with this "child-actor." Then the Kaan begins to see himself the victim of a bad joke.

His anger at learning of Kukachin's death is directed at Polo, for she began to die as soon as it became obvious even to her that Polo has no soul and could not love. She died, despairing of her own life and of the existence of

anything like beauty or truth or goodness—or love. And the tragedy seems compounded when her body lies before her grandfather who withdraws into a kind of nihilism. Kublai Kaan calls his religious advisors around her casket and asks them if they can fathom death. They can only answer, "Death is." The Kaan then prays his own prayer: "In silence—for one concentrated moment—be proud of life! Know in your heart that the living of life can be noble! Know that the dying of death can be noble! . . . Contain the harmony of womb and grave with you!"\(^{20}\) The old man's prayer is not for the assurance of a comic vision, but for the courage to embrace that tragic arc of earthly existence, darkened at either end by the unknown. It is, for that reason, a noble one. 

In one of O'Neill's most moving lines the Kaan is told by an advisor, "Then weep, old man. Be humble and weep for your child. The old should cherish sorrow" (p. 437). The play ends, then, with this sad, wise old man weeping over the grandchild who was all he knew of beauty and love.

The last element in this mixed play is the romantic that becomes mystical. This "last" element is actually found in the Prologue of the play and colors all reactions to what follows it. The romantic-tragic Kukachin is being carried across the desert to her grandfather's home. She is dead and has been embalmed in a glass-front casket. Her burial caravan arrives at the scene where three

merchants are fighting one another, each defending his own religion. The Captain of the caravan allows the merchants to look upon Kukachin's face. O'Neill's stage directions read: "Her calm expression seems to glow with the intense peace of a life beyond death. . . . " The sound of music arises "as if the leaves were tiny harps strummed by the wind," and Kukachin awakes. Then, in a voice "more musical than a human voice," she says, "Say this, 'I loved and died. Now I am love, and live. And living, have forgotten. And loving, can forgive.' (Here her lips part in a smile of beautiful pity) Say this for me in Venice!" (p. 352). Although the bland poetry of this mystical statement is vintage O'Neill, there is little doubt about its import, even though it is impossible to adjust it successfully to what follows in the play. After Kukachin speaks, "a sound of tender laughter, of an intoxicating, supernatural gaiety, comes from her lips and is taken up in chorus in the branches of the tree as if every harp-leaf were laughing in music with her" (p. 352). The relationship between this incident and what O'Neill will do in Lazarus Laughed is clear. In both cases, someone returns from the experience fearful men call death to announce, with laughter, that it is an illusion. In this play the brief mystical moment makes very little emotional or dramatic sense and simply takes its place among all the other disparate elements that weave back and forth and intermingle with one another. Immediately after Kukachin's announcement and her return to "sleep," the
Captain hitches up the three merchants in the place of three men, now dead, who had been helping to pull the wagon. The wagon moves on, the sad music returns, and the dramatic focus is on the three dead bodies lying in "crumpled heaps" under the tree.

Thus oddly begins a very odd play. There are moments of respectable satire; there are impressive tableaus presented throughout; there are moments of profound tragedy; there is one moment of spiritually comic ecstasy; but the whole play is stitched together with the wild thread of buffoonery. In short, Marco Millions is a remarkable piece of work. And beyond repair.

"The Great God Brown"

The Great God Brown, written in 1925 and produced in 1926, was one of O'Neill's most successful plays—financially—and during his lifetime only Strange Interlude, which had over 400 performances, and Ah, Wilderness!, which had 289 performances, had longer runs than did The Great God Brown, which was performed 283 times during its initial production. It is also one of O'Neill's most original and innovative plays.

The Great God Brown is of interest in this study for three reasons, all having to do with O'Neill's thematic and dramatic habits in the first twenty years of his career. The first reason it is worth considering here is that it is

a spiritual comedy in which O'Neill exhibits a drive toward finding a comic resolution to those contradictions in and around man. Secondly, the play is a partial failure because of O'Neill's habit of treading, rapidly and without warning, back and forth between the realistic and the symbolic. O'Neill said, in a letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn, "I'm always, always, trying to interpret Life in terms of lives, instead of lives in terms of character." Even more to the point, O'Neill said to Barrett H. Clark, "Too many playwrights are intent upon writing about people, instead of life." The Great God Brown "makes sense" only if the characters are not taken, on the whole, as realistic characters. They are not, as they appear to be, fragmented men, but rather fragments of Man. The third reason for examining the play is that it contains a powerful and comic sense of contradiction. This factor relates it to the spiritual comedies and links it to those earlier plays which have been identified as ironic tragedies. This comic sense is couched both in a sense of the sublime and a sense of the obscene. When O'Neill's characters' sublime dreams collapse or are taken away, these characters regard their lives (and "Life") as repulsive, disgusting, and dirty. Combined, these two


elements, the sublime and the obscene, form that characteristic mood in O'Neill's ironic tragedies, in which the characters come to recognize the operation of the "behind-life" force as a terrible joke. In this play, however, the characters appear to go beyond the mere recognition of the joke. R. D. Skinner claims that in The Great God Brown O'Neill "approached that estatic moment when tragedy transmutes itself, through song, into spiritual comedy."\(^{24}\) Perhaps he did.

The plot of The Great God Brown is difficult to summarize, partly because the characters wear masks. (This use of the masks will be considered after a brief survey of the action.) The fathers of Billy Brown and Dion Anthony are partners in a building and contracting firm, but Billy and Dion have nothing at all in common. The fathers die. Brown becomes an architect and runs, however unimaginatively, the family business. Dion becomes a painter, marries Margaret, drinks his way into poverty, and is reduced to accepting a job with Brown as a draftsman. He later takes up with Cybel, a prostitute. At the end of the second act, Anthony comes to Brown's home to die, willing his tortured Mephistophelian mask to him, revealing his saintly "real" face beneath. Brown, with Dion's mask now, proceeds to take Dion's place while the old Billy Brown, in a puzzling

denouement, "dies." Then Dion-Brown runs to Cybel, pursued
by the police who are searching for the murderer of Billy
Brown. After Dion-Brown is shot by the police, Cybel re­
moves his mask and, while dying, he says the "Our Father,"
just as Dion had done when he died. He also says a prayer
in which he sees redemptive value in suffering and recogn­
izes the full humor of the "joke" of life: "I have found
Him! . . . 'Blessed are they that weep for they shall laugh!'
The laughter of Heaven sows earth with a rain of tears, and
out of earth's transfigured birth-pain the laughter of man
returns to bless and play again in innumerable dancing gales
of flame upon the knees of God!"25 The laughter of heaven
becomes man's tears, but man's laughter returns to God.

The complexity of the play, however, is to be found
not in the plot, but in the shifts in the personalities of
the principal characters. At the beginning of the play, all
have masks, with the exception of the title character, William
A. Brown.26 The masks are worn by the characters to protect
themselves from other men by seeming to be what other men
and woman expect them to be. The pattern employed is vaguely
Jungian. The masks are images projected by the Conscious


26 Tiusanen suggests that because "William A. Brown is
the only character in the entire O'Neill canon furnished
with the initial of a middle name" he is perhaps intended
to be the "George W. Babbitt" of this play. The suggestion
seems a reasonable one and argues O'Neill's knowledge of
Lewis's works. Tiusanen, O'Neill's Scenic Images, p. 195.
that tend to be the opposite of what lies in the Unconscious. In an unpublished version of the foreward to the play, O'Neill says, "... if we have no Gods, or heroes to portray we have the subconscious, the mother of all gods and heroes."\(^\text{27}\) In the case of Dion Anthony, O'Neill is subtle. The mask of Dion begins as the face of Pan, then degenerates into a satanic, Mephistophelian face. Its opposite, his "real" face, begins as the face of one who is both poetic and spiritual, but degenerates, from O'Neill's view, into the merely ascetic face of a death-loving Christian. Margaret, Dion's wife, has the face of a young woman underneath and her mask begins as an exact copy of her own face, but changes to match her age, going from the face of a young bride to that of a troubled though brave and hopeful wife, to a matronly look of worried solicitation. By the end of the play her mask is that of a proud mother of grown sons. The third major character is Cybel, whose mask is that of a hardened, painted prostitute. Her "real" face, however, is that of a sensuous young girl who is beyond evil. This "real" face becomes more and more that of the Earth Mother, an idol. In the second half of this four-act play, even Billy Brown is masked, with the mask of Dion Anthony, "willed" to Brown at Anthony's death.

One might consider from the death speech of Billy, cited earlier, that the play contains a fully developed comic vision of human existence. However, Cybel's words, after that speech, qualify the vision. While they make a circle of human existence, they do so at the expense of the individual ego. Her speech does not so much absorb pain into a larger circle of joy as it sees the pattern of suffering and joy as eternally recurrent. She speaks "with profound pain": "Always spring comes again bearing life! . . . summer and fall and death and peace again! . . . --but always, always, love and conception and birth and pain again--spring bearing the intolerable chalice of life again [my emphasis]-- . . . bearing the glorious, blazing crown of life again!" (pp. 322-23). Cybel does not see a final resolution of contradiction, but an endless repetition of it. When a policeman asks who the dead person is (apparently he is not recognizable as Billy Brown or Dion), Cybel answers, "Man." But the policeman merely asks, "How d'yuuh spell it?" (p. 323). The significance of Cybel's answer to the policeman's request for a name seems to contain a large part of the explanation of the meaning of the play. O'Neill was not writing a play about two distinct halves of two distinct men, Dion Anthony and Billy Brown. He was writing one play about Man. He did not succeed very well in making his intentions clear.

The play appears to be, among other things, a modern morality play, a battle between personifications of a man's better and worse selves. But it is also a modern version of
the Faust story, even though there is no entry by external spiritual forces into the life of man. The demonic, the Mephistophelian, is the end result of the battle, embodied in Dion Anthony, between the creative pagan desire to embrace life and find it beautiful and the ascetic Christian desire to withdraw from this life and to die to self in order to attain some greater life in the hereafter. Dion Anthony becomes the satanic Mephistopheles who comes to Man, in the person of Billy Brown, to conclude a bargain for his soul. When Dion Anthony comes to Billy Brown's home to die and to leave his mask to Billy, he in fact announces himself with these words: "Tell him it's the devil come to conclude a bargain." The satanic half of Dion Anthony rejoices that "When I die, he [Billy Brown] goes to hell" (p. 295). Brown later tells Margaret, now his wife, "All right, dear. Mr. Brown is now safely in hell" (p. 311). In Goethe's version of the Faust legend, of course, it is the seduction of Margaret that is the vilest of the sins of Faust. As was true when O'Neill borrowed from Aeschylus in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the borrowing from the Faust story here is a bit haphazard and does not offer a complete explanation of O'Neill's intent. Mixed in with the Faustian elements is Jungian archetypal psychology. Each of the characters, particularly Margaret and Cybel, can be seen as representatives of basic elements in the Unconscious or as protective
projections of the Conscious. Mixing medieval myth with modern psychology is, in the end, more confusing than enlightening in this play.

In *The Great God Brown*, as in "The Hairy Ape," O'Neill creates figures which are psychologically realistic and then handles them with abandon, making them perform all sorts of symbolic tasks which the audience is not ready for. Once an audience becomes accustomed to the device of using masks to represent the "public" selves of the characters, it is prepared to see what the playwright will do with this device. But when Dion Anthony dies, his "real" self is buried in Billy's garden and Dion Anthony is reborn in the person of Dion-Brown. Later, Brown apparently "kills" himself, but the dead Brown who is carried out is nothing but "the mask of William Brown" (p. 318). Even psychological realism gets lost in this strange pattern unless the viewer pulls back and treats all of the principal characters not as individuals, but as aspects of Man.

There is one easily seen principal of sexuality beyond the biological one. The female principle, the life-bearer, accepts the biological continuity of life, and in both Cybel and Margaret, even sadly rejoices in it. The male principle

is represented by both Dion Anthony and Billy Brown. Dion is part saint, part devil; Billy Brown, until he is given the perverted creativity in Dion's mask, is a soulless little boy. It is the fully developed male principle that attempts to worry out of life some significance and beauty for the individual ego, both as creator and as created.

The Great God Brown fails partially for several reasons. O'Neill tempts his audience to see his characters as real individuals bedeviled by the contradictory drives in their own personalities, but then he uses the characters as mere symbols in an explication of the meaning of "Man." The comic drive, audible mainly in the death-speeches of Anthony and Brown, is shunted to one side in the sadly wise speeches of Cybel. The creative desire to love life seems doomed to become a destructive, even a self-destructive, desire in man, but it seems unclear whether O'Neill is indicting a materialistic, moralistic American culture or an inimical cosmos. The play is simply not very clear, and its lack of clarity is not the richness of ambiguity, but the poverty of confusion.

"Ah, Wilderness!"

Between 1931 and 1934 O'Neill was struggling through eight drafts of Days Without End, that play which ends with its hero re-embracing the Roman Catholic faith of his youth.

In the midst of these struggles, O'Neill dreamed a whole play one night in September of 1932, arose the next day, and completed a full scenario before he stopped.\textsuperscript{30} Within six weeks O'Neill had finished the final version of \textit{Ah, Wilderness!}, the only full-length "standard" comedy of his maturity.\textsuperscript{31} When the play was produced, it was a "star vehicle" for, of all people, George M. Cohan. O'Neill eventually came to despise Cohan for "hamming up" the drama and rewriting his lines, but the play did poorly in a revival without Cohan.\textsuperscript{32} This little piece O'Neill wrote was called by one critic "an exercise for the left hand."\textsuperscript{33} Yet with minimal effort it captures far better than any of his "serious" spiritual comedies an easy-going embrace and celebration of the ordinary. It is not based on any shouted philosophical or mystical claims. Life seems good simply because the lives of the characters are moderately happy. What pain and suffering there is in the play is absorbed comfortably by larger, more genial forces. The largest and

\textsuperscript{30} Gelb, O'Neill, pp. 761-62.

\textsuperscript{31} O'Neill wrote several comedies and farce-comedies as a beginner, but he destroyed them. Oddly enough, the other play O'Neill is supposed to have dreamed in one night is \textit{Desire Under the Elms}. Gelb, O'Neill, p. 539.

\textsuperscript{32} Miller, \textit{Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic}, p. 158.

most powerful of these forces is not ecstasy, but simple, warm, human affection.

The whole play takes place on July 4 and 5, 1906—which probably explains Cohan's presence in it. The Miller family is the focus of the piece. Nat Miller, the father, is editor of a small-town Connecticut newspaper. He is a man of considerable wisdom and warmth who disciplines his children without alienating them. But he is not the archetypal wise old man, for he is capable of losing his temper, getting drunk, and misjudging his children. Essie, his wife, is the stout kind of matron whose constant worrying and nagging covers a loving indulgence which borders on irresponsibility. There are six children in the family. One of them, Richard, comes close to being the star of the piece, along with his father. He is at that dangerous age during which adolescent romanticizing of sex is sometimes mixed with rebellion against all authority, particularly political and moral authority. Richard is a Nietzschean anarchist in politics, a fin de siècle, pessimistic sensualist in literary taste, but a puppy in love. Although he writes and quotes all sorts of decadent poets and radical philosophers to Muriel McComber, his girlfriend, he is an orderly virginal boy at heart. Two other significant characters are Sid Davis, a drunken but benevolent buffoon, and Lily, an old maid school teacher. Lily long ago turned down Sid's proposal of marriage because of his drinking, but she is still waiting for him to reform.
Richard, as the play opens, receives word that Muriel is through with him because of the "nasty" poetry he sends her. Until near the end of the play, Richard remains the adolescent who is an irreconcilable social rebel, a self-proclaimed tragic figure, and a potential suicide. In one final bit of rebellion, Richard attempts to kill his love and bury himself in defilement by going to the local roadhouse to make love to a prostitute. Although he gets tipsy, he cannot bring himself to take the woman to bed. He arrives home drunk and tumbles into bed. The next day he reports that he never intends to drink again, not because it is "bad"—an anti-comic reason for behavior—but because "it wasn't any fun . . . it only made me sadder—and sick. . . . "34 Such are the motive forces of comedy; considerations of health and happiness. One of Richard's transgressions, drunkenness, is already "cured." But without love, Richard still believes that "Life is all a stupid farce!" And he dramatically claims, "It's lucky there aren't any of General Gabler's [sic] pistols around . . . " (p. 271). He is, at this point, the self-proclaimed tragic figure, which is, of course, a figure of fun.

A note from Muriel sends Richard off that evening to wipe out his other "sin," the one he only considered committing with the prostitute. In a moonlit lovers' conference, Richard suffers until he is forgiven by Muriel. Then they

34 O'Neill, Ah, Wilderness!, The Plays, II, 270.
make innocent lovers’ plans to marry after college and settle down. Richard’s second sin is cast away, not because it is wrong, but again for more esthetic-comic reasons: being with the prostitute just seemed “rotten and dirty” in comparison with what Richard dreamed of sharing with Muriel in marriage. A conference with his father later that evening completes the confession and forgiveness of Richard’s sins.

The play ends with Nat Miller’s words to his wife in regard to themselves: “Well, Spring isn’t everything, is it, Essie? There’s a lot to be said for Autumn. That’s got beauty, too. And Winter—if you’re together” (p. 298). Love is not a trap. It is, at least in this one play, both the light that shows the path and the warmth that supplies the power to walk that path. And all seasons are good, even winter.

O’Neill, in describing Ah, Wilderness!, said, “I call the work a comedy because it is on the whole more gay than grave, but as Mr. Cohan says, it is and it isn’t comedy in the usual sense.” The play is assuredly not situation comedy, which tends to be only a step or two above slapstick in its “seriousness.” Richard’s beliefs and practices contain elements of the potentially catastrophic, but once they are seen to be almost identical with the advanced stage of puberty he is in, they can be regarded as both temporary and harmless. If he were not aided by his parents’ love and wisdom, Richard might have followed these tendencies into tragedy.
The other "serious" element of importance in the play is the relationship between Sid and Lily. Their lives appear, after all, to be poor, stunted things, chopped off fifteen years before the play opens. Sid's drunken talk is funny; his drunkenness is not. He hates himself for it, but he seems unlikely ever to overcome it. Lily is fading into autumn without ever having enjoyed spring; she seems a pitiable figure. But in this comedy of O'Neill's, both salvage much from what might be regarded as the wreckage of their lives. Only on occasion does Lily become bitter; most of the time she is as much the warm mother of the Miller children, and of Sid, as Essie is. And in spite of the fact that Sid's drunkenness has made marriage impossible, she still has a full affection for him, as he has for her. In this play, then, the emphasis is always put on what good, health, and happiness can be found in the present. Without the burden of the past or the future, life is always comic. And for once, O'Neill stayed relaxedly in the moment, the comic moment.

"Days Without End"

*Days Without End* occupied the bulk of O'Neill's creative hours between 1931 and 1934. Eight drafts of the play were tortured on to paper before O'Neill settled on the version that was produced in late 1934 and folded in early 1935. He did not have a play produced for a dozen years after that.

Days Without End was originally to be a part of a trilogy of plays dealing with "the sickness of today." Dynamo, written in 1928 and produced in 1929, was the first of the projected three. It deals with a young man who rejects traditional Christianity and attempts to locate a god in electricity. The third play, which was never written, was to be called It Cannot Be Mad. O'Neill was either disappointed in the reception of the other two--both were popular and critical failures--or he had given up his role as spiritual doctor and no longer saw any purpose in the trilogy. In his original plan, Days Without End was to be called Without End of Days, a title which lacks the teasing ambiguity of the title O'Neill settled on. "Days without end" is O'Neill's variation on the prayer tag-line, "world without end," that is, "for all eternity." But the words also mean "days without purpose or meaning." O'Neill wrote several endings for the play before he decided in favor of the one which appeared on Broadway in which the hero apparently re-embraces the Roman Catholicism of his youth. O'Neill soon repudiated the play's ending and later maintained that he


37 Falk, p. 218.

38 O'Neill considered one version of the play in which the hero went into the church, marched up to the altar, and shot himself. Some Jesuit priests O'Neill spoke with apparently persuaded him to forego that version. Gelb, O'Neill, p. 164.
considered it "phony." O'Neill's third wife said that he "never forgave himself for it."\(^{39}\) The play is, in many respects, the most fully and unambiguously "comic" of O'Neill's spiritual comedies; it is also, in most respects, the least interesting as a play.

The central character in the play, John Loving, is, even more clearly than Dion Anthony in *The Great God Brown*, a split personality. In the sense that his better-and worse-selves war over his soul, the drama is like a morality play. "John" is an unmasked figure and he is the part of John Loving that wants to believe in Love and the God of Love even though he is unable to since that God, whom he had prayed to, allowed his parents to die. "Loving," a masked figure who is also on stage, represents the rational, cynical, Mephistophelian aspects of the same man. Only "John" is aware of "Loving's" presence, but the others hear Loving's voice and attribute his statements to John. Elsa Loving, John's wife, is a woman whom John rescued from a bad marriage. Both Elsa and John have seemingly lived their marriage as a "sacrament"—both call it that—in which they have something like a religious faith. The other two characters of any significance in the play are Father Baird, a Catholic priest, and Lucy Hillman, a "friend" of the family with whom, as it turns out, John has committed adultery.

The action in this play is relatively uncomplicated. Father Baird arrives at John's office to relay a warning which he received in his prayers, that John was about to undergo the critical test of his life. Later on John tells Father Baird and his wife the plot of a novel he is writing. His masked alter ego, Loving, comes to the fore as he gives the details of the hero's involvement with a mistress. Those details coincidentally match what Lucy earlier confided to Elsa about an affair she was having. Loving then admits the novel is autobiographical and insists that it must end with the death of the wife. Elsa, her dream of ideal marriage shattered, becomes ill. Both Father Baird and Loving attempt to proselytize John. Father Baird wins out, John rushes off to church for the final overwrought scene. There before a large crucifix he finds his God of Love as Loving collapses on the floor in surrender. John Loving is a whole man again. Enraptured in an "ecstatic mystic vision" he hears his God. Father Baird then rushes in to say his wife will live. John says--"exaltedly"--"I know! Love lives forever! Death is dead! Ssshh! Listen! Do you hear?"

The kindly priest asks, "Hear what, Jack?" John Loving's reply exhibits both the release from his fear of death and his certainty that his loving relationship with his wife will last through eternity in their Love for the God of Love:

"Life laughs with God's love again! Life laughs with love!"40

The play has, at least, the most completely comic vision of any of O'Neill's works. It has little else.

The play is mediocre drama for a handful of reasons. Elsa, the wife, too closely conforms to the popular image of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. She is nearly forty, a chronic invalid, and absolutely certain of the fidelity of her husband. She makes constant references to the "Ideal" of marriage and love. John Loving is unsatisfactory as a character because the split in his personality seems too sharp, too absolute. He is also given too much of the hand-wringing, hair-tugging kind of emotional display suited only to the soap operas. Father Baird's role would test a genius of an actor who could tread the line between convincing sanctity and superior priggishness. The last scene, however, is probably what spoils the play beyond recovery. At the end of the scene there are three crosses: the crucifix on the wall, the sprawling body of Loving, and the figure of John, arms outstretched in loving adoration and ecstasy. O'Neill's comic visions are generally wordy and noisy, and this one is no exception. It is also more melodramatic than the others. The play deserved to fail. Even Richard Dana Skinner, the Catholic author of Eugene O'Neill: A Poet's Quest, was moved to point out, in spite of his unconcealed glee that O'Neill had "returned," that the play "has all the qualities one would expect in a new phase of spiritual manhood, including the weaknesses, the excess of zeal and the
faltering steps in a strange land without well-marked trails."

The play is much more interesting for some of the elements that are peculiar to O'Neill than it is as a piece of drama. It exhibits the sensitivity O'Neill always shows to the contradiction, the duality, the polarity in human existence. More than that, it contains that recognition of the "jocular" nature of fate's (or God's) operations on men. Most significantly, however, it has that hypersensitivity of O'Neill's characters to what they regard as the sublime and the obscene that provides so much of the power, even if too frequently only melodramatic power, that shows itself in O'Neill's plays. Yet the play finally forces these divergent streams into the single channel of religious faith, in which they become the melody and harmony of God's loving laughter, the great comic song of faith. The song seems a sour one in this play, but it is the clearest example of what extremes O'Neill's striving for a comic resolution could force him to.

The element of contradiction in this play is handled in an absolute way until the last scene. There is a chasm between John's emotional, intuitive self and his rational self. There is an infinite distance between the ideal of love that John and Elsa pride themselves on and the finite ability of the two to give and receive such love. It is the terrible

41 Skinner, Eugene O'Neill: A Poet's Quest, p. 234.
burden of this ideal love that drives John into his little adulterous caper in order to revenge himself on love for its demands and to free himself from those demands. There is an infinite gulf between the quiet certainty of Father Baird and the whining rational certainty of Loving and Loving's proudly atheistic partner, William Eliot. When Eliot speaks woefully of the Depression, which is of peripheral concern early in the play, Father Baird gives some indication of the scope of what O'Neill will try to do in this play: "Ah, who can blame you for whining when your omnipotent Golden Calf explodes into sawdust before your adoring eyes right at the height of his deification? It's tragic, no other word—unless the word be comic" (p. 501). The Depression would be comical only to a man operating at Kierkegaard's level of the comedy of faith. There is also, finally, an infinite distance in this play between the human's capacity to "sin" or be sinned against and his capacity to forgive, be forgiven, or forgive himself. John is pained by Elsa's refusal to forgive him, but he is unable even to forgive himself.

John often speaks of having seen fate's treatment of men as somehow a joke played by a "Something" behind all that a rational being can understand, "a malignant Spirit hiding behind life, waiting to catch men at its mercy, in their hour of secure happiness—Something that hated life!—Something that laughed with mocking scorn!" (p. 535). Loving, however, considers this nothing more than superstition, and he
laughs at it with Mephistophelian glee. The real "joke" in the play, however, is the double-pronged joke that is played on Elsa and John, and it is this joke that moves O'Neill into that realm in which his plays are so often powerful. The joke is seen when what was regarded as beautiful, sublime, even "sacramental," is discovered to be, instead, something disgusting, repulsive, and dirty.

After Elsa becomes convinced of the truth of John's adultery, John is still solicitous toward her, and she snaps, "Are you determined to act out this farce [my emphasis] to the end?" (p. 548). Elsa tells him Lucy gave her "all the sordid details and they were the same as those in your story. So it was you who told on yourself. Rather a joke [my emphasis] on you, isn't it? ... And it was a fine joke [my emphasis] on me, her coming here" (p. 549). And this "joke" has a special flavor for Elsa; it is the ashen taste of the obscene: "You made our love a smutty joke [my emphasis] ... I only know I hate life! It's dirty [my emphasis] and insulting--and evil! I want my dream back--or I want to be dead with it!" (pp. 549-50). Elsa has that duality of sensibility that many of O'Neill's characters have; she is equally sensitive to the sublime and the disgusting.

At this point in the play, only the "comedy of faith" offers a way out of this typically ironic O'Neill tragedy. And that is the solution O'Neill tried to dramatize. Neither Elsa nor John could possess or give infinite love--but they both desired it. Only by grounding their love in some
God of Love who would transcend for them the boundaries of space and time could they feel secure in their love. And so John seeks and finds that God. But his seeking and finding is melodramatic and unconvincing. And it is unmoving. It is perhaps only fair to point out, however, that O'Neill was not as determined that the comedy of faith in the play should be the Roman Catholic faith as many critics assume he was. The church in the last scene is not identifiable—visually—as a Catholic church, and there are no discussions of dogma or religious practice beyond the simplest dogma that "God is Love." O'Neill perhaps lost his chance to have his audience see the play as simply a psychological play, a morality play in modern dress, when he put Father Baird in the middle of things. It is, at any rate, a truism that O'Neill did his poorest work when he tried to deal with his immediate struggles or with sharply contemporary issues. Only when he pushed far back into his memory or far out with his imagination did he write successful drama. Lazarus Laughed, a gargantuan piece, is certainly about as far out as O'Neill's imagination and his desire for a comic vision ever took him. And for all its faults, it is a much more impressive attempt at spiritual comedy than Days Without End.

"Lazarus Laughed"

One aspect of O'Neill's creative personality that caused his contemporaries considerable difficulty when they tried to assess the man's worth was his constant experimentation. Early in his career, particularly in his "sea plays," O'Neill
appeared to be an anti-romantic realist, perhaps even a naturalist. In plays such as "The Emperor Jones" and "The Hairy Ape," he seemed to be some kind of expressionist, possibly even a symbolist, whereas in plays like The Fountain and Marco Millions he was striving toward some kind of romantic or mystical solution for the tragic potentials inherent in human existence. O'Neill himself wrote: "To be called 'a sordid realist' one day, a 'grim pessimistic naturalist' the next, 'a lying Moral Romanticist' the next, etc., is quite perplexing..."

However, given the variety of O'Neill's productions, it is not difficult to see why critics found O'Neill as "perplexing" as he found them.

The most puzzling play in the whole O'Neill canon, however, is Lazarus Laughed. The play, which has still not had a completely professional performance and which was never done under O'Neill's supervision, remained one of the playwright's personal favorites. He included it in the Random House volume, Nine Plays: Eugene O'Neill, and on at least one occasion, when asked to autograph his favorite play, he requested a copy of Lazarus Laughed. On one other occasion, he identified it as "far the best play I've ever written." When George Jean Nathan read the play, he told O'Neill he saw

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43 Gelb, O'Neill, pp. 662-63. The request was made by the wife of Alexander King, January 30, 1928, just after the opening of Strange Interlude.

little in it. O'Neill rather righteously replied that Nathan "was lacking in all religious feeling and was therefore prejudiced against any such play."^45

Oddly enough, however, O'Neill did not push very hard to get *Lazarus Laughed* on Broadway. He probably recognized the inappropriateness of the play for the commercial stage, of which he never had a very high opinion. In addition, O'Neill parted professional company about this time with Kenneth Macgowan and Robert Edmond Jones (the three had pooled resources as the original Provincetown Players group was folding up).^46 Macgowan had reinforced O'Neill's interest in the "religious" possibilities of the stage and had, in fact, written a book called *The Theatre of Tomorrow*, which seemed to call for such plays as *Lazarus Laughed*. In addition, O'Neill's marriage to Agnes Boulton was in the process of falling apart.^47 The best explanation for O'Neill's loss of interest in a production of "far the best play" he had ever written is perhaps to be found in the fact that the next play he worked on was *Strange Interlude*, which


^46 Gelb, pp. 600-10.

^47 Gelb, p. 664. O'Neill's personal life may have had something to do with his failure to get *Lazarus Laughed* produced. In a farewell letter to Oona and Shane, his children by his second wife, Agnes Boulton, he claimed he had to "travel way across America to California to watch them putting on another play of mine, *Lazarus Laughed*. . . . " He was, in fact, leaving them and he had no intention of going to Pasadena.
was as different in mood from Lazarus Laughed as any play he ever wrote.

Lazarus Laughed is certainly one of O'Neill's most interesting experiments even though, as a play, it probably belongs not in "an imaginative theatre," but in the "theatre of the mind," the stage of closet drama. The incredibly large cast and the multitude of masks and stage settings would make it prohibitively expensive and physically too large to be accommodated by a conventional theatre. The Pasadena Community Playhouse, an amateur group which performed the play twenty-eight times in the spring of 1928, did it out of doors and emphasized the pageant and "mass acting" aspects of the play, producing, apparently, a kind of inebriated De Mille spectacular, an intoxication of the eye.

George C. Warren of the San Francisco Chronicle wrote a review of the play which is generally favorable, although

48 Eugene O'Neill, "A Dramatist's Notebook," The American Spectator, January, 1933, rpt. in Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin, and William J. Fisher, ed., O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism (New York: New York University Press, 1961), pp. 120-22. O'Neill subtitled Lazarus Laughed "A Play for an Imaginative Theatre." He explained that the term referred to "the one true theatre . . . that could boast . . . that it is a legitimate descendant of the first theatre that sprang, by virtue of man's imaginative interpretation of life, out of his worship of Dionysus. I mean a theatre returned to its highest and sole significant function as a Temple where the religion of a poetical interpretation and symbolical celebration of life is communicated to human beings . . . ."

49 Miller, Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic, p. 152.
one suspects that O'Neill's message did not impress the man so much as did the masses of people on stage, charging up and down flights of stairs. Warren writes that Lazarus Laughed succeeded "as a pageant... more than as a play" and that it was tremendous as "mass acting." Since there is a considerable distance between a "pageant" and a "symbolic celebration of Life," it is probably just as well that O'Neill paid so little attention to the only "major" production of his work.

As a play for the mind, Lazarus Laughed has garnered surprisingly strong praise from such critics as Oscar Cargill and Sophus Keith Winther, both of whom are enthusiastic in praising it. Such reactions are understandable, however, since the play was meant to be a religious celebration. O'Neill said, "What I would like to see in the production of 'Lazarus' is for the audience to be caught up enough to join in the responses—the laughter and chorus statements even, much as Negroes do in one of their revival meetings." The response of Cargill and Winther who have only read the play certainly has the fervor of religious discussions. Cargill claims Lazarus Laughed is "the supreme piece of drama in modern times" and "as complete a dramatic triumph as the theatre affords. With utter contempt for the nay-sayers we


51 O'Neill, Gelb, pp. 602-3.
may pronounce Lazarus Laughed as much superior to all other
dramatic conceptions of its day as were Faust, Hamlet, and
Oedipus Rex to the contemporary drama of their times.\(^{52}\)
Winther's approval is, if anything, even less restrained.
He calls the theme of the play the "burning truth of a new
Philosophy . . . a new concept of life" that can save modern
civilization which is tottering on the brink of its grave.\(^{53}\)

Those critics with negative responses to the play, while
they are not as whole-hearted in condemning it as Cargill
and Winther are in praising it, are hardly shy. John Henry
Raleigh, the best O'Neill critic in print, praises the play
highly, but says it has its faults, particularly its "ab­
stract and colorless language."\(^{54}\) Timo Tiusanen clucks
over "O'Neill's hysterical over-eagerness to affirm the value
of life in Lazarus Laughed"\(^{55}\) and also avers that the most
astounding feature of the play is the slightness of its con­
tent. Doris V. Falk, who uses the psychological insights
of Carl Jung, Karen Horney, and Erich Fromm as an analog for
discussing the internal dynamics of O'Neill's plays, charac­
terizes the author of Lazarus Laughed as "what Emerson called

\(^{52}\) Oscar Cargill, "Fusion-point of Jung and Nietzsche," in Cargill, Fagin, and Fisher, p. 412.
\(^{54}\) Raleigh, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, p. 46.
\(^{55}\) Tiusanen, O'Neill's Scenic Images, p. 149.
not a poet (or creative artist), but a mystic who attempts to 'nail a meaning' to a given symbol..." And she continues: "The artist who truly affirms existence does not need to thunder his affirmation like a baritone at a musical, singing 'I love life!'"56 Falk feels that O'Neill, in trying to give his drama life and meaning, depends too heavily on allegorical symbols and explication rather than on implication.

It is ironic that even among those critics who regard O'Neill as "major" or even "great" the sharpest differences of opinion center around the only extant full-length play the man wrote which has not had a fully professional production in a commercial theatre. The play also involves the largest, though perhaps not the most profound, dramatic conception O'Neill ever attempted to express. This study sides with those critics who judge the play a magnificent (or not magnificent) failure, but for reasons other than those which others have put forth. The main flaws in the play seem primarily to be dramatic ones in the development of the character of Lazarus himself. These will be considered later as well as other aspects of the drama.

The action of Lazarus Laughed involves primarily the return of the Biblical Lazarus from the dead. He resumes his former life with his wife Miriam and his family. Shortly

thereafter a fight breaks out between the followers of Jesus, the Nazarenes, and the Orthodox Jews. The skirmish is quelled by Roman soldiers only after much bloodshed. Among the victims are Lazarus' mother and father and his two sisters. Yet his response, even at the death of loved ones, is, typically, laughter. Lazarus continually laughs and preaches that death is dead. His reputation grows until he is called before Caligula, the heir of Tiberius Caesar. Caligula feels his power derives only from his ability to administer death to others; therefore Lazarus, who preaches there is no death, is a threat to him. Caligula orders his soldiers to kill the followers of Lazarus, but those disciples merely grab the soldiers' swords and laughingly kill themselves while the Roman forces look on, joining in the infectious laughter. Lazarus is then called before the emperor Tiberius. In an effort to test Lazarus's faith and out of jealous envy, the emperor's mistress Pompeia conceives a plan whereby Miriam, Lazarus's wife, is required to eat a poisoned peach. When Mirian dies, Lazarus's laughter is finally silenced. But his loneliness, grief, and doubt are only temporary. Miriam calls back to him, "Yes! There is only life!" (p. 456), and Lazarus is restored to new faith. Tiberius then confesses his secret fears to Lazarus, and Pompeia reveals her love for him. Having exposed their own weakness and vulnerability, both desire revenge and burn Lazarus at the stake. But his joyful laughter, while dying, calls them. Pompeia throws
herself on the flames and Tiberius himself desires death, crying, "I laugh at Caesar! . . . my brothers, fear not Caesars!" (p. 478). Caligula, the heir, regards such talk as traitorous, chokes Tiberius to death, thus trying to prove to himself that there is such a thing as death, the base for his own power. He is overcome with remorse as the play ends.

Lazarus Laughed is a key example of the spiritual comedies in O'Neill's work primarily because of Lazarus's message, his comic view of existence contained in his cry "Death is dead!" Basically Lazarus teaches that man's ego, which makes him tragic, does not exist, that all men are part of a divine whole. Thus all the contradictions man sees around him are obliterated in this divine unity. A more comic vision O'Neill has never expressed.

In determining how Lazarus should spread his message, O'Neill did considerable research into Roman history and into the theories of "the spirit of laughter among the Greeks or ancients of any sort," and among modern writers as well. Although he did not find a satisfactory definition of laughter, O'Neill, lacking lyrical skills, used it as the primary medium of expression for the death-killing revelation of Lazarus. It was the quality of Lazarus's laughter that would authenticate his message and transmit its mystery. O'Neill's choice was a brilliant and original one. There is

58 O'Neill, Gelb, p. 600.
nothing more mysterious about human behavior than laughter—and nothing more mysteriously and exclusively human. One critic expresses doubts about the play's merit because of its dependence on an actor who can laugh as O'Neill's directions ask, for even four minutes at a time. The message that this laughing Dionysus brings is that all men must move toward a joy in the annihilation of themselves in order to become one with all existence.

Lazarus, throughout the drama, preaches that life is a divine whole. He surrenders all pretense to individuality and all recognition of individuality to a "joy in annihilation and union with nature." As the drama proceeds, he is gradually transformed from a fifty-five year old to a youthful figure, "the positive masculine Dionysus, closest to the soil of the Grecian goals, a Son of Man born of a mortal" (p. 307). In the process of becoming more and more a symbol and less and less a human character, he, of necessity, sheds himself of those human and humane "imperfections"—compassion, tenderness, gentleness, and understanding. However, his godlike pose is momentarily shattered when his wife Miriam dies. Her death is Lazarus's tragic test, the time of sacrifice and pain. Lazarus, who has seen death and


knows it is nothing, has seen the ego and knows it is a foolish illusion, and has laughed the laughter of God is reduced to the state of all men, burdened with the "deluded" fear of death. The great message which Lazarus has preached, based on his own experience of death, abandons him. He is helpless and alone. It is not until the apparently dead Miriam rises up to laugh and tell Lazarus, "Yes! There is only life!" (p. 348) that Lazarus becomes able to laugh again. Out of his moment of doubt he arises with new faith and joy. This "new faith" that Lazarus has does not have much in common with the faith his laughter invited, almost compelled his earlier listeners to share. This time it is the laughter of "a conqueror arrogant with happiness and the pride of new triumph" (p. 349). His laughter, instead of being liberating and inviting, has "a terrible unbearable power and beauty that beats those in the room into abject submissive panic" (p. 349). O'Neill writes in a chilly, scene-closing stage direction: "... the laughter of Lazarus is as remote now as the laughter of a god" (p. 349).

Another problem with the character of Lazarus concerns the role which O'Neill, in accordance with Lazarus's message, had to give him, the role of a savior. Ironically, Lazarus can save only himself. As he says, "But the greatness of Saviors is that they may not save. The greatness of Man is that no god can save him—until he becomes a god!" (p. 289). (In that case, of course, no man needs a savior.) The "mystical logic" of Lazarus's position is clear, then, or
ought to be. He has come to tell men that they must, individually, save themselves because no god or savior can do it. Yet Lazarus's laughter tempts many, including the audience or reader, to believe that Lazarus is a savior and can effect the salvation of others.

In short, if one reads the play carefully, he discovers that Lazarus is not a static, perfect, completely comic visionary although he appears to be and that although Lazarus appears to be a loving savior, he is not, nor according to his own message, could he be.

Because Lazarus is not a dramatic character, the focus of the play tends to shift to the polarized, conflict-ridden characters, notably Caligula, the tragi-comic ape. His body has "wide, powerful shoulders and long arms and hands, and short skinny, hairy legs, like an ape's [my emphasis]" (p. 299). Caligula never walks, runs, sits, or looks. When he is curious, he is seen "squatting on his hams, monkey-wise" or "rocking back and forth on his haunches" (pp. 311, 345). When he is excited or enraged, he begins "hopping up and down" or "dancing a hopping grotesque . . . dance" (pp. 319, 347). When Lazarus first comes to where Caligula is, Caligula squats down and "fingers Lazarus's robe inquisitively and stares up into his face in the attitude of a chained monkey" (p. 308). When Caligula is afraid, he squats "coweringly at Lazarus's feet, blinking up at his face monkey-wise . . . with his teeth . . . chattering together in nervous fear" (pp. 357-58).
Caligula's power is based on his ability to administer death to others. But, since killing is merely an activity with no moral value (in fact, according to Lazarus, killing another may well be doing him a favor), Caligula cannot be threatening, only grotesquely amusing. He is, as he says, "a trained ape" who does "monkey tricks" (p. 360). At the end of the play, after killing Tiberius and becoming Caesar himself, Caligula kills Lazarus and then rants in the empty arena. He is caught between his desire to surrender himself to the annihilation in Lazarus's laughter and his desire to be a Caesar and have the power of death. Caligula, a vulgar grotesque, is most absurd when he orates to crowds that are not there and shouts in triumph over killings that have no meaning and exults in being a Caesar even though a Caesar is nothing more than men's deluded fear of death. Nevertheless, Caligula is invested with some dignity and power even at that moment. O'Neill says of Caligula when he stands saluting himself, that he does so "with a crazy intensity that is not without grandeur" (p. 370).

In "The Hairy Ape," Yank has the stage all to himself when, made fully aware of the contradictions in himself, he laughs at himself. Caligula, an ape who possesses the stage at the end of Lazarus Laughed, cannot focus his desire for Lazarus's laughter (annihilation of self) and his desire to be an individual even long enough to laugh at the infinite distance between the two. What Caligula has done is to refine slightly O'Neill's apparent definition of man. Man, who
has infinite appetites for love and significance but a finite belly, desires to embrace the infinite, but not at the price of losing his sense of the finite, the personal, even if that sense is nothing more than the heady odor and metallic taste of the fear of death. The problem with men is not that they "forget," as Lazarus would have it, but that they remember. Lazarus Laughed, then, settles uneasily into an ambiguous position between comedy and tragedy. Lazarus has a fully comic vision in which many of his followers—even, finally, the corrupt Tiberius and Pompeia—share. But at the end of the play, the ecstatic laughter of Lazarus is replaced by the posturing, shrieking, and groveling of Caligula. The play is spectacular, but muddled. In the character and message of Lazarus, however, O'Neill did express a fully comic vision of existence.
CHAPTER V
O'NEILL'S MATURE IRONIC TRAGEDIES

All of O'Neill's spiritual comedies were written between 1921-1922 (The Fountain) and 1934 (Days Without End). This period was not, however, a time of unremitting spiritual quest for O'Neill. Mixed in with the basically optimistic spiritual comedies were some of O'Neill's darkest works. Of the thirteen plays O'Neill wrote during those years, seven have been discussed as spiritual comedies. Of the six remaining, two, Welded (192201923) and Dynamo (1928), have almost as much in common with the spiritual comedies as they do with the other mature tragedies. Both contain large quantities of that metaphysical-religious "gas" with which O'Neill, with so much difficulty, tried to pump up his spiritual comedies. Welded and Dynamo, though neither can be considered "religious" in the sense that Lazarus Laughed and Days Without End are religious, are both "answer" plays of O'Neill's "apocalyptic phase." A third work, O'Neill's adaptation of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (O'Neill's title, "The Ancient Mariner"), involves so little

1 Tiisanen, O'Neill's Scenic Images, pp. 349-50.


of O'Neill's own work as to be insignificant. He added almost no words and limited himself to directions for the staging of the work as part pantomime, part recitation. The work was put on in 1924 and quietly disappeared.\(^4\) The other three works that are referred to as O'Neill's mature ironic tragedies are *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), *Strange Interlude* (1926-1927), and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1929-1931). These plays literally and figuratively dwarf the other three. Indeed, they make most of the spiritual comedies seem impoverished, too. *Welded* and *Dynamo* will be discussed first, partly because they are not worth a great deal of attention and partly because they constitute a bridge of sorts between O'Neill's spiritual comedies and the mature ironic tragedies.

"Welded"

O'Neill wrote *Welded* in 1922 and 1923. The play was produced in 1924 and folded after a brief run; neither the audiences nor critics liked it. By 1932, neither did O'Neill. He listed *Welded* among the group of plays that he considered "too painfully bungled in their present form to be worth producing at all."\(^5\) The play is of some interest for two reasons. First, it has some of the spiritual "hunger" that


shows up in O'Neill's spiritual comedies; it even has, in its conclusion, a "mysterious" spirit of unity and acceptance of life. Secondly, it is perhaps the most rigidly and neatly constructed full-length play O'Neill ever wrote. But within its tight structure is more frantic emotional energy than is usual even for the highly emotional O'Neill. Even worse, the emotion is forced on the play intellectually; it does not accumulate and then flow out of the play itself.

Welded is one of several plays in the O'Neill canon that reveal his often-admitted indebtedness to Strindberg. It is a "marriage" play in which love and hate are finally seen as the opposite but inseparable forces in a marriage. The explanation for why the play is such a poor one is perhaps most easily found in the information provided by the biographical critics of O'Neill's works. This play apparently arose out of O'Neill's personal struggle to come to an understanding of the relationship between himself and his second wife, Agnes Boulton O'Neill. O'Neill never wrote

6 Barrett H. Clark says Welded is "the most compact, the most deliberately and exclusively intellectual of all the O'Neill plays. It is a work of hard surfaces. . . . " rev. ed. (New York: Dover, 1947), p. 90.

7 O'Neill's Nobel Prize acceptance speech contains an acknowledgement of Strindberg's influence on his work. (Gelb, O'Neill, p. 814) An article O'Neill wrote for the Provincetown Playbill, 1923-24 season, No. 1, also contains high praise for Strindberg. That small essay contains O'Neill's coinages, "super-naturalism" and "behind-life."

8 Gelb, O'Neill, p. 554.
movingly or well about either contemporary problems or immediate personal concerns. His successful plays are either memory plays that dig into his past or plays that arise from the phantasms of his mind but are given solid, universalized forms. This play is neither kind. But its flaws as a drama are easy to see, whatever their reasons for being there.

The plot of the play is simple. Michael Cape, a playwright, and his wife, Eleanor, an actress, pride themselves on being in a magnificent marriage, an "ideal" marriage that puts all common loves to shame. Their marriage is a "sacrament," a "faith," a religion. The play begins with Michael's surprise return from a country retreat where he has been working on his latest play. Both husband and wife are surrounded by single spotlights throughout the play—there is no other lighting. O'Neill describes the effect he seeks in this strange method of lighting by calling the two circles of light "auras of egotism" (p. 443). For the first few moments of the reunion of husband and wife, all is passionate joy and a semi-mystical desire for physical union. As the two start toward the stairs leading to their bedroom, there is repeated and insistent knocking at the door. The visitor, their friend John, senses tension in the room and leaves almost immediately. As soon as the door is closed, Michael makes it very clear that all is not perfect. One angry and jealous word leads to a dozen or so more angry and
jealous words until both are expressing their undying hatred for one another. Each rushes off to "kill" love forever. The first act, neatly enough, has only the one scene. It is a scene that begins with expressions of mystical-romantic unity that seem exaggerated and ends with scorching expressions of hatred and disgust that seem equally exaggerated.

The second act has two scenes in it, paralleling the unholy split in the unity previously enjoyed by Michael and Eleanor. Eleanor rushes off to kill her love for Cape by throwing herself at John who, though he loves her, will not co-operate since he believes she does not now love him. He shepherds her back home. Michael, on the other hand, attempts to kill his love by defiling it. He picks the randiest street-walker he can find but in vain. She takes on the symbolic functions of an all-wise, all-forgiving priestess, and Michael humbly leaves his money and returns home. The explosion of unity—Michael and Eleanor—occupies the first act. These two egos separate, rush off on destructive missions, and then begin coming back together again at the end of each of the two scenes in the second act.

The third act, logically enough, has but a single scene in it. Michael and Eleanor meet again in their home and the whole play is repeated, but in reverse. They sense a unity when they first meet again, but it fades away and they try to understand this strange oscillation between enraptured unity and alienation and hatred. Finally they are enlightened "as if . . . by a sudden flash from within" (pp. 487-88);
their individual egos melt away; they love again. This "flash" is utterly unconvincing. It is not "love at first sight," obviously, nor does it seem to arise from some mystical source whose existence has been at least hinted at before. Cape, in a speech notable for its blurriness, proclaims: "Our life is to bear together our burden which is our goal--on and up! Above the world, beyond its vision--our meaning!" In the verbal climax of this play, Cape continues this vaguely Dionysian testimony in favor of accepting existence: "Listen! Often I wake up in the night--in a black world, alone in a hundred million years of darkness. I feel like crying out to God for mercy because life lives! Then instinctively I seek you--my hand touches you! You are there--beside me--alive--and with you I become whole, a truth! Life guides me back through the hundred million years to you. It reveals a beginning in unity that I may have faith in the unity of the end!" (p. 488). The visual climax of the play involves Eleanor at the top of the stairs with her arms out in the shape of a cross; Michael is coming up the stairs to meet her. When he reaches her, he too puts his arms in the same position. The two pools of light that have set these two egotists off throughout the play coalesce into one. And the audience hears, "I love" . . . "I love you" . . . "We love!" (p. 489).

The flaws in the play are many, but one peculiar lack is most noteworthy. There is not in either the husband or the wife a sense of the comic. Neither is able to pull back
to reflect that this unbearably mixed relationship may be a bad joke played on the two of them by life or fate. Both seek to cope with the contradictory forces in their relationship by following one or the other of the forces entirely. But in the end, both find a mystical unity in this dualism. Only the prostitute, a slatternly foreign woman whom Cape picks out precisely because she is the antithesis of his ideal, shows any appreciation for the "jokes" of fate. Her pimp is an evil man, but when Cape asks her if she loves the man in spite of the fact that he is likely to beat her "just for the fun of it" (p. 478), she smiles and says, "Sure. I'm lonesome." Cape asks her why she smiled when she answered him and she says simply, "I was thinkin' of the whole game. It's funny, ain't it?" Cape, perhaps the leading male character in the O'Neill canon who is least sensitive to the comic, replies—"slowly": "You mean--life?" The woman says, "Sure. You got to laugh, ain't you? You got to loin to like it." These are the words from the mouth of a new prophetess for Cape, but he hears "love" instead of "like," and what is a pragmatic solution for the riddle of life for this woman becomes for Cape the "one faith," "your church" (p. 478). As he rushes down the stairs from the woman's room, she murmurs "confusedly": "Say--?" (p. 479).

Both the husband and the wife have that duality of sensibility that is found in many of O'Neill's characters. Either their love is sacred, ideal, even sublime or it is foul and disgusting. Each eventually tries to kill the marriage in
the dirtiest way possible. Those critics, and they are legion,¹⁰ who claim O'Neill would have avoided many of his gauche ries if he had only had a "sense of humor" are largely right about this play. A sense of humor allows a man to pummel his own problems on the back and guffaw, thus achieving for him a certain emotional distance from those problems. O'Neill lacked that genial capacity, but in most of his ironic tragedies his sense of the comic, incorporated in one or more of the characters, enables him to exercise at least enough restraint on "mere" emotion to avoid being too easily labeled "melodramatic." The sense of the comic that O'Neill puts into most of his plays enables his major character at least briefly to put both himself and his problems against a larger background to see how small he and they appear. O'Neill is at least as much interested in the pathos of such a comparison as he is in the comic in it, but the comic supplies at least some control over possible bathos. In Welded, however, the emotional pool is a wallow.

In O'Neill's best plays, such as Long Day's Journey into Night and The Iceman Cometh, the apparent looseness and repetitiveness in structure and dialogue allow him to accumulate emotion until the explosions have an inevitability to them. In this play, the emotional explosions take place before

the audience has even had a chance to get acquainted with the characters. And these emotional explosions have little of the inevitable about them. It is as if O'Neill merely shows the audience an emotional keyboard, whose keys are guaranteed to produce thunderous music at the touch of a finger, and then proceeds to use both hands. The man automatically works himself into a frenzy if the woman shows the least inclination to let her attention wander from him; the woman is certain to look for the most infuriating "infidelity" she can dig up or invent to throw in the man's face whenever he gets possessive. George Jean Nathan, one of O'Neill's closest and most enduring friends among the American literati, summarizes the nerve-grating effect of Welded about as well as it can be done. Although Nathan often seems more interested in Nathan than in what he is discussing, his conclusion in this case is amusing and mortally accurate. Nathan says of Strindberg's plays (the obvious sources of inspiration for this one of O'Neill's) that the effect comes from "the sparks that fly upward from a prodigious and deafening pounding on the anvil." But of O'Neill's play, Nathan claims, "All one gets . . . is the prodigious and deafening pounding." 11

"Dynamo"

Dynamo, the first of the trilogy of plays O'Neill proposed to write to "dig at the roots of the sickness of

today,"12 was written in 1928 and produced in 1929. It ran for only fifty performances.13 Timo Tiusanen says, "It is a perfect play . . . for those who do not think highly of its author."14 Dynamo digs noisily away at the modern "sickness" by dramatizing one boy's rejection of the harsh, vengeful Christianity of his father in favor of the great mother god, electricity, who is variously represented on the stage by a thunderstorm, by the boy's mother, by a two-hundred-pound neighbor woman who hums, and by a dynamo. The symbolism is a bit confusing. If O'Neill had read a little Henry Adams, he would perhaps not have offered up the dynamo as the symbol of a "modern" god, created by the "science and materialism"15 which he always linked together and apparently despised. The dynamo, as a "new" symbol of the new materialistic "theology" was already thirty years old when O'Neill wrote Dynamo.16 Dynamo is of interest, however,


14 Tiusanen, O'Neill's Scenic Images, p. 167.


because it resembles some aspects of O'Neill's spiritual comedies. It has nothing like the scope or optimism in those plays, but it is a theological-mystical work of sorts. It is also a terrible play. If one were asked to pick O'Neill's worst mature play, Dynamo would certainly make it difficult to choose Welded. This play, like Welded, lacks O'Neill's usual appreciation for the comic values in the contradictions that bedevil man. Nearly all of O'Neill's work is "humorless," but only a few of his plays lack almost completely a sensitivity to the tonic value of the comic. Welded is one such play; Dynamo is another.

The play is about the "spiritual" quest of a boy named Reuben Light, the son of a Fundamentalist father and an irreligious mother, and the relationship of the Lights to their neighbors the Fifes, an atheistic family who, unlike the Lights, have electricity. The whole play turns on a budding romance between Reuben Light and the Fifes' daughter, Ada, a "joke" played on the Lights by Ramsey Fife, and the betrayal of Reuben by his mother.

One stormy evening Fife reads in the newspaper of a man who confessed an old murder to his daughter's fiance only to have the fiance feel duty-bound to turn the man in to the police. It suddenly occurs to Fife that he can play a good "joke" on the Reverend Light and show up Reuben as a Christian sissy—for Ada's benefit—by telling this story to Reuben and pretending that he, Fife, is the murderer. He tells Reuben this fact and later Reuben reveals Fife's depravity
to his mother, certain that she will keep the evil secret. Then Reuben's father, who has overheard everything while hiding in the closet, leaps out with glee, ready to get Fife—both for the crime and for furthering Reuben's romance with Ada, who the Lights feel is too sluttish for their son. Light is, of course, later made a fool of when Fife tells him of the joke he has played. Reuben, however, is a new man who has seen the old God die and rejoiced in that death. As is revealed later in the play, Reuben runs away from home that evening and spends the night baring his breast to the thunder and lightning of the old God to prove he fears that dead God no longer. When the lightning fails to obey the old God, Reuben believes that perhaps there is "no God but electricity!" 17

In the second of the three acts, Reuben, nearly nineteen now and hardened into a sensualist and a mocker, returns home. He is, strangely, welcomed back by May Fife, Ada's sensual two-hundred pound mother, who has from the beginning encouraged her daughter's illicit interest in Reuben. Reuben takes immediate and unromantic possession of Ada, gets a job at Ramsay Fife's electric plant, and returns home to see his mother. He discovers that she was trying to reach him to beg his forgiveness for her betrayal but that she had died while mumbling the blasphemous words he had written her in postcards: "We have electrocuted your God. Don't be a fool" (p. 456). 17

17 O'Neill, Dynamo, in The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, III, 419.
Now Reuben's commitment to the god of electricity is complicated by the fact that he feels guilt about his mother. He goes back to his old room at home, hoping he will receive messages from his mother. He craves her forgiveness.

In the third scene of Act Two, Reuben is in his "church" and has his "revelation." He is standing in the power plant staring at the dynamo. It appears to him as a great dark idol, a mother, "what life is" (p. 474). And he prays to this god, calling it the "Mother of Life" and seeking forgiveness. The prayer must work; he feels forgiven.

In Act Three of Dynamo the boy, in the company of the mooning Mrs. Fife, spends nearly all of his time in his new church, the electric plant, worshipping the dynamo, his new god. He feels this god is asking for his total love, calling him to be a savior, to bring happiness to all men. Into the scene comes Ada; he couples with her on the floor, arises feeling more unworthy than ever, asks the god what he should do, and receives the interesting summons to shoot Ada. He does. Reuben's own mother had, of course, despised Ada as a "harlot," so Reuben's confusion is understandable. Finally Reuben's sense of unworthiness becomes so unbearable that he no longer wants to be the new messiah, to be privy to the new truth. He wants peace: "I only want you to hide me, Mother!" (p. 488). With that, poor Reuben embraces the dynamo and dies. O'Neill's directions at this point have an odd ring to them: "... Reuben's voice dies in a moan that is a
mingling of pain and loving consummation, and this cry dies into a sound that is like the crooning of a baby and merges and is lost in the dynamo's hum" (p. 488). Reuben has, however ironically, achieved that peace he sought and, at least in terms of sound effects, he has also achieved a rebirth of sorts in the bosom of his Mother, three-in-one.

This analysis of the plot of the play is probably sufficient commentary on what is wrong with the play. It is just silly.

Richard Dana Skinner suggests that all of O'Neill's plays (Skinner's study stops with Days Without End) have something to do with balancing the masculine and feminine souls in man. In that he seems correct. Very many of O'Neill's plays do seem to be a struggle between the submissive, comforting feminine and the prideful, striving masculine or, even more unfortunately, between the unnaturally aggressive feminine and the unnaturally submissive masculine. The masculine principle in Dynamo is represented by the vengeful Christian, Hutchins Light, and the equally vengeful atheist, Ramsay Fife, and neither is an attractive figure. The females in the play, on the other hand, represent the allurements of biological sex in the person of Ada Fife, and the allurements of comfort and peaceful oblivion in the "persons" of Amelia Light, May Fife, and the gently,

hypnotically humming dynamo.

It is strange, but both O'Neill and Henry Adams noticed a peculiarly soothing but religious and awesome quality in the sound and appearance of a dynamo. O'Neill had an interesting set of physical ideas and scenic effects for a play, but no significant dramatic ones. Reading Henry Adams's discussion of the electric dynamo gives one an idea of what undoubtedly inspired O'Neill. Perhaps if O'Neill had simply taken his audience to a power plant and let them watch and hear and be overwhelmed by a real dynamo, he would have given them that religious sense of awe he apparently wanted. Dynamo not only betrays the lack of a sense of humor on the part of its author; it also reveals the absence even of a sense of the comic, a sense that O'Neill did not, in most of his plays, lack.

"Desire Under the Elms"

O'Neill wrote Desire Under the Elms in 1924 and saw it successfully produced in 1924-1925. It is an odd play in the O'Neill canon in many ways. It is one of the two plays—Ah, Wilderness! is the other—that O'Neill said he dreamed in a single night. It is also as close as O'Neill ever

19 Robert Benchley says, "It is doubtful if even a sense of humor could have made Dynamo a great play but it could have made it less dull and less obvious." Benchley, "Dynamo," Life, 93 (1929), p. 24, rpt. in Cargill et al., pp. 187-89.

20 Miller, Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic, p. 147.

21 Gelb, O'Neill, p. 539.
got to the tremendous sense of affirmation of life that is generally associated with the great tragedies of the Greeks and the Elizabethans. In its naturalistic manner, the play resembles many of O'Neill's earlier works, the ironic tragedies, yet it differs from those plays in ways that are perhaps more significant. It has too much affirmative power to be listed among the early ironic tragedies; the victory-in-defeat won by two of its principal characters lifts it out of that category. Yet it does not belong with the loudly affirmative spiritual comedies. Although it does seem to affirm life, the nature of its affirmation lies outside mystical proclamations. O'Neill also avoids in this play his greatest weakness, which shows up regularly in his spiritual comedies: an inability to write lyrically. The play resembles O'Neill's late plays, his failed comedies, but only in that it seems to create comic energies that are used in the service of the terrible beauty of tragedy. But it does not have that center of paralysis and death that dominates both the failed comedies and the other two mature ironic tragedies, Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra. The play is of interest at this point because of the odd presence of the comic in it. Doris V. Falk, in fact, sees the comic elements as dominant and hence argues, not very convincingly, that the play is a deliberate parody of romantic melodrama. (She even locates an old melodrama whose plot resembles that of O'Neill's play.) She also indicates that O'Neill probably
knew the play. 22 One need not accept Falk's view, however, in order to find the comic elements in the play interesting. The attention that is drawn to the largely comic figure of Ephraim Cabot does, in fact, cause a shift in focus in the play. In the play's denouement, the elder Cabot is at least as interesting as the ill-fated lovers. It is also difficult to see that flinty old man as a tragic figure; he is too hard and too full of life. He lacks the ability to recognize in himself the need to love and be loved, and in that absent recognition lies the absence of the tragic in Cabot. Because the focus of the play is so surely on Ephraim Cabot, Desire Under the Elms bears a strong resemblance to O'Neill's other ironic tragedies. This hard old man, who desired a new wife and a new son as expressions of his own fruitfulness, ends up getting both a wife and a son but neither is really his. In fact, even the three sons he had in the beginning are taken from him. The joke which fate plays on Cabot is to grant his wish but to negate it at the same time.

The plot of Desire Under the Elms is one of the strongest plots O'Neill ever used. The play turns upon the "incestuous" relationship between stepmother and stepson and upon the murder of their child. 23 The real strength of the


23 Numerous critics have noticed the obvious borrowing from the Greeks in this play. The Gelbs suggest the Hippolytus and Medea legends as handled by Euripides. It seems clear that the borrowing was more successful in this play than in the more obviously derivative Mourning Becomes Electra. Gelb, O'Neill, p. 539.
plot arises, however, not from the violence or unusual na-
ture of the crimes committed, but from the credibility that
those crimes derive from the strength of the perpetrators.
For once in an O'Neill play, the characters seem forcefully
to create their own fate, at least for a time. And in the
end their defeat is so fully absorbed, without whimpering,
that the characters seem in fact to gain a genuine victory
over their own fate.

Desire Under the Elms is the story of a seventy-five
year-old New England farmer, Ephraim Cabot, his third wife
Abbie, his two older sons Simeon and Peter (born of his first
wife), and his youngest son Eben who was born of his second
wife and who, on her behalf, claims ownership of the Cabot
farm. The two elder sons depart for California early in the
action after Eben buys their shares of the farm. At the
same time Ephraim returns home with his new bride Abbie. As
soon as Abbie and Eben meet, the titanic struggle over pos-
session of the farm begins, but this struggle is mixed with
various emotions. On Abbie's part it involves frank lust,
an effort to gain control of the farm by controlling Eben,
and a maternal spirit. Eben's part also involves sexual at-
traction as well as a desire for his mother and revenge for
her death.

These feelings climax when Abbie succeeds in seducing
Eben in the very parlor that had been closed since his mother's
death. The resultant child is claimed unwittingly by Ephraim;
meanwhile the relationship between Abbie and Eben simplifies
into a genuinely romantic love.

In what is the comic-tragic highlight of the play Ephraim invites all the neighbors in to celebrate the child's birth. During the evening he and his son quarrel over the farm, and Ephraim tells Eben that Abbie is anxious to get him cut off by law from any claim to the farm. Abbie then gets the full force of Eben's rage and out of love for him decides to kill the child, who Ephraim says will be the sole heir of the farm, so the land will go to Eben instead. But when she later tells Eben she smothered the baby, rather than being happy he feels that, ironically, she took away the last thing she left him. He leaves to take vengeance by getting the sheriff. Abbie then confesses the whole story to Ephraim.

When Eben returns, just ahead of the sheriff, he tells Abbie of his love for her, asks forgiveness, and vows to share with her the consequences of the murder. Ephraim in his loneliness chooses the hard life of remaining on the farm rather than joining his sons in California.

Clifford Leech says of *Desire Under the Elms* that it is "the first O'Neill play to which one can return with a sense of making fresh discoveries." The richness of *Desire Under the Elms* that startles anyone who attempts to analyze it closely represents a great advance in artistic complexity over the bulk of what O'Neill had done before it and not a little of what he was to do after it.

In its broadest outlines, the play can perhaps best be described as the victory of the pagan and natural over the unnatural and artificial impositions of a harsh religion, with that victory exacting as its price a terrible, ironic defeat. But even that defeat is turned into that peculiar fitness that accompanies great tragedies. The whole of the tragedy is willed by Eben and Abbie because part of its inevitable linking of cause and effect includes the love they consider worth having, even though it be taken by death.

The real complexity and richness in the play is not, however, in its theme, but in its characterizations. What O'Neill borrowed from classical drama and from Freudian psychology arises out of these rough characters and does not seem imposed on them as it seems to be in Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra. The very crude aspects of these individual (their rough lives and rough sense of religion and morality) make them seem, superficially at least, to be grotesque caricatures. Beneath their comic exterior is a complexity and heroism. But the comic element in the characters perhaps deprives them of the nobility one might expect them to have in a "classic" tragedy.

Old Ephraim is the most complex of the characters in the play, and as John Henry Raleigh says, "The play really belongs to Ephraim Cabot, a great grotesque, a powerful buffoon in the tradition of the elder Karamosov. . . . "25 On one level Cabot is like the monolithic God he speaks of, who is

"hard, not easy," and who can "make thin's grow out o' nothin'."26 It is that aspect of Cabot that is most obvious, and it is Cabot's choosing of that aspect of himself that makes him both comically grotesque and heroic. He is, unnaturally, a man made of stone whose only apparent human capacity is for the hardest kind of work. He has never loved anyone, never known anyone. Two of his wives were worn out by him. Even when Abbie, his third wife, suggests that they have a child together, the old man, although he seems excited by the prospect, does not speak his own honied words, but quotes from the "Song of Songs" instead. The man is "pure power"; he is, in fact, "that very God he keeps referring to and calling upon."27 In these respects, Ephraim Cabot is a powerful creature, but hardly more than an impressive monster.

It is the strange, unexpected aspects of his characterization that make Ephraim Cabot perhaps O'Neill's finest imaginary creation. No one in the play has as strong a sense of loneliness or of the need for beauty as Ephraim, and no one would like more to surrender the burden of his ego than this man. During a conversation with Abbie, Ephraim suddenly "stares up at the sky": "Purty, hain't it? (p. 231), he says. Ephraim's sense of a need for transcendent beauty, useless beauty, is stronger by far than that same sense in


27 Raleigh, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, p. 54.
the Hairy Ape on Fifth Avenue. And in Ephraim, that sense of beauty is related, in a way that remains mysterious to him, to his dissatisfaction with his relationships with those around him. Abbie says crossly, "I don't see nothin' purty" (p. 231). Cabot, whose eyesight is terrible, then makes clear what kind of beauty it is that he is speaking of: "The sky. Feels like a wa'm field up thar." Abbie makes fun of the old man as if he wanted his farm to include even the sky above it. The old man continues, "It's allus-lonesome cold in the house--even when it's bilin' hot outside" (p. 231). Abbie has never noticed that. It is significant that in both cases the old man is not talking about sight or temperature but about what he feels emotionally. The sky to him is not clouds and color; it is warmth and the feel of soil. A house is not cold when it is "bilin' hot outside," but it is cold when a man is alone, unloved and unloving. The old man will admit to missing something, but he does not know what it is.

It is a constant lament on the part of Ephraim that nobody knows him. He points out in each case that none of his three wives ever really knew him; he feels comfortable only with his cows. Throughout the play his contact with people sends him off to the barn. There he feels the cows know him, and he finds warmth and peace.

John Henry Raleigh says, "A note of pathos, still grotesque, is introduced by [Ephraim's] love of cows. . . ." 28

The word "pathos" probably does not fit a man who is this preternaturally strong. Ephraim's strength and the "weakness" that strength creates in him as a man can be seen in the paradoxical tendencies within him. This man would not only make the farm his, but also make it literally him. But he would also seek the shelter of learning the unacquisitive peace of cows. Part of Cabot found his God in that rocky farm, but he also created both that God and himself in the image of that farm. That farm became himself and his God; he became both his farm and the God he saw in it. Admittedly, what Cabot created for himself was inherently self-defeating, but what others do not understand when they seek to take his farm from him— even when (and if) he dies— is that the farm is Cabot. He had made his God and himself and his farm to be one thing. His infinite desires have been trapped by him in the finite area of his immediate physical environment. But this old man is so powerful that at the end of the play one fully expects him to will himself into another seventy-five years on that farm. However distorted his "religion" is, however comic Ephraim seems in his distortion, he has the fanatic's attachment to his beliefs; and however forbidding fanaticism is, it is always impressive.

What makes Ephraim Cabot such an impressive figure, however, escapes any kind of analysis of his "religion" or his infatuation with the annihilation of the ego. What he has is an incredible grip on existence, on life. He is a
natural force like Falstaff to whom death is meaningless; only life matters. Appropriately, Ephraim's name means "very fruitful." The old man has felt "damned" (his word) only twice in his life. Once many years ago he became "despairful" on his rocky farm, left that farm (his God), and sought the rich easy farming in the West. But he came back. The other time was the spring before the play opens when he went "ridin' out t' learn God's message t' me in the spring" (p. 210). The message was, of course, for him to take a wife. Cabot told one son as he left on that pilgrimage, "I'm feelin' damned ... damned like an old hickory tree fit on'y fur burnin'" (p. 210). There are only two sins for Ephraim Cabot: one is to be unproductive, which includes farming on rich land since one need only toss out the seed, "set an' smoke yer pipe an' watch thin's grow" (p. 210), and the other is to die. And he does not intend to do either. As with Falstaff, one does not expect Ephraim to die. When Cabot suggests that he might well destroy his farm if he saw he was dying, he sounds a little like Falstaff, who tells Hal, " ... old Jack Falstaff, banish not him thy Harry's company, banish not him thy Harry's company: banish plump Jack, and banish all the world."29

The best testimony of Ephraim's awesome comic grasp on life, which only the most egotistical of men can possibly

have, is found in the wild speech he gives at the party celebrating the baby's birth. Into the midst of a carping group of scandal-hunters comes this wild old man, more full of life than the rest of them together. He shouts, dances, whoops, brags on his long life, and boasts of an Indian fight of folk-epic proportions. Men who possess that much life must be using up someone else's share. The utter unconcern on the part of Falstaff for his impressed troops and Cabot's concern for no one's life but his own ought to frighten anyone who reads of the two. But somehow, creatures who are that filled with life are called great comic figures; lesser folk are both amazed and amused.

The other characters in the play do not loom as large as Ephraim, but they are of some interest. Simeon and Peter are well-drawn comic characters even though they are soon out of the play. Both are nearly forty and both are virtually sterile as human beings when the play opens. Ephraim gave the two of them names that suggest that O'Neill, if not Ephraim, had a purpose in mind. The two names, Simeon (Simon) and Peter, are appropriate. Ephraim says to Abbie in the middle of the play, "Build my church on a rock--out o' stones an' I'll be in them! That's what He [God] meant t' Peter" (p. 237). Of course, that original "rock" was named Simon, and he was given the additional name "Peter" (rock) by his God. Simeon and Peter, however, are more like oxen than rocks. When it is time for dinner "they turn, shouldering each other, their bodies bumping and rubbing together as they
hurry clumsily toward their food, like two friendly oxen toward their evening meal" (p. 206). Neither Simeon nor Peter has anything but a simple animal's desire for the farm, and when Ephraim's third marriage makes it unlikely that they will be able to stay there and keep it, they suddenly are turned free and explode into celebration like the Bacchanalian rites of spring. They leave with the old man's curse.

It is ironic, but the two sons who were supposed to be hard turn out to be soft and free and "sinful." Eben, the one that Ephraim blindly despises as the "soft" one, turns out to be the only one hard enough to cope with his father. And Eben's name, Ebenezer (and it seems likely O'Neill knew it) means "the stone [my emphasis] of help." Eben is, in fact, perhaps stronger than his father because he discovers how to overcome the loneliness of pure strength in the "weakness" and "softness" of love.

Eben has the first and last of the statements made by the principal characters, and both times he is looking up at the sky. At the beginning of the play, Eben "sighs with a puzzled awe and blurts out with halting appreciation": "God! Purty!" (p. 203). Eben's tentative appreciation of the uselessly beautiful resembles the same capacity in his father. In Eben's case, however, that appreciation does not return until the end of the play, until after his complex desires

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have run their course. Only then can he appreciate transcendent beauty again. He and Abbie gaze at the sky as the sheriff is taking them off. Eben says, "Sun's arizin'. Purty, hain't it?" (p. 269). Both Eben and Abbie find a human equivalent for that kind of beauty in their love, and that love enables them to embrace their own tragedy and thus transcend it.

Abbie comes almost as close to becoming a figure of mythic proportions as Ephraim does. She comes to the farm with only the desire to have a "hum." That lust leads her into the seduction of Eben which in turn leads her into a strange mixture of maternally possessive and protective love and passionately generous love. By the end of the play it is Abbie's kind of love that provides the tragic victory. She gives both herself and Eben a way of transcending the tragedy that Ephraim can only turn away from. The old man returns resolutely to rounding up his stock, but the two lovers go off almost eagerly to accept their doom, which is wondrous because it is theirs. The feminine, productive spirit that was locked up by Ephraim's fierce religion is released in the person of Abbie and allowed to escape its thralldom to that patch of rocky soil. Abbie and Eben are even more significantly free than Simeon and Peter.

Desire Under the Elms contains O'Neill's most affirmative tragic ending (in the love of Abbie and Eben) but it also contains the ironic tragedy that is typical of O'Neill (in the person of Ephraim Cabot). Abbie and Eben's love
enables them to embrace the inevitable and thus to transcend it. But Ephraim simply moves through what befalls him and is almost unaffected by it. The man seems larger even than his own dreams. The elemental comic power in him makes him almost as super-human as Lazarus in Lazarus Laughed.

"Strange Interlude"

In 1926 and 1927 O'Neill wrote the longest of his plays, the mammoth Strange Interlude, a nine-act play that required his audience to come in the afternoon, break for dinner, and then return to stay until almost midnight. The play was, in his lifetime, O'Neill's greatest popular success. It ran for most of 1928 and 1929 (414 performances in New York), won him his third Pulitzer Prize, and even sold very well in book form.

The drama was an unusual one for reasons other than its mere length. O'Neill employed a technique involving what he called "thought asides," in which the action of the play was "frozen" while one or the other character spoke thoughts that reflected his or her current state of mind. These speeches, which easily constitute half the play's dialogue, are not heard by other characters in the play. In that respect they are soliloquies. But the speeches are too numerous to operate as formal soliloquies. They are not,

31 Miller, Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic, p. 151; Gelb, O'Neill, p. 662.

32 Miller, p. 151 and p. 119.

33 O'Neill, in Tiusanen, O'Neill's Scenic Images, pp. 207-08.
however, directed specifically at the audience, either; hence they are not the traditional aside. O'Neill described them as "thought asides." This technique would seem, a priori, to be an extremely clumsy one, but audiences apparently adjusted to it as easily and rapidly as they had to the use of masks in The Great God Brown. The techniques in the two plays are similar in that both involve the speaking of normally unspoken thoughts. O'Neill also used a variety of the "thought aside" technique in Welded (produced in 1924). In that play, the husband and wife sit side-by-side at times and speak straight ahead toward the audience, and neither character appears to hear what the other is saying. O'Neill also used the "thought aside" technique in Dynamo (1928). And he seriously considered using it in Mourning Becomes Electra (1931) but rewrote the play finally and left the thought asides out. O'Neill himself seems finally to have realized the limited value of the technique in drama. As he said of Strange Interlude in 1932, it was "an attempt at the new masked psychological drama . . . without masks—a successful attempt, perhaps, in so far as it concerns only surfaces and their immediate subsurfaces, but not where, occasionally, it tries to probe deeper."34 The technique is also not a very economical one. What can be conveyed in thought asides is the sort of thing a perceptive audience infers about the

34 O'Neill, in Gelb, p. 662.
characters and situations in a well-written play. Part of dramatic delight for an audience is realizing that what a character is saying is probably not a true reflection of what the audience feels that character is like. Since the thought asides put O'Neill no closer to the ineffable depths of his characters, he finally abandoned the technique.

O'Neill told a reporter a year or so before he began work on *Strange Interlude*, "I have no ambition to go out of my field and become a novelist. . . . In my opinion, the drama is a darn sight harder medium than the novel because it is concentrated." In *Strange Interlude* O'Neill used what amounts to a compromise between the novel and the drama. Joseph Wood Krutch, who was O'Neill's favorite critic and who was probably the most consistently laudatory among O'Neill's perceptive, intelligent critics, explains well what benefits O'Neill derived from the unusual length and unusual technique of *Strange Interlude*. Krutch claims that drama belongs to a self-assured "heroic" age and the novel to "a complex and baffled one, since a certain simplicity of presentation has been inseparable from playwrighting [sic]." Krutch claims that a play must involve both a story elementary enough to be presented almost in the form of an anecdote

35 O'Neill, in Gelb, p. 585.

36 Gelb, O'Neill, numerous references.

and a view of human life uncomplicated enough to be presented almost without shadings." It is Krutch's belief that "the modern mind has found itself unable to express its reactions without the infinite qualifications and the subtle half-thoughts which its most characteristic form the novel makes possible." According to Krutch, "What Mr. O'Neill has done . . . is to take a story which is not only longer than the ordinary story of a play but one which invites, or rather demands, that brooding subtlety of treatment impossible in the ordinary dramatic form. . . . He is . . . the first to dare to make full use in the drama of that introspection without which it would be impossible to imagine the existence of a large part of modern literature, and he is the first to employ there our newly won knowledge of the unconscious . . . in such a way as to make it cast over all the events that uncertain, flickering light which it sheds in the events around us." Krutch concludes that O'Neill has taken "most of the things which gave modern literature its excuse for being" and "has succeeded in making them dramatic." 38

What O'Neill actually achieved was to camouflage a gigantic soap-opera of a high quality behind a very deep- and modern-seeming technique. The play involves the sine qua non of the soap opera--sex--in abundance. But that is covered over with a pseudo-theology of God the Father and God the Mother in such a way as to make this sex-thriller seem a deep and probing investigation of human reality.

38 Krutch, "Strange Interlude," rpt. in Cargill et al., pp. 185-86.
O'Neill's own comment, quoted earlier, seems to indicate the same feeling on his part. The play is of interest because, for all its crippling defects, it is a new variety of O'Neill's typical ironic tragedy, a variety that leads one rapidly towards O'Neill's last plays. It is necessary at this point to offer a review of the plot of the play in order to approach _Strange Interlude_ as a mature ironic tragedy. The plot summary should give some indication of why the play is here called a soap opera.

The central figure in the play is Nina Leeds. One first learns that she lost her beau Gordon Shaw, who was killed in the combat of World War I, and she has chosen to give herself instead to the wounded men in the military hospital where she works. Her close and supportive friend is a eunuch Charles Marsden, the sterile center of the play. After a series of affairs Nina decides to marry Sam Evans, who is gifted with the stupidity and insensitivity that guarantee his "happiness." Nina becomes pregnant but is persuaded to have an abortion after she learns that hereditary insanity runs through the male branch of Sam's family. Undaunted, she decides to have a child by another man, selecting Dr. Ned Darrell whom she met at the hospital. The doctor, a rational man, agrees to the plan but the scheme backfires when he and Nina fall in love.

For a brief time at the end of Act Six, Nina Leeds is an integrated being. She feels the four male desires converging on her, and that is enough. She has her husband's "big
brother” love, Ned Darrell’s “lover’s” love, her fetal son's "love," and the "father love" of Charlie Marsden. This brief balancing of energies does not, however, last very long.

O'Neill then skips over a period of eleven years between Act Six and Act Seven. Dr. Darrell has lost his desire for Nina and his appeal for her as well. Her son Gordon, named after her first love, is eleven; Sam is a successful businessman; only Charlie has remained a faithful retainer. By the eighth act Nina is waging her last battle for happiness against her grown son’s fiancee, Madeline Arnold, a battle she loses. Sam dies of a heart attack and Nina falls back into the waiting lap of "dear old Charlie," who "has all the luck at last" because he is "beyond all desire." The play ends on an ironic note of both quiescence and new life as Charlie and Nina wave to the new Gordon as he and his wife-to-be—in an airplane—fly off into that sky from which the first Gordon had fallen, setting the tragedy in motion. The form of the play thus comes into a full, though ironic, circle, and Nina, Everywoman, subsides into a peaceful, child-like wait for death.


40 O'Neill undoubtedly intended some irony in the fact that the play has nine acts and that "Nina" is the heroine's name. The gestation period in this play does involve an ironic kind of birth—Gordon Evans's—and an even more ironic rebirth—Gordon Shaw's—but the central figures are simply exhausted by the end of the play.
Strange Interlude is an interesting play because it shows all those elements that energize O'Neill's earlier ironic tragedies, and yet it goes beyond them. The whole play is based on the contradictions inherent in Nina's dreams (and in the dreams of the other characters as well) and in the reality she keeps reaching out for and grasping. These contradictions are seen by nearly all of the major characters as somehow comic. The "joke-of-fate" theme is an obvious thread in the pattern of the play. The characters' dreams are not only not attained; they are regularly reversed. What is gained is almost always the opposite of what was desired. Both Nina and Ned at different times sacrifice themselves for Sam Evans. But the joke is that they do not save themselves by losing themselves; they simply lose themselves. Even more ironically, their gallant self-sacrifice does not gain Sam's or Gordon's gratitude. They are not even aware of what has been sacrificed for them.

The element of the sublime is more clearly embodied in this play than in almost any other O'Neill play. The image of Gordon Shaw, which becomes a spectre, dominates the entire play. Gordon Shaw is, in Nina's mind and soul and body, the epitome of all that life and love have to offer. Since Nina did not give herself to Gordon sexually, her attachment to him, an attachment that makes all real attachments ultimately unsatisfying, is literally a "sublimated" one. Unfortunately Gordon's is an image which takes on infinite, godlike qualities and is an ideal that no real love or series of loves could
ever equal.

Running parallel to the element of the sublime, which usually operates in the characters' minds under the code names of "love" and "happiness," is a powerful sense of the obscene. Charlie Marsden is the principal "carrier" of this element in the play, but it is eventually felt by Nina and Darrell as well. In the end, all of the characters believe that the "love" they sought after in so many ways was nothing more than nasty, brutal sex—hardly the quality to satisfy completely the needs of creatures so complex as these people are.

Finally, the play is of interest because of its ending. There is an element of the transcendent, or at least a sense of the continuation of life, in the escape of Gordon Evans and Madeline into the sky and away from the muddy earth. But the focus of the play has been so surely on Nina that the escape of the young couple only makes the enervated dozing of the long-struggling Nina that much more pathetically ironic. There are in this play no "hopeless hopes" for the principal characters. There is only a quiet surrender of all desire. The only thing that keeps this play from being thematically identical with O'Neill's failed comedies, his last plays, is that Nina's withdrawal from the struggle of life seems successful and genuinely restful. There is not the terrible animal fear of death that terrorizes some of the central characters in the failed comedies and leaves them no place to hide. It is significant that this play ends in
the afternoon; the night is still to come.

The most powerful element of contradiction that supplies the power may not be the most obvious one: the image of the perfect Gordon Shaw as opposed to the flawed reality of the flesh-and-blood people. If there is a more powerful dynamic in the play, it is the alternation between self-sacrifice and greedy attempts at self-aggrandizement. At times even Nina, who has been described by one critic as a "praying mantis," seems eager to sacrifice herself for someone else's happiness. She gives herself to the soldiers in the hospital and then to Sam to make him happy; she destroys one child to protect Sam; she gives herself to Darrell to produce another child; she surrenders her love for Darrell to protect her child and Sam. Each time, however, the self-sacrifice has disastrous results. Sleeping with the soldiers insulted them and filled Nina with even more revulsion. Giving herself to Sam put her into despair. Giving up her child led her into the ludicrous expedient of searching out a healthy father for another child; that expedient produced another dilemma when she fell in love with the man.

The hopelessness of the whole process could perhaps best be described in Kierkegaardian terms. He claims that the


most absurd element in the highest comedy, the comedy of faith, is that a man has to risk everything with no assurance whatever that he will not lose everything. Otherwise, Kierkegaard claims, the contradictions that are life cause existence to remain "both comic and pathetic in the same degree." The passionate characters in the play attempt at various times to give up "all" in the hope of attaining "all" or perfect happiness. But each time one of the characters does sacrifice himself, he sits back to wait for a return on his investment. When it does not come, the formerly self-sacrificing individual becomes greedy. Nina has a "right" to the second child after she gives up the first; she and Darrell have a "right" to their "happiness" after they have given up so much for Sam; and on it goes.

Typical of O'Neill is the "joke" aspect of all the convolutions of desire and surrender. Each time a choice is made, the reverse of the desired end results. When Nina has a second child to bind herself more securely to Sam and make him happy, she creates in herself the almost unbearable desire to destroy Sam in order to follow her own happiness with Darrell. When Nina greedily latches on to Sam and the child because they put her closer to Gordon Shaw than Darrell could if she left her family, both son and husband drift away from her to form their own exclusive unit. This awareness of the big "joke" behind their struggles strikes each of the important characters at one time or another, but most of the

43 Kierkegaard, in Sypher, Comedy, pp. 196-97.
recognitions come, as one might expect, near the end of the play.

Charles Marsden's sensitivity to the "joke" is regularly tinged with his powerful sense of the obscene. One critic suggests that Charlie represents a "spiritual monism" and that he is apart from the flesh the others so avidly pursue. That is not exactly the case. It is Charlie's very sensibility to the flesh, especially his own, that provides the constant sense of corruption throughout the play. It is precisely the fleshly tinge to Charlie's "spirituality" that makes him more easily revolted by the desires of the flesh than any of the others.

Nina and Ned Darrell are, throughout much of the play, too involved in their passion to be much aware of the joke that is being played on them. For instance, Nina describes her first pregnancy by Sam as "a tragic joke" (p. 72). Darrell looks at the pompous, hog-healthy Sam and says, "... the huge joke has dawned on me! ... Sam is the only normal one! ... we lunatics have made a sane life for him out of our madness!" (p. 139).

The largest jokes on Nina and Ned are saved for the last, and the perpetrator of them is poor, dead, stupid Sam, the unwitting beneficiary of their innumerable sacrifices. In Sam's will there is a half-million dollar bequest to Darrell's research center. But the money has been left to

Engel, Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill, p. 277.
the center. Darrell, already wealthy as Sam's non-working partner, has not even the right to refuse it. It will be Sam's money that will finance the work of Darrell's substitute son, Doctor Preston, the young man through whose research Darrell is beginning to feel a sense of vicarious fulfillment. When young Gordon announces the bequest, Darrell can only stammer, "What's that? That's a joke, isn't it?" And the boy answers, "I thought it must be a joke myself—but Dad insisted" (p. 192). Sam, even in his dying generosity, took a little more from Darrell, the man who had given him everything else. The tension that arises in this scene leads to the cruelest joke on Nina and Ned. Gordon becomes angrier and angrier and seems about to challenge his mother about her relationship to Darrell (the boy is largely ignorant about it and remains so). Darrell stops him, with real authority in his voice. Gordon reacts angrily and threatens to give Darrell a "spanking." Nina is overcome by the awful comedy of it as she thinks, "The son spanks the father!" She bursts into peals of hysterical laughter: "Oh, Gordon, don't make me laugh! It's all so funny!" A conversation follows in which Ned and Nina repeatedly refer to Gordon as Ned's son, but Gordon apparently attributes the appellation to poetic license and never realizes the truth. This joke, of sorts, keeps Nina laughing hysterically. She says, "Yes, God the Father, I hear you laughing . . . you see the joke . . . I'm laughing too . . . it's all so crazy, isn't it?" (pp. 193-94). Ned comes very close to telling the dull
boy everything, but he does not, and Gordon leaves. Then, in their own little joke, Ned tells Nina that she can repay him for protecting the boy's pristine image of her by refusing his proposal of marriage, a proposal he must make because the boy—and "Dad"—would expect it.

The largest joke on both Nina and Ned, however, and on the others too, is that both Gordons, for whom so much was suffered, are obviously as cloddish as Sam. Gordon Evans, the fulfillment of the Gordon Shaw image, is, as we assume Gordon Shaw must have been, a boyish bundle of energy and stupidity. O'Neill describes Gordon Evans as a handsome collegian type whose success might be measured by athletics, money, and pretty girls. Both Gordons are pitiful as gods or demi-gods. They are Marco Polo and the "great God Brown"—hardly adequate gods to explain why a half-dozen men and women destroy themselves. That overriding joke is the most pathetic element in the play.

If there is anything in Strange Interlude that lifts it at least a little above the level of mere soap opera, it is not the "theology" that pervades the play. That amounts to nothing more than attributing to God the Father the onerous concepts of "love" and "honor" and "duty" and "sacrifice." The Mother God appears to be nothing more than the deification of a soft gray figure who cradles babies and tired old men. The strength of the play is in Charles Marsden, a character without a counterpart in the whole O'Neill canon. And it is the hypersensitive Charlie who sniffs the odor of
obscenity hovering about. Whenever anything vaguely connected with sex rears its ugly head, Charlie can sense it. He knows of Nina's affairs in the hospital, of her lust for Ned, and of her abortion. The thought aside that Charlie delivers when he sees Nina and Ned sitting in Sam's living room is filled with references to their disgusting lust which taunts his "sensitive timidities." Like Prufrock he is both repulsed and attracted by the sensual. He desires both a platonic union with Nina, loving her "pilgrim soul," and a sexual one, yet his own passions revolt him. And it is Charlie who awakens others to the "obscenity" in life. His apparent sexlessness creates in the other characters a feeling of contempt as well as a dirty guilt for themselves. But in the end, it is Charlie who "wins."

In the last act, Charlie, dressed in black and portentously snipping off roses with the shears in his hand, comes upon the embracing Gordon and Madeline. His immediate reaction is revulsion. After all, Gordon's father has just been buried. Charlie thinks, "... it's positively bestial" (p. 187). But Charlie's own physical desires are so nearly dead now that he is able to endure the youngsters' kissing as mere "biological preparations," which no longer offend him. He has achieved a distance from the heat of human passion, and he is gathering roses in the afternoon: "Nina is a rose," he says, "my rose, exhausted by the long, hot day, leaning wearily toward peace . . . " (p. 187). Charlie once felt jealous of those whose physical desires were strong
enough to compel them to reach out, enjoy, and possess. Now, however, he knows that "dear old Charlie ... yes, poor dear old Charlie!—passed beyond desire, has all the luck at last!" (p. 187). Once Sam and Ned and both Gordons are gone, Nina falls back into "Father" Charlie's lap. Charlie tells her to regard life as nothing more than "an interlude of trial and preparation, say, in which our souls have been scraped clean of impure flesh and made worthy to bleach in peace" (p. 199). And Nina can now agree with him at last: "Strange Interlude! Yes, our lives are merely strange dark interludes in the electrical display of God the Father!" (p. 199). With that, Nina shrugs off a lifetime of dreams and guilt and agony much as a small child shrugs off sleep effortlessly. And the long somnolent afternoon begins.

The sense of exhaustion in this play is complete, but it is not particularly oppressive. There are no fervent "hopeless hopes" remaining, and there is no attempt to glorify the inevitable defeated struggles of dreamers and lovers as somehow beautiful or significant. This play differs considerably, in that respect, from virtually all of O'Neill's earlier ironic tragedies. No one ever surrenders willingly in those plays to the death of one dream or one hope without seizing upon another. The only difference between this play and O'Neill's last plays, the failed comedies, lies in the easy acceptance of death in Strange Interlude. It hardly seems a fearful thing in this play; it is simply what follows after the drowsy afternoon when men and women have "passed
beyond desire" (p. 187). In The Iceman Cometh, Larry Slade claims that he has passed beyond all dreams and desires; he is, in fact, waiting for the iceman with a peaceful eagerness. But the iceman comes at night, not in the afternoon. And Slade endures the last joke that is played on man in O'Neill's plays: although life and man are worthless, a man has the hog's squealing fear of death—and long before it actually comes. There is some hint of a similar recognition on Charlie's part in Strange Interlude. As Nina is dozing off, she says, "You're so good—dear old Charlie." Marsden, "reacting automatically and wincing with pain," says, "God damn dear old . . . !" (p. 200). But he goes no further. Charlie and Nina are but recent converts to the religion of "peace" that Hickey will preach so effectively in The Iceman Cometh. They have not had their trial in this new faith of quiescence and dreamlessness. One can only assume it will come.

"Mourning Becomes Electra"

O'Neill spent nearly three years (1929-1931) writing this trilogy, Mourning Becomes Electra. When the play was produced in 1931, critics were almost unanimous in their evaluation of the piece as a great moment for American drama. Some critics noted the poverty of the language; some cited the over-obvious reliance on a simplified form of Freudian psychology; several felt the Greek model had been translated ineffectively, perhaps. But the general thrust of the contemporary

45 Tiisanen, O'Neill's Scenic Images, pp. 349-50.
reviews of the play was enthusiastically laudatory.\textsuperscript{46} The consensus placed the work far above other American drama and only slightly below the world's great drama. In the years that have followed critical enthusiasm has greatly cooled. Most of the book-length studies of O'Neill's work are very reluctant to give the piece unqualified praise. To a degree, it would appear that the ovation that greeted the play when it was initially produced was largely a tribute to O'Neill's boldness in borrowing from the Greek of Aeschylus and partly a reflection of the desire on the part of American literati to find an American drama worthy of being compared with the great drama of the world. The play does not seem, however, to be the great American play; it is not even one of O'Neill's half-dozen best works. It is very large and very interesting, but it is not a great play.

O'Neill struggled through several drafts of the play before he was satisfied. In one draft he tried to incorporate both the masks and the thought-aside technique that he had used in other plays. The use of masks in connection with a neo-Greek play, O'Neill felt, would "demand great language to speak--which let me out of it with a sickening bump!"\textsuperscript{47} The thought asides, O'Neill discovered, "don't reveal anything about the characters I can't bring out quite naturally

\textsuperscript{46} Miller, Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic, pp. 406-12.

\textsuperscript{47} O'Neill, in Gelb, p. 755.
in their talk or in their soliloquies when alone. What O'Neill finally settled on was a method that is largely realistic.

At least some attention should be paid to the fact that O'Neill quite consciously had the Oresteian trilogy of Aeschylus in mind when he wrote *Mourning Becomes Electra*. O'Neill said, before writing the play, that he wanted to "get modern psychological approximation of the Greek sense of fate . . . which an intelligent audience of today, possessed of no belief in gods or supernatural retribution, could accept and be moved by." O'Neill's trilogy follows at least the outlines of its predecessor in plot and characters until the third play. O'Neill departs sharply from the Greek trilogy when he shifts the emphasis in the last play from Orin (Orestes) to Lavinia (Electra). More importantly, however, O'Neill departs almost entirely from the Greek in insisting on using a superficially understood Freudianism as the matrix for the fatal necessity he wanted audiences to feel. As a key to O'Neill's trilogy, it is not Aeschylus, but Freud that fits. And the Freudianism is, as Eric Bentley harshly but aptly put it, the "watered-down Freudianism of Sardi's and the Algonquin . . . the Freudianism of the subintelligentsia." O'Neill himself said, after the play was

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48 O'Neill, in Gelb, p. 725.
49 O'Neill, in Gelb, p. 699.
50 Eric Bentley, "Trying to Like O'Neill," from *In Search of Theatre*, pp. 331-45, rpt. in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "The Iceman Cometh"*, p. 47.
produced, that he had avoided using masks only because "the Classical connection was too insistent."\(^1\) O'Neill added, "I should like to see *Mourning Becomes Electra* done entirely with masks, now that I can view it solely as a psychological play, quite removed from the confusing preoccupations the Classical derivation of its plot once caused me.\(^2\) Some American critics, with Joseph Wood Krutch in the lead, championed the play as America's great tragedy, lacking only great language, as Krutch regretfully pointed out, to be ranked with the greatest tragedies of all times.\(^3\) Krutch's enthusiasm seems excessive.

It should perhaps be noted here that although playgoers had to be in the theatre from late afternoon until almost midnight, with a brief dinner break, *Mourning Becomes Electra* was not even O'Neill's longest work. *Strange Interlude* was; it still is. Several other O'Neill plays are nearly as long as the trilogy. *The Iceman Cometh, Long Day's Journey into Night,* and *The Great God Brown* are all approximately as "big" as the trilogy. The three plays in *Mourning Becomes Electra,* totalling thirteen acts, are not long individually. It should be noted also that the three plays do not stand alone very well. Only the third play, *The Haunted,* carries with it a sense of artistic wholeness, and

\(^1\) O'Neill, in Gelb, p. 755.

\(^2\) O'Neill, in Gelb, pp. 755-56.

\(^3\) Joseph Wood Krutch, "Introduction" to *Nine Plays: Eugene O'Neill,* p. xxi.
of course, it makes very little sense without the two others. *Mourning Becomes Electra* is, in reality, a very long three-act play.

O'Neill's tidy plot in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is, as has been mentioned, derived from Aeschylus. In the first of the trilogy, *Homecoming*, the characters are set up. Ezra Mannon (Agamemnon) returns home to his New England mansion after serving in the Civil War to discover that his wife Christine (Clytemnestra) has fallen in love with a sea captain, Adam Brant (Aegisthus). The Mannon's two children, Lavinia (Electra) and Orin (Orestes), have aligned themselves with the parent of the opposite sex. The real action begins when Lavinia discovers her mother's affair and threatens to reveal all to Ezra. Christine, however, solves the problem by giving Ezra poison instead of his medicine, but while dying, Ezra realizes he has been murdered and tells Lavinia of Christine's guilt.

In the second part of the trilogy, *The Hunted*, Orin returns home and he and Lavinia succeed in killing Christine's lover Brant. (The police attribute it to burglars.) Christine, in turn, kills herself.

*Haunted*, the last part of the trilogy, exhibits the Mannon curse working its way to completion. When Orin suggests to Lavinia that they commit incest, she replies he is "too vile to live."54 He takes her at her word and kills

himself. She, in turn, closes herself up in the Mannon "tomb," for so the house is called, and lives out her life, punishing herself for being born.

Of the three mature ironic tragedies, *Mourning Becomes Electra* is undoubtedly the "deadliest" and the one that is closest in general theme to the dark plays of O'Neill's last creative years. In *Desire Under the Elms*, something very close to a full affirmation of life takes place, even in destructive, chaotic circumstances. In *Strange Interlude* the surrender to the peace of exhausted desires contains implicitly the dark judgments on the value of human life which shadow forth in the late plays, but taken by itself, *Strange Interlude* is not half so dark as *Mourning Becomes Electra*. The flight into the sky by a new generation, represented by Gordon and Madeline, symbolizes, however ironically, at least the continuation of life. *Mourning Becomes Electra* ends with Lavinia's perversely heroic embrace of death-in-life.

*Mourning Becomes Electra* contains the various elements that exist in O'Neill's ironic tragedies and, in varying degrees, in all his plays. The sense of irony and contradiction in human existence is perhaps more powerful and more pervasive in this play than in most of his others. Love and hate, affection and lust, life and death, justice and vengeance, dreams and reality—these opposites are absolute opposites. The distance between what the characters ask of life and what they are able to get is so great that suicide comes to be
infinitely preferable to continued existence.

The absurd comedy of man that seems to have been for O'Neill soluble only in the comedy of faith or in nihilism is carefully mapped out in this play. The effect of the drama relies significantly on O'Neill's use of the comic, employing especially the use of the joke motif, the ironic contradiction, the obscene (as it is contrasted to the sublime). In the play the Edenic islands of the South Pacific, visited by Adam Brant and dreamed of by the others, symbolize the sublime, which for the characters is love. Accompanying the sense of the sublime, however, is an even more powerful sense of the obscene which comes to dominate the characters. Their desire for love leads them into distorted attempts to find it, and in typically ironic O'Neill fashion, they find the opposite of what they set out to find. Instead of the sublimity of romantic love, they find the depths of personal degradation, depths so deep and disgusting that all save Lavinia would prefer to die rather than continue to live what seem to them disgusting lives.

There is in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, as there is in many of O'Neill's plays, a Manichean universe: flesh and spirit (or consciousness, even) are the contradictory qualities that man is, and the flesh is regarded as evil. The characters in *Mourning Becomes Electra* struggle to unify the two within themselves through dreams of romantic love in which the flesh and its needs are lifted up and made beautiful. The characters fail in the attempt, and when they do
they are so disgusted by what they consider the degraded and degrading nastiness of their own flesh that they prefer death to continuing so vile an existence. They resemble the Gulliver of Book Four in that man's body and its functions seem unbearably dirty to them when not covered over by lovely dreams or absolute rational control. Whereas Gulliver hides from his revulsion in the half-light of insanity, O'Neill's characters seek the dark release of death. Only death can relieve them of the intolerable contradictions within them. That this kind of hypersensitivity is abnormal and even sick is neither debatable nor relevant. The highly charged nature of O'Neill's dramatic world draws much of its power from this source. For O'Neill's characters, discovering the omnipresence of the libido is always a shock from which none recovers. Human existence becomes for them a pulsating, disgusting mass of sexual energies that defile and degrade.

The controlling contradictions in the trilogy are those which are within the character of Ezra Mannon and are shared by those around him. Ezra recognizes two causes for the distortions within himself. As a Mannon he was raised to believe that "Life was a dying. Being born is starting to die" (p. 54). But in the battles of war death has become so common for him that it does not mean anything. He remarks, "Queer, isn't it? Death made me think of life. Before that life had only made me think of death!" (p. 53). The second cause of Ezra's distortion is his inability to win his wife's
love or express his own. Ironically, just when the war and its attendant deaths freed Ezra from his obsession with death, he is marked for execution. Earlier he had only the need to love; when he has the capacity it is too late.

In Ezra, then, is apparent the progression, common in the others as well, which begins with a sense of contradictory needs and desires, extends to the sublime dream of unification and love, and then degenerates into a dirty joke. Ezra, after explaining his inner contradictions to Christine—that he now wants life instead of death and love instead of duty—tries to love her. He dreams of a new start on an island-Eden somewhere. (The joke is on Ezra since the island which already figures in Christine's plans is Adam Brant's.) Ironically, Ezra's newly won understanding of the beauty of life and love disintegrates when he realizes that Christine's lovemaking with him is done in hopes of bringing on his chest pains so that she can give him the poison as medicine. In contrast to the genuine love he sought, the raw sexuality of the scene (Ezra senses she is only giving him her body) is all the more vivid. He calls Christine a whore, the irony being that all her life he approached her as if she were a whore, but now that he seeks genuine love she behaves as a whore would. It is this "joke of love" which brings on his seizure and the administration of the poison.

Ezra's states of mind typify those of the others. The same element of contradiction exists, in one degree or
another, in all the Mannons. Life plays similar jokes on them. And it is perhaps most clearly seen in the dual capacity each has to imagine and long for the sublimities of love and yet to see in their desires a kind of ineradicable filthiness. As Christine jeers at Lavinia, "Isn't beauty an abomination and love a vile thing?" (p. 45).

The jokes that fate plays on Christine are less involved and more brutal, perhaps, than those played on Ezra. Christine, whose very name tempts one to see her as a victim, although, ironically, not a saving victim, secretly rejoices once she has persuaded Brant to involve himself in the murder by buying the poison. She says to him after he has gone off, "You'll never dare leave me now, Adam--for your ships or your sea or your naked Island girls--when I grow old and ugly!" (p. 42). Christine has learned from the Mannons what a valuable thing mutual guilt can be in retaining the facade of "love." It is Christine's favorite child, Orin, who kills her lover and then brings back a newspaper account to gloat in front of her because the article is so short. Brant meant little to anyone, thinks Orin. The most brutal joke on Christine occurs after her two children have returned home to announce to her what they have done. Her lover is dead, killed by the very son in whom she had hidden away all her love from Ezra for twenty years. There is nothing left in life for her except the dubious privilege of staying alive to cover up the foul Mannon secrets. But Vinnie, who can see what her mother is thinking of, shouts, "Mother! What are
you going to do! You can live!” Christine simply "glares at her as if this were the last insult." Then she bursts into shrill laughter and says, with strident mockery, "Live!" (p. 123). Christine then goes inside and kills herself.

The character in the play who is most sensitive to the comic—and also to both the sublime and the obscene—is Orin, the son. Orin describes an experience he had in battle of killing one man and then another who seemed exactly like the first. He felt he was murdering the same man over and over and that, in the end, he would discover that the man was himself: "I thought what a joke it would be on the stupid generals like father if everyone on both sides suddenly saw the joke was on them and laughed and shook hands! So I began to laugh and walked toward their lines with my hand out. [He led his fellows in an insane, murderous rush on enemy lines.] Of course, the joke was on me and I got this wound in my head for my pains” (p. 95). Orin, then, like Ezra, found life in death. He describes hillsides of corpses as "nothing but a dirty joke life plays on life!” (pp. 93-94).

Orin like his father had come home in search of his dreams of love. With the help of Melville's Typee Orin constructed for himself a dream world of love that involved the sexual innocence and warm beauty of the South Sea Islands combined with all his affection for his mother. It is the betrayal that Orin feels when he discovers that his mother has a lover that leads him into the jealous fury that kills
Brant. But in the midst of this "victory" over Brant, the big joke that occurred to Orin during the war returns to haunt him. He feels he has killed himself.

Lavinia and Orin together experience the same contradictions as had Ezra between the sublime and the obscene. After Christine's suicide they go to the islands, the symbols for all the characters of the sublimity of innocent beauty and love. Here Lavinia sees the good spirit of love; Orin is only disgusted by the naked native women. But even Orin can feel drawn to the purity of his childhood sweetheart, Hazel Niles, whom he intends to marry. But the presence of that kind of innocence only makes Orin feel "a million times more vile, that's the hell of it!" (p. 151). And, as if to prove his increased sensitivity to the pervasive nastiness of the flesh, he accuses Lavinia of having desired Brant and of being jealous of her mother. He mocks an attraction Lavinia felt to an island native. She (falsely) claims her feelings were innocent and beautiful, but Orin says, regarding the native, "You watched him stare at your body through your clothes, stripping you naked! And you wanted him!" (p. 154). The climactic fleshly degradation which suggests itself to Orin is the desire to commit incest with Lavinia. When she condemns him, it is just the "benediction" he has been waiting for, and he kills himself.

After Orin's "accidental" death Lavinia makes one last effort to pull her "right" to innocent love and happiness from the Mannon darkness of guilt and death. Her suitor
Peter Niles visits her, but his innocence works on her as did the innocence of Hazel on Orin. Lavinia, in contrast to this purity, senses her degradation even more and tries to drive off Peter with lewd suggestions. She succeeds, marches into the Mannon house, and begins her service of death-in-life, making the object of almost religious devotion that same inward, selfish, unloving character of the Mannons that had brought down the curse of murder, suicide, and sterility on that family. The Mannons do kill themselves, as Orin said. They do not, in the end, love even their own lives. Lavinia's continued existence is antipathetic to life; it is a celebration of the death-in-life spirit of the Mannons. The family which had lived by repressing manifestations of love and beauty around it is represented by this woman who will torture the only Mannon life left—her own.

Mourning Becomes Electra is, without question, the darkest of O'Neill's plays prior to his last works. The play ends with the deliberate sterility of the last of the Mannons. Although life and fate played jokes on all O'Neill's characters in the earlier ironic tragedies, virtually all of them rescued something from their defeats. Most were able to hold on to hopeless hopes; most were able to see the beauty in their doomed struggles. But in this play, all dreams and hopeless hopes collapse before the play is over. Two of the characters, Christine and Orin, end their lives rather than continue to live lives without meaning, purpose, dignity, love, or dreams. Their lives become harsh jokes and then intolerably
disgusting burdens and they refuse to continue. Only Lavinia chooses to live, and she does so in order to culminate the Mannon victory of hatred and death-in-life over love and even over life itself.
CHAPTER VI

O'NEILL'S LATE PLAYS

Between the premiere of Days Without End, January, 1935, and the premiere of The Iceman Cometh, October, 1946, O'Neill had nothing to do with the theatre of his time. There were occasional reports that he was working on a mammoth cycle of plays dealing with America in some way, but not much was known about them other than that the number of plays in the cycle was getting larger. As O'Neill himself said in 1941, "I have not told anyone yet of the expansion of idea to eleven plays. Seems ridiculous—idea was first five plays, then seven, then eight, then nine, now eleven—will never live to do it—but what price anything but a dream!" O'Neill did not live to complete his great cycle; he in fact tore up most of the considerable work he had done on the plays when he realized he could not finish them. However, he did complete one of the cycle plays to his own satisfaction, a play called A Touch of the Poet, copyrighted in 1946. A second play from the cycle apparently escaped O'Neill when he destroyed all his

1 Miller, Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic, pp. 156-58.

2 O'Neill, in Gelb, p. 839.
uncompleted drafts. That play, *More Stately Mansions*, had been revised by him, but he was far from finished with it and did not intend it to survive him. Its survival was an accident. The play was later edited and produced by Karl-Ragnar Gierow with some success, but it seems unfair to pay very much attention to a play the man did not get a chance to finish.

Apart from *More Stately Mansions* and *A Touch of the Poet*, the plays in the cycle are only titles; little else is known of what O'Neill's preliminary drafts were like, other than that he had done at least first drafts of eight of the plays.

During the last years of his life, O'Neill was working on another "cycle" of plays, a cycle of six one-act plays, a form he had not used for many years. Of these, only "Hughie" survives. The whole cycle was to be entitled "By Way of Obit." Although O'Neill wrote scenarios for three or four other one-act plays, he did not finish any others and destroyed the scenarios.

It should be noted in connection with both of these cycles of plays that O'Neill was in progressively poorer health the last dozen years of his life. (He died in 1953.) He had a degenerative nervous disease, apparently inherited from his mother, that attacked the motor centers in his brain. To the

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3 Donald Gallup, "Prefatory Note" to O'Neill's *More Stately Mansions* shortened by Karl-Ragnar Gierow and edited by Gallup (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. x. According to Gallup, curator of the O'Neill collection at Yale, the typescript of the play has a note signed by O'Neill attached to it: "Unfinished Work This script to be destroyed in case of my death!"

end of his life, his mind was not affected, only his ability to function physically. From his youth O'Neill had a nervous trembling in his hands that sometimes was noticeable, even to those who knew him only slightly. By the last eight or nine years of his life, he found it impossible to control the trembling in his hands even well enough to use a pencil. He tried using electric typewriters and dictaphones as well as dictating his work to his wife, but all to no avail. He usually wrote in bed, with a board propped upon his knees, yellow legal-sized pad in hand, and a pile of extremely sharp pencils nearby. It is not surprising, perhaps, that with the advent of his nervous condition O'Neill found it impossible to change the thirty-year-old physical routine of his creative efforts. There are those critics, Doris Falk and Travis Bogard among them, who claim that O'Neill had followed his creative urges and run from his personal demons as far as he could possibly go. He had, so they claim, nothing more to say. It is possible, however, to see the ultimate cruelty visited upon O'Neill as ironically consonant with the tragic vision of human existence that occupied him during most of his creative years. No better "joke" could be played on a writer than to take away his ability to write. O'Neill's last recorded words, by which he drew the ironic circle of

5 Gelb, numerous places in the book.

6 Bogard, Contour in Time, pp. 363-453; Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension, pp. 156-64.
his own life, were spoken as he lay dying in a hotel in Boston: "Born in a hotel room--and God damn it--died in a hotel room." (He was and did.) Both of O'Neill's cycles of plays were his own hopeless hopes. And what little growth they achieved is a tribute to this tortured man's creative drive.

Ironically, it is not for the huge projects he attempted to carry out during those years of failing health that O'Neill seems likely to be remembered. If he is to be considered more than a bold, imaginative, often brash pioneer, it will be because he took some time out from his gigantic cycle to write three deeply personal plays: A Moon for the Misbegotten, Long Day's Journey into Night, and The Iceman Cometh. Of the late plays, as has been mentioned, Long Day's Journey into Night and More Stately Mansions are not failed comedies and will not be considered, whereas The Iceman Cometh will be analyzed in a separate chapter following this one because it is the best manifestation of those thematic and dramatic tendencies in O'Neill's last plays that make them failed comedies. "Hughie," then, will be dealt with first because it is a one-act play. A Touch of the Poet, the other cycle play, will be treated next, and A Moon for the Misbegotten will be analyzed last.

7 Gelb. p. 939.
"Hughie"

"Hughie," O'Neill's last one-act play, was written in 1941 and was one of that series of six one-act plays O'Neill proposed to write in a small cycle to be called "By Way of Obit." Although he wrote scenarios for several others, "Hughie" is the only one O'Neill finished. It has none of the melodramatic tendencies obvious in some of O'Neill's early one-act plays. It contains that subtle sense of the beauty in human relationships that exists even in the harshest and darkest of O'Neill's last plays. And grim as it is, this little play is not the darkest of O'Neill's failed comedies.

"Hughie" offers some difficulty in that one of the two characters in the play, Charlie Hughes, a night clerk in a "third class dump," has almost nothing to say until near the end of the play. He has been supplied, however, with a great deal in O'Neill's stage directions. Much of Charlie Hughes's role in the play involves reactions and observations on his part that are silent and could be expressed only by the use of "thought asides." O'Neill himself thought perhaps someone could combine a stage play with a motion picture picture to reveal Hughes's thoughts and reactions while "Erie" Smith, the third-class Broadway gambler and bum, babbles on to the unhearing clerk. But O'Neill no longer had the energy

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or ambition to try to work out the staging problems himself.9

The first production of "Hughie" was done in Stockholm in 1958. All of the unspoken material was left unspoken, and the actor playing the clerk was left to make as much of his reactions clear as he could.10 Since a great deal of what the clerk is thinking is prompted by the various street noises by which he both marks and passes time, one would expect a competent actor to make much of the "unspoken" material clear.

There is no real plot in "Hughie." The play is simply a 3:00 a.m. conversation between two men, Erie Smith and Charles Hughes. Hughes is a night clerk in a seedy New York hotel. His marriage and his job are equally dismal. A semi-moribund man, he desires violence. The policeman's feet on the pavement remind him that he would like to see a gunfight. When he hears an ambulance, he hopes the patient will be lucky enough to die. A firetruck goes by and he wishes for a fire big enough to burn the whole city down. He has frequent imaginary conversations, especially with a glamorous big-time gambler, Arnold Rothstein, with whom he plays poker and wins. Hughes plays the saving role of an admirer for the other character, Erie Smith. Smith is a petty gambler, a

9 Gelb, p. 844.

fringe hoodlum, and a Broadway sport with many racy stories. He plays the role of the man-in-the-know, a "Wise Guy" who can lead "Suckers" around by the nose with stories of what a slick operator and gifted womanizer he is. There is one other character in the play, Hughie, the former night clerk, now deceased. Like Charles Hughes, he was an admirer of Smith, and the memory of him in Smith's mind significantly contributes to the emotional climax of the action.

What is readily apparent to the audience, besides the characters of both Smith and Hughes in themselves, is their relationship to each other. Each is a lonely, self-admitted failure, needing to escape himself and his fear of death, yet for most of the play neither man can communicate with the other. Each talks primarily to himself, and neither reaches more than the periphery of the other. When the moment of utmost horror and disgust and fear comes for each man, the other is moving off in another direction.

Yet Hughes does feel an admiration, a kind of "love," for Smith. This type of love, based as it seems to be on O'Neill's notion that love among men is basically a selfish propping up of someone else's illusions in order to have one's own propped up, is a beautiful thing. Its beauty certainly does not extend beyond the boundaries of the hell these men are in, but loneliness and a feeling of worthlessness and boredom are perhaps universal enough for O'Neill's audiences to sense at least distant kinship with these two creatures.
Watching the two men circling around and around in their own little spirals is at first grotesquely comic, then pathetically sad, and finally oddly beautiful. When the two spirals come together, however fleetingly and superficially, something of real beauty is achieved. Such communication first begins after Erie Smith says, "No use gabbin' here all night... you can't do me no good." He then hears the night clerk asking him "pleadingly" to talk about Rothstein (p. 290). From that moment on Smith and Hughes begin cooperating in building up and sustaining images of themselves that make it possible for both to avoid having to be alone with nothing but the fear of death for company.

"Hughie" is considered here to be one of O'Neill's failed comedies for two reasons. It contains comic elements and uses the technique of building up comic energies which are then released, thus simulating the impact of a tragic ending.

The characters of Erie Smith and Charles Hughes are superficially comic. As an example, Erie is deliberately overdrawn by O'Neill so that no one, least of all the clerk, will mistake him for anything but a windy little charlatan. He has a "pasty complexion, a big head, fat arms, and fat legs too short for his body"; thus his gait has a waddling effect. He wears stylish, too slick clothes, though they are obviously old and faded. His shirt is "a shade of blue that sets teeth on edge" (p. 263). Physically, Erie Smith is a comic lie. He is not a gambler or a ladies' man; he is a fat little loser in life whose very appearance gives him away.
But it is in his description of Erie's manner that O'Neill makes clear the comic contrasts between the man's role-playing and his probable real self. In his efforts to seem a sport and a "Wise Guy" in "the Real Know," Erie speaks in a low guarded tone, his eyes wary of nonexistent eavesdroppers. On his face is the prescribed pattern of gambler's dead pan, and his mouth is set in the cynical leer of one who possesses superior, inside information. His shifty once-over glances never miss the "price tag he detects on everything and everybody" (p. 264). Erie's exaggerated self-appraisal does no one any harm, except perhaps, as we learn later, himself. In this sense, then, he is a safely comic figure.

The balance of the comic energy in the play is supplied by Charlie Hughes, the night clerk. On one level, the night clerk is the "straight man" in this apparent comic routine. It is his failure even to hear the majority of what Erie boasts and blusters about that deflates Erie in comic fashion. The braggart Erie pokes the hole in himself that lets all of the hot air out of his false characterization. But Hughes supplies more than just the unbelieving "attention" that deflates Erie Smith. He is comic himself. He is a dead man, who goes through the motions, occasionally, of seeming alive. He gives answers to questions he doesn't hear; he makes remarks apropos of nothing; he smiles a mechanical smile when he thinks the customer expects one. But Hughes supplies even more than that. There is a repulsiveness about him that is supplied partly by O'Neill's description of him and partly by
the contrast between his absolutely harmless appearance and
the cynical and violent thoughts with which he entertains
himself. The would-be cynic, Erie Smith, is an innocent
child compared to Charlie Hughes. O'Neill describes him as
being tall and thin, with a large nose, mouth, and ears.
His complexion is sallow and greasy, "studded with pimples
from ingrowing hairs." His thinning brown hair is "powdered
with dandruff" (p. 263). His teeth are in need of repair.
Seldom in all of his plays did O'Neill go to so much trouble
to describe a physically repulsive character. Such repul­siveness is only part of this man, however. His boredom
with life is so deadening that only thoughts of mass deaths,
violent shootings, and the destruction of whole cities by
fire are sufficient to entertain him. He is a Caligula, if
only in his mind. Charlie Hughes is an ugly, silent little
man with a perverse fascination with violence and death. But
it is from this disgusting person and from the buffoonish
Erie Smith that O'Neill succeeds in producing a moment of
theatrical beauty, perhaps even a moment of tragic grace.
And he found the materials for both in the superficially comic,
revolting, and ugly.

The manner in which O'Neill's failed comedies operate
is strange. These plays begin either with characters who do
not appear to matter much, as is the case in "Hughie," or with
characters who do not seem to be in serious danger as is the
case in The Iceman Cometh. Then slowly, these characters are
made to seem to matter and their danger and their pain
become real. Henry Hewes, who saw the Stockholm production of "Hughie," feels that in the play O'Neill "has written the whole cycle of life into a forty-minute piece. The wise guy and the sucker stand for all forms of human interdependence. The swing from naked truth to illusion, from isolation to communication, from bitterness to love are all basic to living. We alternate from one to the other, and this cycle motion rather than the achievement of a goal is the stuff and richness of life." O'Neill himself explains better than anyone else what it is that he does in these failed comedies. In writing to the producer, Lawrence Langner, O'Neill tried to explain what the best moments in The Iceman Cometh were like. His remarks apply as well to "Hughie."

"What I mean is," wrote O'Neill, "there are moments in it that suddenly strip away the secret soul of a man stark, naked, not in cruelty or moral superiority, but with an understanding compassion which sees him as a victim of the ironies of life and of himself. These moments are for me the depth of tragedy, with nothing more that can possibly be said." What O'Neill achieves then, in these last plays is what might be called the "humanism of despair." He has surrendered his earlier search for the behind-life force that gives human beings their significance, and he has surrendered

11 Hewes, p. 225.

for good his search for those mystical insights which show up so clumsily and unconvincingly in his spiritual comedies. He has even given up trying to find an equivalent for the Greek sense of fate which might make the individual important by relating him to inscrutable but omnipotent forces. In O'Neill's last plays, the only beauty is in man, in individual men. No longer did he seek to find and express the significance of the Life behind lives. Only the lives themselves interested him. And only in them did he find beauty.

It is in the character of Erie Smith, especially, that the comic energies of the play focus, only to dissipate, in typical failed-comedy fashion, for the tragic letdown. Erie, of course, for all his cynical posing as a "Wise Guy," is desperately lonely and vulnerable. An audience watches this fat, loud, little man flattening himself in comic fashion by bragging to a man who is not even listening. Soon, however, it becomes apparent that stripping off the mask reveals a man at whom one cannot laugh. His pain is real.

Once during his long, one-sided conversation with the clerk, Erie Smith tells of the time he visited Hughie's family for dinner. He got no more than a half-dozen words into one of his racy stories before the drab wife of Hughie stopped him. Erie can only say, "I coulda liked her--a little--if she'd give me a chance" (p. 280). The woman did not give him that chance. Later, when Hughie tried to apologize for his wife's behavior, Erie changed the subject, apparently because he found it painful. Erie, however, says
to the clerk, "Believe me, Pal, I can stop guys that start telling me their family troubles." To this lie, Erie himself can only give a "forced chuckle" (p. 281). But the clerk, instead of hearing the pain in the man's recollection of a distressing experience, hears only the chuckle, thinks that Erie is "telling me jokes," and so forces out a hollow laugh and says, "That's a good one, Erie. That's the best I've heard in a long time!" (p. 281). At that moment, Erie "is so hurt and depressed he hasn't the spirit to make a sarcastic crack" (p. 282). Erie could survive the clerk's professional neutrality or his indifferent silence, but the man's pretending to enjoy greatly a joke that has not even been told strips Erie of all his defenses.

It is from that moment on that Erie drives almost unswervingly into the depths of despair. He begins realizing the truth about himself even though he does not find the truth very palatable. Erie admits now that Hughie did not enjoy him, but his lies about gambling and fast women because they gave him material for his own daydreams. Hughie in his dull life enjoyed the very idea of big bets, "making" Follies girls, and traveling in the company of glamorous gangsters. Smith wishes Hughie were alive so he could tell those lies again and half believe them himself. When he realizes the clerk has not even been listening to his reveries about Hughie, his despair finds harsh expression, and he declares that "Hughie's better off . . . that he's out of the racket. I mean, the whole goddamned racket. I mean life" (p. 288).
The wise guy's wisdom finally turns out to be a strong desire to be dead. This aggressive, garrulous, phony man turns out to be nothing but a failure, a man so lonely he would rather be dead. Although it is only an accident that this new clerk, Charles Hughes, turns out to need Erie's tall tales as much as Hughie ever had, the clerk's need is Erie's salvation. And the rescuing of this sadly comic little man seems a fine moment in drama. There is in Erie no self-pity. There is only the brash front and the vast and echoing loneliness within.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of "Hughie" lies in its inversion of much of O'Neill's earlier dramatic practice. Often in O'Neill's earlier works what is seen and desired as sublime by his characters eventually comes to be a joke on them, even a dirty joke. In this play what appears in the beginning to be a vulgar joke becomes something serious, and, in the end, something that has an element of the sublime in it. When Erie's loneliness for Hughie is most painful to him, he gives a short speech listing all the lies he wants to tell Hughie. It is his moment of deepest despair when he wants to escape life as Hughie did. But at the same time the clerk, Hughes, is dreaming of winning a hand of poker against Arnold Rothstein, and Erie's words supply him with part of what he needs to fly up and away from himself. His dream climaxes when Rothstein is beaten, and on the clerk's face is a "beatific vision." He resembles "a holy saint, recently elected to Paradise" (pp. 287-88).
He continually asks Erie questions about gambling and Arnold Rothstein. Erie is irritated until he notices the pleading tone of the clerk's voice and looks at his face. "There is a pause. Suddenly his Erie's face lights up with a saving revelation [my emphasis]." (p. 290). Both men are saved. Charlie Hughes becomes the new "Hughie." It is significant that O'Neill deliberately uses the religious vocabulary that he does in describing the moment when each man again has an excuse and a means for escaping himself. Out of the ridiculous and the repulsive, O'Neill rescues a moment of considerable dramatic sublimity. That the dreams and illusions of these men are pathetic need not be argued. The beauty that O'Neill finds is not in the dreams but in those subtle moments when these two miserable individuals come together, not in great strength of character, but in mutual need. And the contact that is established, however ephemeral and however based on selfish needs, has something of the divine in it.

"A Touch of the Poet"

A Touch of the Poet, the only one of the cycle plays that O'Neill intended to survive him, was written between 1935 and 1942. O'Neill had nearly finished the play by 1936, but he revised it considerably after he had completed both The Iceman Cometh and Long Day's Journey into Night.13 It is perhaps the earliest of O'Neill's last plays which can be identified, with considerable justification, as a failed comedy.

13 Bogard, Contour in Time, p. 376.
(With the exception of More Stately Mansions and Long Day's Journey into Night all of O'Neill's last plays are identified as failed comedies: "Hughie," A Touch of the Poet, A Moon for the Misbegotten, and The Iceman Cometh.)

A Touch of the Poet generates considerable comic energy in its characters, in its situations, and in its pivotal actions; but that comic energy is used up with what seems to be tragic intent. One critic, Timo Tiusanen, claims that A Touch of the Poet is "a comedy with tragic overtones." He is probably wrong. A Touch of the Poet is perhaps the least dark of O'Neill's failed comedies, but there is little doubt that the comedy in the play is in its manner and not in its final intent. The play is a rich one, filled with much of the brutal honesty and astringent compassion that broods through O'Neill's last despairing pieces.

The plot in the play is two-fold. On one level it involves the tragic-comic unmasking of Cornelius ("Con") Melody. On another level it concerns the attempts of his daughter Sara to snare in marriage Simon Harford. Con Melody's father had bought his way into the gentry, and Con, thus, is overwhelmingly concerned with playing the role of an aristocrat, a role which does not suit him too well, especially since his wife Nora is an Irish peasant. His daughter Sara he regards as a peasant also. And he himself is an innkeeper. Sara's beau Simon, a Yankee blue-blood, is an
idealistic with "a touch of the poet." He remains offstage throughout the play recuperating from an illness. Simon is a link, though, between Con Melody and Simon's mother, the aristocratic Deborah Harford. In a humorous scene Melody almost succeeds in seducing this lady but for the alcohol on his breath. The central conflict of the play is introduced when a lawyer of the Harfords comes to negotiate with Melody, in effect, to buy him off in an effort to prevent the marriage of young Simon to Sara. Con at first mistakes the lawyer's visit, thinking it is to arrange a dowry, so when the truth is known, he is forced to duel, he thinks, to save the family honor. The duel, however, is a disappointment since Melody is never able to see the elder Harford. Instead he and his small retinue manage a brawl with a footman and a servant or two, and Con returns a destroyed man. In despair he shoots his thoroughbred horse, symbolic to him of his own aristocratic pretensions. In this action he considers that Major Melody has died along with the horse, and he then assumes the accent and mannerisms of an Irish peasant, a "drunken Mick." In his reveling he is like a satyr. Sara, in the meantime, has succeeded in seducing Simon and has subsequently fallen in love with him. He then feels compelled, out of honor, to marry her.

15 O'Neill, A Touch of the Poet, in The Later Plays of Eugene O'Neill, ed. Bogard, p. 164. O'Neill first used the expression "a touch of the poet" to describe Robert Mayo in Beyond the Horizon.
Although the overtones of the play are comic (as will be demonstrated), the plot itself is that of a tragedy. In the end Sara appears to win just as her father is losing, but neither the defeat nor the victory seems healthy. Melody's "comic" downfall does not produce a healthy reassessment or a truthful evaluation of himself. If he is not a genuine aristocrat, neither is he a true peasant. His education, experiences, and tastes have raised him above that level. But he chooses to wallow with the Irish riffraff. Even his daughter begs him to become Major Melody again, but he will not. His unmasking has resulted only in his assuming a new mask. If Melody's ending is tragic, Sara's is certainly not happy either. Her crafty capture of Simon seems tainted by her original motives, a desire for money and upward mobility, and by her actually falling in love with the man she set out to catch cold-bloodedly. She has used Simon's "touch of the poet" and his sense of honor to trap him. Her drive will force him to prove himself to her as a husband by becoming a commercial success, but that "touch of the poet" will one day certainly make him realize what he has sold in order to buy Sara's love.

The comic in A Touch of the Poet is found both in the characterization and in the actions. Cornelius Melody is the primary comic figure. O'Neill describes him in these words: "His manner is that of a polished gentleman. Too much so. He overdoes it and one soon feels that he is overplaying a role which has become more real than his real self to him (p. 155).
Melody is, with some qualifications, a miles gloriosus. Heparades around in his scarlet uniform, rides a noble thorn­oughbred mare, and keeps a brace of dueling pistols. He has a capacity for looking for insults, which he invariably finds. He often stands in front of a large mirror in the main room of the tavern, admiring his face and form and reciting lines from Byron's "Childe Harold." He dresses with foppish elegance in the finely tailored clothes of the English aristocracy—of about fifteen years before. He makes constant reference to his drinking nightly as any gentleman is allowed to, "provided he can hold his liquor as he should" (p. 163). He has removed all traces of the brogue from his speech and speaks instead with the elaborate elegance of an English gentleman with an overlay of the oaths of a gentleman soldier. This miles gloriosus is constantly referring to the great battle of Talavera during which he acquitted himself with so much distinction that the Duke of Wellington singled him out for high praise. The audience also learns, however, that he was kicked out of the service for indiscretions involving Spanish ladies and their hus­bands. Most of what Melody boasts of is not taken very seri­ously by anyone around him other than Nora, his peasant wife.

Cornelius Melody, the miles gloriosus of this piece, has the requisite supporting cast of spongers and parasites. His retinue consists of three bog-trotting Irishmen: Dan Roche, Paddy O'Dowd, and Patch Riley. Dan Roche is middle­aged, "squat, bowlegged, with a potbelly and short arms
lumpy with muscle. His face is flat with a big mouth, protruding ears, and red-rimmed little pig's eyes." O'Dowd is "thin, round-shouldered, flat-chested, with a pimply complexion, bulgy eyes, and a droopy mouth. His manner is oily and fawning." And Riley, the third of the unholy threesome that is in constant attendance on the Major, is an old man dressed in rags. He carries an Irish bagpipe under his arm. He sports a "thatch of dirty white hair" and his "washed-out blue eyes have a wandering half-witted expression" (p. 167). These three comic gems constitute Melody's crowd of admirers and supporters. They hang around principally for the free food and liquor that the Major gives out with great largesse. They are required to do little more than to keep in their proper place when they are around the Major. When the great battle with the Harfords comes, these men form a large part of Melody's ludicrous army. The other of the Major's company is Jamie Cregan, who is something like the stock companion for the great man. A distant cousin who also served at the battle of Talavera, he has just come to see Major Melody. Cregan is the only one of Melody's followers who seems to have some genuine respect for what this miles gloriosus had once been.

There is also something of the comic in the characters of Sara Melody and her unseen beau, Simon Harford. Sara has the tongue of a fishwife when she cares to use it, which she does with some regularity. The relationship between Sara and Simon is roughly that in the prince-and-the-peasant fairy
tales. She is the humble but beautiful peasant girl who rescues the charming prince. (He developed a fever while living alone in the woods and was taken to the Melody tavern where Sara nursed him back to health.) There is considerable humor in Sara's reports on her approaches to Simon, the Prince. She invariably plays the innocent, but she enjoys the humor in the fact that it is really Simon who is the blushing innocent. Sara quite slyly maneuvers the young man from one stage of their relationship to another until she ends up in his bed and in his heart. She battles with Simon's mother, Deborah Harford, a delicate little woman who has some strange power over her son which she attempts to exercise once she knows he is in the clutches of Sara. But the peasant wins out over the "evil" mother and love conquers all in romantic comedy fashion—almost.

There is also a considerable amount of the comic in the pivotal events in the play as well as in the characters themselves. In one scene Deborah Harford arrives at Melody's tavern looking for her son. The Major arouses all of the charm and seductive hauteur he is capable of, which is considerable, and he almost succeeds in arousing genuine passion in this porcelain butterfly. But just as Con is leaning over to seal his victory over this aristocrat with a kiss, she smells whiskey on his breath, and regains her dominance by sneering at his "absurd performance" (p. 182).

The pivotal events of the play also have comic overtones. On the evening of July 27, 1828, Melody and his cronies gather
to celebrate the anniversary of the battle of Talavera. All in attendance get thoroughly drunk, and the Major, using silverware, cups, and plates, treats them to a table top recreation of the fighting of the battle. Late in the celebration, a pompous little man, Nicholas Gadsby, the Harfords' lawyer, comes looking for "the proprietor of this tavern, by name, Melody" (p. 214). In an hilarious series of misunderstandings, Melody hears the word "settlement" and assumes that the lawyer has come to arrange the dowry and settlement of the marriage of one gentleman's son, Simon Harford, to another gentleman's daughter, Sara Melody. When Gadsby, to whom "settlement" is synonymous with "pay-off," makes it clear that Melody's "Irish wit" (p. 216) in making such a proposal is not appreciated, Melody is infuriated. Harford, instead of treating him as a gentleman, has sent a lackey to buy him off. Con is stopped from pounding on Gadsby only when Sara tells him he should not soil his hands on a "paid lackey" (p. 218). Melody then activates his troops, Roche and O'Dowd, and the two rowdies hustle the protesting lawyer out the door and down the street, kicking him all the way. Melody, whose fury is now directed at Harford, intends to demand a formal apology, "or else he meets me in the morning . . . at ten paces or across a handkerchief!" (p. 219). Neither Nora nor Sara can stop Melody. He commands his "Corporal," Jamie Cregan, to join him in "stirrup cup" (p. 222), and they are off to do battle with the high and mighty Harfords, a row which is so much the more humiliating for Melody since it is
witnessed by Deborah Harford. The battle, which is the comic highlight of the play, is not shown, but it is reported with great flair by Jamie Cregan after he and the Major have been released from jail. It seems the great battle did not involve Harford himself, but several of his servants and four club-carrying policemen. According to Jamie's report, the Major was worth any two men as he whipped one and thumped another and kicked a third, roaring and swearing all the while. Both men were finally subdued and hauled off to jail. Harford, anxious to avoid scandal, bailed the two men out the same night.

The unmasking of Con Melody, which takes place in the fourth act of the play, has something of the comic in it. After he shoots his horse he begins speaking in an Irish brogue. Sara starts to laugh at him. Melody tells Nora, "Lave Sara laugh. Sure, who could blame her? I'm roarin' myself inside me. It's the damnedest joke a man ivir played on himself since time began" (p. 247). The joke, Melody explains, is not that he shot his horse, but that once the horse was dead he realized that the Major was dead too. Melody did not then shoot himself "because it'd be a mad thing to waste a good bullet on a corpse! ... Didn't I tell you there was a great joke in it? Well, that's the joke" (p. 249).

Thus, as has been pointed out, although the characters and actions in the play seem somewhat comic, the plot is a tragic one since Melody never finds himself but merely assumes another mask. There are also other difficulties in
accepting the play as a comedy (or even a "comedy with tragic overtones," as Timo Tiusanen describes it) as well as difficulties in accepting it as a play equal in quality to O'Neill's best works, *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *The Iceman Cometh*. A main problem lies in the character of Cornelius Melody; he is too vicious to gain much sympathy from the audience. For instance, at one point he fiercely attacks his daughter with disgust in his voice, "Keep your thick wrists and ugly peasant paws off the table in my presence, if you please! They turn my stomach!" (p. 206). He seems unwilling or unable to give even that minimal amount of love and respect that is due those in his own family. He bullies even his lackies who fawn on him. The amount of sympathy that seems to be directed toward Melody at the end of the play seems in excess of what he merits. There is almost nothing about him that is attractive other than his outsized, distorted illusions. The audience can at least sympathize with him, though, as a man who is trapped between a wife who adores him and accepts all his aristocratic illusions and a daughter who despises him and is constantly attacking those pretensions. But as a character he is in no way lovable.

Another difficulty in the play derives from an emphasis on love in the final scene which prevents Melody's tragedy from taking on its proper aura of size. The ending is thus superficially "happy." Both Nora and Sara, and even Con to

16 Tiusanen, p. 325.
a small degree, seem to be motivated more by love in the end than by anything else. There are hints, however, that the "love" that seems to move the three of them is not the warm, encompassing kind, but rather a strange kind of self-protective egotistical shield put up and maintained by the characters. Nora, for instance, is not so much in love with Con as she is in love with her love for him. When Con is playing the new role of a peasant at the end, her love remains the same because it is hers, not his. And in this love is her pride. Sara, though she has fallen in love with Simon, takes none of his dreams and ideals seriously. In the final scene she claims to understand the "nobility" of her mother's love. If her love for Simon is, in fact, of the same variety as her mother's for Con, there is something more to be desired.

Another difficulty in accepting this play as a comedy is the tragic overtones of Melody's relationship to Deborah Harford. She preys on his mind as the genuine blue-blood which he is not, and the contrast between her and himself grows greater after she rebukes his advances in the seduction scene and then witnesses the battle royal in front of her house. His undignified beating does not so much cause his collapse as does his seeming to be in her eyes just "another drunken Mick raising a crazy row" (p. 220).

Melody's memory of the event has the same sense of personal degradation that is in Yank's memories of the pale and ghostly Mildred Douglas who called him a "filthy beast." Melody, jeering at himself, recalls how he must have appeared
"cursing like a drunken, foulmouthed son of a thieving shebeen keeper who sprang from the filth of a peasant hovel, with pigs on the floor—with that pale Yankee bitch watching from a window, sneering with disgust!" (p. 241). In his disgust and collapse, Melody joins the image of the delicate Harford woman and what she represents to him with his thoroughbred mare and all the mare represents to him, and he confuses the two in an image that is reminiscent of the recurring images in the mind and words of the Hairy Ape. Jamie Cregan says, "All the same, it's no fun listening to his mad blather about the pale bitch [my emphasis], as he calls her, like she was a ghost [my emphasis], haunting and scorning him. And his gab about his beautiful thoroughbred mare is madder still, raving what a grand, beautiful lady she is, with her slender ankles and dainty feet, sobbin' and beggin' her forgiveness and talkin' of dishonor and death—" (p. 244). And while Melody, with his intelligence, cannot seek to join labor movements or apes in the zoo to regain his sense of place, he can wrap himself in disgust. He becomes what is for him almost the equivalent of an ape, a "filthy beast"; he becomes a shanty Irishman and a "democrat." He surrenders his Byronic pose and lets his gentleman-soldier's bearing collapse. In his dishevelled state he looks like a "loutish, grinning clown" (p. 253). All his pride and self-respect are buried in this lewd new character.

A Touch of the Poet is the earliest of O'Neill's late full-length plays that are failed comedies. That the comic
energies do not continue to operate in a comic fashion seems obvious. Con Melody's viciousness makes him less than comic. The events of the plot bring him toward a tragic downfall, his degradation being all the more intense because of the presence of Deborah Harford. Although his mask is taken off in the play, part of his real self is obliterated in the process and what is left is a new lie. But what O'Neill intended in this play is a bit obscure. All the talk of "love" at the end of the play gives the play perhaps too much of the comforting thrust of a conventional comedy, a Romeo and Juliet that ends with a case of mild stomach upset and a fleshwound instead of a double suicide. O'Neill does not leave the same puzzlingly optimistic aura around his other failed comedies.

"A Moon for the Misbegotten"

A Moon for the Misbegotten was the last of O'Neill's plays to be completed. Most of the work was done in 1941 and 1942, and the piece was finished in 1943. It was also the last of O'Neill's plays to have its premiere production during his lifetime. O'Neill took part in preparing and casting the play, but his health grew worse and he did not take an active part in the play's road tryout. The play ran into all sorts of problems in Columbus, Ohio, in Pittsburgh, and in Detroit (censorship being numbered among the problems).

17 Bogard, "Introduction" to The Later Plays of Eugene O'Neill, p. xiv.
and it folded in 1947 without ever reaching Broadway. In 1952 O'Neill, because he could not "give it the attention required for appropriate presentation," allowed it to be printed in book form.

This last of O'Neill's plays is clearly a failed comedy as will be discussed later. It is also the second of O'Neill's "family" plays. It is a sequel of sorts to Long Day's Journey into Night in that it deals with "James, Tyrone, Jr." (Jamie O'Neill) about a dozen years after the final curtain of the earlier play. The connections between biography and art in this play, however, are tenuous. In the play, Jamie's past and his personality tally with the facts that are known about him, but the central "action" of the drama, Jamie's "confession" and "absolution," almost certainly did not happen in the life of James O'Neill, Jr. At the time given for the action of the play, "September, 1923," James O'Neill, Jr., was already in a sanitorium, nearly blind, and two months away from his death, the victim of prolonged, suicidal drinking. The moment of forgiveness and beauty granted Jim in the play was O'Neill's gift to the tortured brother who loved him more than he hated him, but who hated him enough to try to destroy him.

18 Bogard, Contour in Time, pp. 446-47. The play was closed by Detroit police for being an "obscene slander on American Motherhood." The words "mother" and "prostitute" occur once or twice within the same speech.


20 Gelb, p. 532.
There are perhaps more difficulties to be dealt with in *A Moon for the Misbegotten* than in any other of O'Neill's finished last plays. A strong case can be made for the contention that the play is a melodrama. The distance between the comic mood of the play's beginning and the dark pathetic beauty of its conclusion is perhaps too great. James Tyrone, Jr., is not an admirable character; in many respects he is not an attractive character, either. All of the characters in the play lack much of the subtlety, flexibility, and depth to be found in the characters in *A Touch of the Poet*. They lack also the more easily accepted combination of the comic and tragic (or pathetic) that is found in the large collection of characters in *The Iceman Cometh*. And love seems perhaps a more narrowly circumscribed "good" in its range of effects in *A Moon for the Misbegotten* than in any other of the late plays. Even the return to the comforting and sometimes lovely illusions and dreams that occur for most of the characters in "Hughie" and *The Iceman Cometh* is missing in "Jamie's play.***21 But there is in *A Moon for the Misbegotten* the creation and use of comic energies to develop and "bring off" something like the inevitable emotional magnificence of tragedy.

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21 Carlotta M. O'Neill, in Gelb, p. 848. The third Mrs. O'Neill disliked the play because she felt it was unnecessary to "rub it in." That she apparently viewed the play as O'Neill's revenge against his brother seems an error, though an understandable one.
A Moon for the Misbegotten has very little plot, a lack that is shared by O'Neill's other late plays. It is, instead, a play of memory, confession, and realization. James Tyrone, Jr., has come from New York to a small Connecticut town to await the completion of probate proceedings on the estate left by his deceased mother. Tyrone divides his time between the Inn (he is a hopeless alcoholic) and the tenant farm, on the Tyrone estate, of Phil Hogan and his daughter Josie. There is a duality in the action of the play. One line of action involves a supposed plot on the part of Jim to sell the tenant farm, long promised to the Hogans at a "reasonable price," to one T. Stedman Harder, the local Standard Oil millionaire. A key scene in the play occurs when Harder pays the Hogans a visit to get them to keep their hogs out of his ice pond. Another line of action involves the "romance" between Jim and Josie Hogan as it develops in a moonlit meeting between them. Their romance begins as an obscene joke of gross sexual banter and ends as a gothic miracle of spiritual love. The play concludes when Josie understands at last Jim's need for a feminine love purified of physical sexuality. She makes of her love something pure and clean and only then can Jim make a confession of his sins. Josie, after a moment of disgust and revulsion, is able to extend the unreserved and loving forgiveness that Jim seeks. Her benediction and blessing do not cure Jim. Rather they free him from the necessity of fleeing from his guilt in drinking and debauchery. They free him to die. He has not "earned" the right to die as so
many great traditional tragic heroes do, but he has been granted the "grace" to die.

_A Moon for the Misbegotten_ is perhaps the easiest of O'Neill's last plays to attack with the exception of the unfinished _More Stately Mansions_. Doris V. Falk, in her otherwise impressive handling of O'Neill's plays from a psychologist's point of view, is forced into the unenviable position of concentrating on the fact that the characters in O'Neill's last plays, his best work, are merely neurotic individuals. She also contends that _A Moon for the Misbegotten_ is half "crude country-bumpkin farce" and half "meller-drama."²² Her principal objection, though, concerns the credibility of Phil Hogan. Phil told Josie that Jim had betrayed them by agreeing to accept ten thousand dollars from Harder for the Hogan farm, which is barely worth two thousand. As is revealed later in the play, Hogan is manipulating Josie's personal feelings of hurt and betrayal in order to trick her into trying to get even with Jim Tyrone. The plan is, ostensibly, to get Tyrone to go to bed with her and then force him to marry her or sign over land titles or make large payoffs. In the last act the audience learns that Hogan really manipulated the whole affair to trick Josie and Jim into seeing their love for one another. As Doris Falk points out, Phil Hogan in the beginning of the play is described as the epitome of the clever,

²² Falk, _Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension_, p. 171.
energetic, amoral, self-centered rogue. He is a veritable giant satyr, very unlike the sentimental cupid he later seems to be. A possible explanation for O'Neill's having given Hogan a role of crude nobility in this love affair is that he did not wish the female savior, Josie, left with nothing. At least the old man loved her in his fashion.

A perhaps more damaging objection might be made to the character of Jim Tyrone. Falk points out that he is the least dramatic of O'Neill's leading characters. In that she is correct. His struggle is nothing more than an attempt to find a frame of mind in which he can quietly await and welcome death. He is utterly incapable of dreaming or loving or acting. But O'Neill's last plays are impressive precisely because they find beauty in such unlikely places and in such unlikely characters. The real difficulty with Jamie Tyrone is rather that his impotent degradation seems under-motivated; he is thus an unattractive character whose unattractiveness is insufficiently explained in terms of his past. O'Neill does not make that mistake in his other failed comedies. In *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, Jamie's great guilt and his equally great distortion as a human being seem to stem solely from his behavior after his mother's death. On the trip back from California, where the mother died, Jamie stayed drunk the entire time and hired a fifty-dollar-a-night whore to distract him from his pain—or so he claims. Actually, his behavior stemmed, as he later admits, from a desire to revenge himself on his mother for abandoning him and leaving him with nothing
to live for. But it is vital to a forgiving attitude toward Jamie to know that his mother represented his very last chance to find meaning and beauty in his life. When she died, Jamie had nothing left but a lifetime of drinking and whoring and wasted potential. But O'Neill imparts this knowledge only in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, not in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*.

The other principal difficulty in the play lies in the character of Josie herself. She is built up convincingly enough in the uproarious early part of the play for an audience to find credible the terrible strength of love with which she hears, absorbs, and forgives Jamie's depravity. But the character of Josie is a bit difficult to accept when she is examined after the whole of the play is finished. In the early part of the play she is portrayed as a woman with a boundless love of life, but the audience later realizes that her capacity to love is somewhat limited since she is for so long a time blind to what it is that Jamie is asking of her. When she finally responds to him, her rather limited ability to love is extended to its outermost limits, a feat which is impressive partly because that ability was made to seem larger than it really is through O'Neill's use of comic inflation. In short, O'Neill inflates Josie through his use of the comic early in the play, and then he uses that energy to accomplish the forgiveness in love of Jamie Tyrone.

Since *A Moon for the Misbegotten* is perhaps the most clearly wrought example among O'Neill's failed comedies outside
of *The Iceman Cometh*, it may be enlightening to demonstrate just how O'Neill goes about creating the comic energies in the play that he discharges in creating a sense of the tragic that is almost wholly unearned by the tragic scenes if they are taken by themselves.

There is much of the visually comic in the play although much that seems comic to begin with does not turn out to be so. The shack that the Hogans live in and a section of their near-worthless farm make up the scenery that is used for the entire play. When the curtain opens, the shack seems ludicrous, the perfect setting for a rustic kind of comedy. The Hogan "farm," where all of the on-stage action occurs, is actually a ratty, jerry-built shack. Far from being a harmonious part of the landscape, it was moved to its present site and looks it. An old boxlike, clapboard affair, it is propped up two feet above the ground by layers of timber blocks. To make the house even more grotesque, there is a one-room addition which is tacked on. It is Josie's bedroom. The room is only six feet high, so each time the gigantic Josie goes in or out of its separate door, she gives a physical performance that is the comic equivalent of the long-legged clown's exit from a tiny foreign car at the circus. One eventually realizes that this ugly shack and its misbegotten addition are symbolic of Josie's own tragic grotesqueness, but one's first impression is comic. Very near Josie's bedroom is a large flat boulder which gradually takes on an almost religious significance. It becomes, if you will, the altar around
which the ceremonies of confession, forgiveness, and love take place. In the beginning, however, its solidity only makes the shack look more ridiculously temporary and clumsy.

The comic in this play is nicely balanced by O'Neill between the comic in the appearance and speech of his characters and the comic in the situations and actions these characters are involved in. Josie Hogan begins the play as a comic grotesque. Josie, at twenty-eight, is "all woman" (p. 301) though she is a female of mythic proportions, being five feet eleven in her stockings and weighing around one hundred and eighty. In short, she is immensely strong and comically huge.

Josie's brother Mike appears briefly early in the play. She gives him a reprimanding tap at one point and nearly sends him sprawling. Mike is the kind who "never forgets that he is a good Catholic, faithful to all the observances, and so is one of the elite of Almighty God in a world of damned sinners composed of Protestants and bad Catholics." Mike gets his comic comeuppance as a representative of a religious elite just as T. Stedman Harder gets his as a representative of a monied elite.

Phil Hogan is as much a comic grotesque in physical appearance as his daughter is, and the physical comedy grows when he and his daughter stand together. Hogan, at fifty-five, is muscular, with a barrel-like trunk. He is short, about five feet six. Rather disreputable looking, he wears filthy clothes.

When Hogan and Josie are together, the violent contrast in their appearance is magnified by their constant battling. He calls her "you great slut you" and she calls him "an ugly little buck goat" (p. 307). The two of them seem constantly on the verge of coming to blows, and Josie does, in fact, whack her father once or twice during the play. But she does so with part of a broom handle, not because she could not handle him with her fists, but because she makes allowances for his pride. In between their arguments, the two reveal themselves to be a compatible pair, both laughingly dedicated to their cleverness in outtrading their neighbors and in being able to rough up anyone who causes them trouble. Josie is almost an earth mother slut, reveling in her supposed depravity with any and all male comers. (Her virginity is well hidden beneath her brazen talk.) Her father is a drunken satyr, impishly protesting that his daughter shames him, all the while being delighted with this "overgrown cow" (p. 307).

Even Jamie Tyrone is presented first as a carefree drunkard and lover of the flesh when he comes to the Hogan farm. While he and Josie carry on conversations about their sexual plays, Jamie and Phil Hogan are locked in a mock combat in which Jamie plays the rent-hungry landlord and Hogan the aggrieved, homicidal, oppressed tenant.

The most comic scene in the play involves the Standard Oil millionaire T. Stedman Harder. Throughout his career O'Neill had no sympathy for, and very little interest in, the rich except as objects of scorn. Harder is treated accordingly
with deadly satire. "His highest achievement was the moment he was tapped for the exclusive Senior Society at the Ivy university to which his father had given millions" (p. 334). Since that day he has felt no need for aspiring and settled into the life of a country gentleman, never drinking much, except at his class reunion every spring, the most exciting episode of each year for him. Harder, like many of his class, was prevented by a cushion of money from ever developing a soul or tasting the tragic beauty of life. He is only marginally alive.

Act One of A Moon for the Misbegotten is about as close as O'Neill ever got in his whole career to writing a scene of pure, rollicking good humor. In a scene of sustained comedy, T. Stedman Harder appears at the Hogan farm, assuming that the tenant farmers will be awestruck by his very name. He has come to get the Hogans to keep their hogs out of his ice pond, and they take him on in a battle of wits. As O'Neill wrote of Harder, "It would be hard to find anyone more ill-equipped for combat with the Hogans. He has never come in contact with anyone like them. To make matters easier for them he is deliberate in speech, slow on the uptake, and has no sense of humor" (p. 334). As it turns out, Harder gets the chance to say no more than a dozen words during the several minutes that Phil and Josie are scoring a tremendous victory, without striking a blow, for the poor and oppressed everywhere. The Hogans' strategy in their verbal battle is to take the offensive at once to confuse an enemy
further" (p. 334). The comedy in the scene as it unfolds is increased by the presence of two witnesses to the battle, Harder's "limey" foreman, who stays far off in safety, laughing, and Jim Tyrone, who is hiding in Josie's bedroom and whose whoops of laughter only increase Harder's impotent rage and confusion. And as is very often true in comedy, complete and utter victory goes not to right but to wit.

Harder gets to announce his name, but that is almost the last time he gets to say anything. He is attacked for his sissified appearance and accused of being both impotent and crazy and of insulting a lady, Josie. Hogan claims that ten of his prize pigs died of pneumonia after being "enticed" (p. 338) into Harder's pond. Josie adds that ten more died of cholera from the filthy water. Hogan adds up a bill for these assaults on his property and comes up with four thousand dollars, not counting a thousand dollars for funeral expenses. Harder is nearly a beaten man by this time, but Hogan has one last blast for him: "I have put up with a lot of pests on this heap of boulders some joker once called a farm. There's a cruel skinflint of a landlord [this is for Jamie's benefit as he gasps for air in Josie's bedroom] who swindles me out of my last drop of whiskey, and there's poison ivy, and ticks, and potato bugs, and there's snakes and skunks! But, be God, I draw the line somewhere, and I'll be damned if I'll stand for a Standard Oil man trespassing!" (p. 339). As Harder tries to exit, Josie strikes the coup de grace of the Hogan victory. Josie "leers at him idiotically" and coos, "Sure, you wouldn't
go without a word of good-bye to me, would you, darlin'?
Don't scorn me just because you have on your jockey's pants.
(In a hoarse whisper) Meet me tonight, as usual, down by the pigpen" (p. 339). Harder's retreat now becomes a rout as he runs off shouting threats about the police. He has been thoroughly beaten.

From the moment of Harder's retreat to the end of the play, the comic and the sexually obscene begin slowly to give place to the pathetic and what can only be called the religious. (The shift from the comic to the pathetic is characteristic of the failed comedies.) There is still some comedy in Phil Hogan's drunken return later that day, but by then the focus of the play has shifted to whatever is going to come of the moonlit meeting between Josie Hogan and Jim Tyrone.

Act Three of the play contains Jim's slow, stumbling progress toward his confession. He needs to be convinced beforehand, that Josie's love for him is strong enough to bear what he has to say of himself without collapsing under the weight of horror and revulsion. Josie misunderstands his need at first and tries to banter with him. Then she guesses wrong again by offering him physical expressions of love which only disgust him since he needs from her a spiritual love and acceptance. After an intense struggle, Josie's maternal tenderness for Jim overcomes her desire to have a normal love relationship with a man. Jim, seemingly convinced that he has found the priestess who has love enough to absorb his own disgust with himself in order to enable him to rid
himself of it, then begins circling round and round until he makes his full confession. Tyrone retells the story of his mother's death and receives Josie's forgiveness. Then, in the most powerful individual stage "picture" in all of O'Neill's plays, Jim falls asleep on the breast of Josie as both sit on the front steps. The huge woman and the ruined man, sculpted into a moonlit statue, look like nothing so much as a gothic "Pieta." The moment is one of considerable beauty. O'Neill seems also to have feared its melodramatic tinge, however. Josie speaks to the sleeping Tyrone of her love and then, since he does not and will not hear her, she makes sad fun of herself. Josie's speech sounds very much like the speeches of O'Neill's heroes and heroines in his early ironic tragedies: "God forgive me, it's a fine end to all my scheming, to sit here with the dead hugged to my breast, and the silly mug of the moon grinning down, enjoying the joke!" (p. 395).

In *A Moon for the Misbegotten* the broadly comic and the hilariously obscene supply the sense of motion and life that is spent in Jamie's terrible confession and absolution. Tyrone, although he is at the center of the play, is not a tragic hero, not even in O'Neill's terms. He is, even at the beginning of the play, an irreparably damaged man who desires only forgiveness and the peace of the grave. But he cannot have the latter without first finding the former. Josie, in her sacrifice, perhaps measures up as a tragic heroine of sorts, but the play is not hers. The shift from the comic to the pathetic supplies the power in the play which approximates
the power of traditional tragedy. The tragic beauty in the
drama is largely theatrical in the sense of theatre as re-
ligious ritual. The confessional area is prepared and a
priestess with the loving power to forgive is found. The
moment of confession and absolution takes place and then it
is over. The aura of power around Josie is, to a degree, as
specious as Jim's apparent liveliness in the early parts of
the play. Josie is the priestess of a completely human re-
ligion and her power is limited to this one sad man during one
moonlit evening. The religion is "merely" that of human
love, but Josie tells her father a "miracle" has happened:
"A virgin who bears a dead child in the night, and the dawn
finds her still a virgin. If that isn't a miracle, what
is?" (p. 398). In terms of O'Neill's humanism of despair
Josie is absolutely right.

In this play O'Neill takes materials that ought to be
used in a black comedy or a comedy of the absurd, but he
squeezes from them beauty that can only be called tragic beauty.
The sense of great loss that pervades the end of the play and
provides the emotional power the play possesses appears to be
tragic. And it is, at least pathetically so. But the origin
of that energy which is expended is O'Neill's employment of
the comic.
CHAPTER VII

THE ICEMAN COMETH: O'NEILL'S FAILED COMEDY

The Iceman Cometh is the second most obvious full-length example in the O'Neill canon of the failed comedy. A Moon for the Misbegotten is the most obvious. But The Iceman Cometh seems the best play to use as the capstone of this study of O'Neill's works because it is the greater play.

O'Neill wrote The Iceman Cometh with more dispatch than almost any other of the works he completed in the last creative years of his life (1935-1943). In mid-1939 he put aside the mammoth cycle, which came to so little finally, and by late November of that year he had completed The Iceman Cometh.\(^1\) It was not until 1946, however, that the play was produced. It was the first new O'Neill play to appear since the mediocre Days Without End failed in 1935. Although O'Neill worked closely with the persons responsible for the 1946 production of the play, he was not much more pleased with it than were audiences or critics. (O'Neill complained at the time that the play was acted as a tragedy too soon.)\(^2\) The play was not a failure, but it was only marginally a success. It was not until after O'Neill's death that the

\(^1\) Gelb, O'Neill, p. 831.

play had a very popular 1956 production in the longest single run of an O'Neill play, 565 performances. And today critical opinion, although it is somewhat mixed, seems willing to rank the play near Long Day's Journey into Night as, in the words of John Henry Raleigh, "the most substantial dramatic literature ever composed on this continent." 4

The Iceman Cometh, in its first production, attracted considerable attention as the first play from America's Nobel laureate in a dozen years. Shortly before the opening of the play O'Neill submitted to the only press conference of his life, during which he spoke of his strange play in a way that suggests what quality in his last plays makes them seem greater than a mere examination of their grim themes would indicate. Said O'Neill: "It's struck me as time goes on, how something funny, even farcical, can suddenly without any apparent reason, break up into something gloomy and tragic . . . A sort of non sequitur, as though events, as though life, were being manipulated just to confuse us. I think I'm more aware of comedy than I ever was before; a big kind of comedy that doesn't stay funny very long. I've made use of it in The Iceman. The first act [which constitutes more than a third of the length of this four-act play] is hilarious comedy, I think, but then some

3 Jordan Y. Miller, Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic, p. 162.

people may not even laugh. At any rate, the comedy breaks up and the tragedy comes on. . . . 5 O'Neill's remarks come close to a descriptive definition of the failed comedy, and The Iceman Cometh is his finest failed comedy.

"The Iceman Cometh"

The Iceman Cometh has very little action and thus very little which could be described as plot. The setting is Harry Hope's run-down bar-flophouse on New York's West Side in 1912. Some of the characters in the play are derelicts who live in rooms above the bar and others only frequent the place. Larry Slade, a boarder, remains near the center of the play's focus and relates in a significant way to two sinners. One of those sinners is a hardware salesman, Theodore Hickman (called "Hickey"), who visits the bar periodically. This time he comes preaching the gospel that "truth saves," that peace is found only when one strips away all illusions from life. Ironically, after the peaceful bar derelicts hear this message, they find the agony of admitting the truth awakens all the angry, aggressive energies they have quieted for so long. Each man becomes a potential murderer when he is stripped of the illusion that comforts him. And in his agony, he lashes out at those closest to him in place and affection. In response to Hickey's entreaty to leave the bar and to face their "illusions," the men go out and try to resume their former jobs. But each realizes he

5 O'Neill, in Gelb, p. 871.
can no longer function in the real world and returns to Harry's in desperate agony. It is only when Hickey says he must have been crazy that the men pick up the word "crazy" and apply that term to the whole philosophy he has given them. They are thus able to disregard Hickey's preaching and return to their sheltered life in the bar, to their mutually supported dreams.

Ironically, Hickey, who has come to preach truth to others, is actually deluded in thinking that he has faced the truth himself. He tells Slade that he has killed his wife because his love for her would not allow him to continue hurting her with moral lapses he could not control. Thus he feels he has brought her in death the peace he could not give her in life and that, from the grave, she somehow understands his motive and forgives him. Such reasoning, however, is merely an illusion. Slade, like a Grand Inquisitor, gradually prods Hickey into a more accurate appraisal of his act. Furthermore, when Hickey sees what has happened to the men who have returned to the bar, defeated by their efforts to face the truth about themselves, he begins to have some doubts about his own "conversion." He begins to admit his guilt and senses that his real reason for killing his wife was that her pure and demanding love for him burdened him with more guilt than he could bear. When looking on his dead wife, he had told her he hated her. In retrospect, though, he claims he must have been crazy to have said such a thing. Thus, although Hickey does realize
the truth about his motives, he retreats from it and cannot face it. He is thus able to go to the electric chair convinced that he has spared his wife the agony of loving an unworthy man and that her love has forgiven him.

During Hickey's unwitting movement toward the truth, with some direction from Slade, Slade is also playing a significant role in the emotional agony of another character, Don Parritt. Parritt had turned his mother in to the police. She was a leader in the anarchist "Movement" and is now in prison, a situation which for her is worse than death. Parritt drives in on Slade, asking him to either forgive him or be his executioner. Finally, Slade gives Parritt the command the boy wants to hear: "Go! Get the hell out of life! . . . " Parritt, who can stand no longer the burden of his guilt, commits suicide as Slade knew he would.

Some of the criticisms of The Iceman Cometh must be taken up before any detailed analysis of the play as a failed comedy is attempted because the criticisms attack some of the basic elements in the play that make it a failed comedy.

Doris V. Falk's impressive book, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension, offers an interesting set of criteria for judging modern tragedies. Falk tosses out the traditional demand that a universe involve a God or gods and deals with


7 Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension, pp. 156-64.
She feels that modern man projects two images of himself: the expansive image (an overblown, prideful image) and the submissive image (a projection of the feelings of impotence and worthlessness). There is a "tragic tension" between these two images as man projects first one and then the other before settling on his true self which is neither image. A tragedy arises if a man cannot tear down his false, prideful image or overcome his worthless image. The tragic hero, though, is eventually able to reject these two images and to find his true self. In doing so he faces the "reality principle" without flinching, finds it lacking in any absolute values, and then projects, in existentialist fashion, his created values on it. It is these projected values that enable a man to cope with the absurd blank that the universe offers him, to give it meaning, and then to act. It is Falk's belief that O'Neill simply surrendered, in his last plays, any attempt to strip man down to his true self in order to produce such values as might be created, projected, and acted upon. In his last plays, Falk claims, O'Neill has his characters come to see both their false images (the expansive and the submissive) for what they are. But, according to Falk, O'Neill goes even further in that his characters see the self that produced the images as essentially worthless as well. O'Neill's characters must then either flee from this "truth" into dreams and drunkenness, or they must seek to annihilate the terrible burden by actively pursuing, or at least desiring,
death, the only sure solution to the problem.

Larry Slade, in The Iceman Cometh, says Falk, is the kind of man who has rejected his expansive, bold self (the one that formerly belonged to the anarchist movement) only to fall victim to his submissive self (the one which sees his own life and that of other men against a blank, signifying nothing). In the end Slade is left with nothing but "the disconsolateness of being unable to die." It is Falk's opinion that O'Neill imposed on mankind as a whole his own "neurotic" inability to deal with the reality principle.

There are some problems with Falk's view in general, but, first, there is a particular difficulty in her contention that Larry Slade fell victim to his submissive self and was unable to deal with the reality principle. On the contrary, Slade, almost in Falk's tragic-hero fashion, does face reality. And he finds, with his intelligence at least, no value in existence or mankind. He is able to look upon reality without its protective, illusory covering. He is thus forced, almost in spite of himself, to project his own values onto the blank the universe offers him. He must make choices and give commands of the sort that assume, metaphysically, that both life and man have meaning. This meaning, he is, in fact, able to project as the result of a "gut" response. He can insist, as he deals with Hickey and Parritt, that there are some things in life no man can do and still

8 Søren Kierkegaard, in Falk, p. 163.
deserve to live and, conversely, that there are some things no man should have to bear without being given sanction to escape the burden of his life. Thus out of his compassion and moral sensitivity Slade is able both to execute basis "laws" of human conduct and to forgive those who transgress those laws.

In short, an argument can be made that Larry Slade, ironically, fits Doris Falk's description of a tragic hero, but on a more general level, her theory does not always apply well to O'Neill's drama. In the first place, the plays of O'Neill that she finds exemplifications of the extremities of mental illness are also the plays that are overwhelmingly regarded as the man's best works and probably the best works American drama has produced. In the second place, Falk's argument begs the question of whether or not the "reality principle" is, indeed, bearable in all its unadorned blankness without the aid of gods, philosophical systems, or dreams and illusions. Man may indeed be the dreaming animal, the one creature who, because he has both intelligence and self-awareness, cannot bear reality without believing it has some intrinsic meaning and value, even if that meaning is really imposed on it by his religion or by some barroom philosophy. The new psychologists may be nothing more than a new breed of romantics, positing a belief in man's capacities for which they can offer only fervent proclamations by way of evidence. O'Neill's bellowed beliefs in his spiritual comedies rest on a similar ad hoc
kind of "argumentation." Finally, drama has perhaps never been a matter of mental health. Traditional tragedy at least has always concerned itself with the man who would impose his powerful emotions and powerful convictions on an order which he finds repugnant. The tragic man is one who is unwilling to adapt or adjust. O'Neill's last plays do involve a full-fledged retreat from a chaotic reality, and for that reason they lack that essential courage that has always marked tragedy in ages of belief. But the courage with which O'Neill faces the possibility that man may indeed be a small, powerless creature whose worth is measured only by the understanding and compassion that he can draw from other small, powerless creatures is the peculiar trait that marks O'Neill's last plays. The aura of worth around the characters in O'Neill's failed comedies is not justified metaphysically, but dramatically. It arises from O'Neill's humanism of despair. Compassion, tolerance, and mutual support among men, even among men living patent lies, are important precisely because they may be all there is between weak men and pitiless, absurd existence.

Mary McCarthy criticizes various aspects of The Iceman Cometh. She objects particularly to the use of heavy drinking in the play, claiming that O'Neill's characters fail to show that lunacy, unpredictability, and sudden viciousness that chronic heavy drinking ought to produce.9 When one

reads the play carefully, one can only agree with her that O'Neill's portrayal of chronic drinkers lacks some of the insanity of the "real thing." The answer to her objection is that O'Neill's interest was not clinical, but artistic. The drinking is a condition in the play that contributes to more important things. In the first act, the drinking supplies O'Neill with some easy comedy, but later in the play its role is a carefully modulated one, ranging between "truth-production" on the one hand, and the support of illusion on the other. Its role is too important a role to be carelessly overplayed simply to fulfill the exigencies of detailed realism. McCarthy's dislike for O'Neill's failure to be entirely realistic in his play leads to another of the heavy guns that have been leveled against The Iceman Cometh, a witty howitzer named Eric Bentley.

Bentley's criticism, like Falk's and McCarthy's in some ways, attacks the basic elements in O'Neill's failed comedies. He was responsible for the German language premiere of The Iceman Cometh which failed miserably. He had had problems in the translation and had cut down or excised entirely whole speeches until, as he admits, some characters were mutilated. But Bentley's greatest mistake, one that changed The Iceman Cometh from a failed comedy into a dismal play of disaster, was to change completely the setting O'Neill calls for.

In O'Neill's directions, the setting of the bar is to be realistic, but the lighting called for makes the place appear dim, warm, and womb-like. Bentley says, "Instead of darkness, and dim, soulfully colored lights, we used a harsh white glare, suggesting unshaded electric bulbs in a bare room."11 What he intended to produce by the change, Bentley says, was "to underline the sheer reality, the sheer banality and ugliness, of the play's locale."12 What resulted from these changes, according to Bentley, was that "the comedy was sharpened." In fact, Bentley boasts, "Nothing emerged more triumphantly from our shortened, crisper version than the comic elements."13 Bentley's version probably did draw laughter from the audience, but it seems likely that it was not the kind O'Neill would have wanted. Most of the geniality and ease of the comedy early in the play would of necessity disappear if the human wreckage that these alcoholic characters are were viewed under harsh, glaring light. And while comedy might still be present, it would be morgue-comedy, black comedy, operating-room comedy. The play does not have the power it should have if the genial energies of relaxed comedy are not present. The kind of humor produced by Bentley's version is too close to the heavy mood of the rest of the play when, as O'Neill put it, the "comedy breaks

11 Bentley, p. 39.
12 Bentley, p. 39.
13 Bentley, p. 40.
up and the tragedy comes on. . . . "14 O'Neill felt the early part of the play was "hilarious comedy." The play, in Bentley's version, instead of using up comically produced energies in an esthetically pleasing exhaustion, becomes merely depressing from beginning to end.

The significance of Bentley's error in stripping the play of its genially comic beginning and its mixture of realism and expressionism would be difficult to exaggerate. The important thing about the comedy that O'Neill employs is his failed comedies is that it is to be taken as genuine, healthy comedy up until the time that its energy is expended in the movement from a comic mode to a pathetic mode. Without the energies created by the comedy, O'Neill's last plays, as dramatic experiences, become not exhausting, but merely depressing. If the strong comic energies are not produced, then there is no sense of loss or destruction, only the sense of a detailed outlining of already existing degradation and failure. If the hapless bums are treated in a harshly realistic manner, they are already obviously on the floor. There is no way then to produce even the illusion of a fall. The comic in the failed comedies is not an "in-essential excrescence," as Bentley claims,15 but an absolutely essential part of the plays.

14 O'Neill, in Gelb, p. 871.

15 Bentley, p. 39. Bentley also refers to the expressionistically presented interior of the bar as "the rotten fruit of unreality" around the play's "core of reality . . . its artistic, its dramatic core. . . . "
The comic strength that is expended in *The Iceman Cometh* arises from several sources, nearly all of which dry up not far into the second act of the play. But they have produced energy of a comic kind which, coupled with the manic energy of Hickey, the salesman for the salvation of dreamless peace, is enough to make this physically static play seem to bustle with life and energy which leaves a great silence once it has been spent. And then at the end of the play the characters in the bar slowly move back into their dream-insulated and alcohol-lighted world that provides a semblance of the life energies of genial comedy. At the end of the play, however, the audience is aware of how fragile even that semblance of life is and how delicate is the balance between what these men are and what they can persuade themselves they are with the help of alcohol and friends who will "kid" them along. The fortunate ones in the play are able to sustain themselves in a world they know to be not evil or ugly, but empty. They know that the meaning they can give to life lies not in what they will make of themselves, but in the web of dreams and alcohol and mutual support and tolerance.

Dominant among the causes of the comic in the first act of *The Iceman Cometh* is the impression given that these men and their dark bar are safely insulated from the often tragic demands of the well-lighted world of family, responsibility, life, and death. The overall impression given by the interior of Harry Hope's is that of a shabbily upholstered womb where
they are completely protected from the full light of day until they stumble out one at a time in the third act, each bent on proving to the taunting Hickey that his pipe dream can be realized. The grim failure of the men is emphasized by their sudden, unpleasant exposure to the heat and light of the external world. Few of the men who live at Harry Hope's have been outside in years. Harry himself has "never set foot out of this place since his wife died twenty years ago" (p. 36). In the end, it is the reality within each man that he finds most painful, but at the beginning of the play each needs only to be protected from the outside world and its demands.

The primary comic energies in the first act of The Iceman Cometh arise from the characters themselves. First, the characters are, for the most part, comic grotesques or even comic stage-types. Secondly, they arrange themselves into natural groups of two or three who have something in common and who protect each other from reality with two kinds of "kidding." In the one kind of kidding each man assures his neighbor of the validity of that neighbor's illusions. In the other kind of kidding, each man occasionally attacks the illusions of his neighbor, but never very seriously. The mixture of the two types of kidding supplies a gentle kind of tension that provides part of the sense of liveliness that emanates from the men at Harry Hope's. Thirdly, the whole crew is capable of operating as a unit, a "family circle" (p. 36), as Larry Slade calls it, to protect one another from
"outsiders" and, to a lesser degree, from one another. A fourth element, one that rules almost completely in the first act, is the separation of the roomers from all contact with outside reality. Only two of them have ever been married; none have wives now; none have ever had children. Although this separation of these men from "normal" family relationships eventually becomes part of their tragedy, early in the play it is a sine qua non for the geniality of the comedy. Since they are not hurting anyone with a rightful claim to their love and support and since no one cares where they are or what they are doing, these men can be in constant attendance at the vigil of the "Feast of All Fools" (p. 9), as Larry Slade calls it, perpetually involved in the spirit of Mardi Gras. Although the isolation and sterility of these men will eventually be seen as tragic, or at least pathetic, all during the long first act they are able to perform as jesters, buffoons, and fools. It is significant that the two men who upset this sheltered barroom world, Hickey and Parritt, come from the outside. The result is that the characters, however briefly, face and suffer from both internal and external reality, but they are, in the first act, completely isolated and insulated from both.

Each of the nineteen characters in The Iceman Cometh, with the exception of Don Parritt and the two policemen who come to get Hickey at the end of the play, is presented initially as a comic character. Mary McCarthy objects to the
characters because they seem so simple. As she says, "The Boer is boerish, the Englishman english, the philosopher philosophizes, and the sentimental grouch who runs the establishment grouches and sentimentalizes in orderly alternation." The characters are, indeed, somewhat "flat," but their flatness is what enables them to function initially as comic characters. Each man is a "humours" character of sorts; each has limited the exercise of his humanity to a very small area which he guards against any interference or change. Each man is comic because he has surrendered any flexibility he might once have had for the comfort of a simplified reality. Each has eliminated all those desires that complicate existence for men in order to avoid the pain of loss and failure. The tragedy—at least the pathos—of the play arrives when these men are taunted into leaving their safe web of dreams and alcohol to go back into complicated reality to try to impose their fragile dreams on the universe. For just a brief moment, each man abandons his "humour" and attempts to come to grips with life. When that moment comes, each sees and confesses with sudden clarity that he is, indeed, a comic type, whose very laughability is rooted in his wooden incapacity to handle reality in any but the simplest, most uncomplicated way. The failed comedy rises up out of genially comic energy and falls when that energy is spent in an attempt, by these characters, to deal with a reality that is both comic and pathetic. The majority of the characters are

able to return to their comic roles, but not before they and their audience are aware of what the price of such roles is.

O'Neill gives rather lengthy descriptions of the dere­licts in the bar in his stage directions. Their very appearance is often comic. For instance, one of the men, Hugo Kal­mar, has a huge head, a tiny body, wild hair, and a walrus mustache. His dark eyes peer out from behind thick-lensed glasses. O'Neill often uses animal imagery in describing the men to increase the comic effect. Harry Hope, the owner of the place, has "the face of an old family horse" (p. 7). Jimmy Cameron's face is "like an old well-bred, gentle blood­hound's, with folds of flesh hanging from each side of his mouth, and big brown friendly guileless eyes ... " (p. 6). Piet Wetjoen is the "balmy Boer that walks like a man" (p. 43). Costume can also lend a comic effect. Joe Mott, the only black in the play, wears the flashy clothes of a Broadway sport, though they are considerably out of date and badly worn.

O'Neill finds some humor in the stereotyped and harmless mannerisms of these men. One character, Jimmy ("Tomorrow") Cameron, has manners which are a combination of those of "a prim, Victorian old maid" and those of "a likable, affection­ate boy who has never grown up" (p. 6). Cecil Lewis, on the other hand, is "as obviously English as Yorkshire pudding and just as obviously the former army officer" (p. 6). Pat McGloon "has his old occupation of policeman stamped all over him" (p. 6), but years of whiskey and inactivity have mellowed
him considerably. Hugo is a stereotypical mad foreign anarchist, though he is harmless.

Even the language of these characters can be amusing. One affects the flashy speech of the racetrack world, another a kind of watered down gangsters' slang. Hugo Kalmar delivers tirades that are a mixture of revolutionary cant, loud bullying, and giggling childishness. One man has a Scottish accent while another, a Boer, contributes an occasional "Ja" and "By Gott."

The behavior of the characters in the first act of the play is totally without malice and often has the air of good-natured fun. Hugo teases Rocky, the bartender, about his stable of prostitutes. But Rocky's relationship to the girls is not, in the first act, that of a pimp to whores but that of a big brother to naughty sisters. The owner, Harry Hope, "a soft-hearted slob" (p. 7), periodically gets angry at his non-paying boarders and threatens them with eviction. But in the process he gets so tickled at the cleverness of his insults that he cackles to himself, forgets that he was angry, and is able to resubmerge himself in the laughter, liquor, and camaraderie of his own barroom.

Occasionally the sense of humor exhibited by the characters also runs to the obscene. Several times Willie Oban sings the dirty ditty about the girl who invites young men up to her room to see the "prettiest (rap, rap, rap) / That ever you did see." Willie attributes the song's authorship to various worthy figures, such as "Waldo" Emerson, Jonathan
Edwards (p. 40) or "the Dean of the Divinity School" who allegedly composed it "on a moonlight night in July, 1776, while sobering up in a Turkish bath" (p. 56). The whole play, in fact, revolves around the various levels at which Hickey's obscene joke about leaving his wife in bed with the iceman is understood.

According to José Quintero, who directed the play in 1956, *The Iceman Cometh* is like "a complex musical form, with themes repeating themselves with slight variation, as melodies do in a symphony." Quintero felt his work was like that of an orchestra director, emphasizing rhythms and being aware of changing tempos. Many O'Neill critics have noticed that this "symphony" of drama is accomplished in large part through the group of comic characters in the barroom. These men function like a chorus, providing a background for the central actions involving Hickey, Slade, and Parritt. Singly, and in groups of two or three, the characters are moved gracefully in and out of prominence in the play by the simple expedient of having one man or group doze off while another man or group takes over. José Quintero's comparing the play to a symphony is apt, and by playing several parts of the theme in succession, O'Neill avoids having the audience peer too steadily at any one character. Part of the hilarity of the comedy in this first act arises from O'Neill's making sure that the audience does not look at any one character too long.

But O'Neill also achieves lightness and a comic sense of life by providing safety for these groups of men as they interact. In each group of two or three characters, each man in the group cooperates in sustaining the illusions of the others in order to have his own supported in return. An example of one of these "brother" units within what Slade calls "our whole family circle" (p. 36) is the grouping of the owner Harry Hope, Ed Mosher, and Pat McGloin. Mosher, a former circus con man, is Hope's brother-in-law. McGloin is a former cop. Whenever Harry threatens Mosher or McGloin, the other man comes to his aid. And both Mosher and McGloin are careful to flatter Harry's vanity about his quick wit and the virtues of his beloved, much lamented, deceased wife. Harry indirectly supports the other two by threatening to force them to leave his place and earn a living. His threat carries with it the assurance that they could earn their living outside.

In summary, the characters in the bar, with the exception of Slade, Hickey, and Parritt, function both as comic individuals and as a chorus-like family with its own genially comic sense of life and of safety.

Two of the three main characters, Slade and Hickey, have a comic lightness about them. Only Parritt is not comic at all. Larry Slade's eyes have a "gleam of sharp sardonic humor in them" (p. 4). In the first act he is an amused and amusing cynic, regarding all of his dreamy drunken friends with a perceptive but sympathetic eye. Larry is raggedly dressed and
lousy, but his face has the expression of a "pitying but weary old priest's" (p. 5). On one occasion Rocky comments cynically on the conversation of the dreamers and Larry tells him, with "a comical intensity in his low voice,"

"Don't mock the faith! Have you no respect for religion, you unregenerate Wop? What's it matter if the truth is that their favorite breeze has the stink of nickel whiskey on its breath . . . ?" (p. 9). When Don Parritt speaks pityingly of these men, Larry tells him, "Don't waste your pity. They wouldn't thank you for it. They manage to get drunk, by hook or crook, and keep their pipe dreams, and that's all they ask of life. I've never known more contented men. It isn't often that men attain the true goal of their heart's desire (p. 36). Once when Larry interrupts one of Jimmy Tomorrow's (Jimmy Cameron's) little dreamy speeches with a cynical remark, Jimmy replies, with considerable accuracy, "No, Larry, old friend, you can't deceive me. You pretend a bitter, cynical philosophy, but in your heart you are the kindest man among us" (p. 44).

Theodore Hickman, or Hickey, is the other central character with comic overtones. In fact, he is very much the American comic archetype, the traveling salesman. He has a roly-poly figure. "His expression is fixed in a salesman's winning smile of self-confident affability and hearty good fellowship. His eyes have the twinkle of humor which delights in kidding others but can also enjoy equally a joke on himself. He exudes a friendly, generous personality that
makes everyone like him on sight" (p. 76). Hickey's "periodical" appearance has always meant a comic, festive, enlivening of Hope's crew. He brings a wad of money and stays until it has all been spent on drinks for his friends. Part of the comic energy in the first act arises from the gleeful anticipation with which the men await Hickey's coming. He is almost the soul of the comic "Feast of All Fools" spirit for them. As Harry Hope says of Hickey, he's "always got a million funny stories... He'd make a cat laugh!" (p. 61). When Hickey finally does appear, he claims to be bringing a message that will save his friends and bring them peace. When the boarders hear this, they assume that it is merely Hickey's latest joke, a "new gag" (p. 14). Hickey's favorite joke on himself has always been, of course, that he left his wife in the "hay" with "the iceman" (p. 13).

The comedy of the first act of The Iceman Cometh is, then, safe and genuine-seeming. Every day is the vigil of the "Feast of All Fools," as Slade describes their existence. And, as is the case in Cheapside, the comedy is unreservedly enjoyable and real because no one is harmed and no one is in danger. And it is this sense of life and love emanating from these men and women that provides the energy that is spent in the play.

Beginning in the second act, however, O'Neill shifts his perspective from the purely comic to the pathetic. Hickey and Parritt introduce into this cozy refuge for losers the impossible
demands of the outside world. Hickey, preaching a gospel that truth saves, persuades the men to go out and face their illusions. They return, destroyed, but they are later allowed to sink back into drunken contentment. The central action of the drama involves, of course, the realizations toward which Slade draws both Hickey and Parritt. In a sense Slade, ironically, has the role of both judge and savior thrust upon him. He condemns two sinners and then sends each on his way to peace with a "benediction." Hickey is able to admit momentarily his true motive for the murder of his wife, and Parritt recognizes the burden of guilt he bears for turning his mother in to the police, a burden he cannot bear. All three men are tragic figures in the end. Parritt kills himself. Hickey goes off to prison, having succumbed to his illusions again after a painful, fleeting glimpse of truth. And Slade, the "Old Grandstand Foolosopher" (p. 83), is hopelessly lost. He cannot return to his illusion that he is looking forward to death as an agreeable escape from the foolish degradation of the human comedy, but he lacks the weight of guilt that Hickey and Parritt have which could propel him into the dark peace of death. He is left suspended in a paralysis between detestation of life and fear of death. He is possessed by the "disconsolateness of being unable to die." 18

Those critics seem correct who see the theme of O'Neill's play to be that man can handle life only through dreams and

18 Kierkegaard, in Falk, p. 163.
drunkenness, with death as the only other alternative. In that respect, The Iceman Cometh is probably O'Neill's grim­
mest play. But it is a play and not a philosophical state­
ment. By moving as he does from a comic to a pathetic per­
spective, O'Neill achieves a power in his play that is in no
way justified by the play's thematic contents.

It might be helpful to examine in more detail how this power works. O'Neill, as has been demonstrated, generates large amounts of comic energy in the first act and then ex­
pends that energy with such force and completeness that an audience receives and endures the kind of esthetically satis­
fying exhaustion that usually comes only at the end of a great tragedy. Whatever transcendence is achieved, however, is achieved only by the audience. What O'Neill does is to take his audience from the one perspective, from which the contradictions that afflict (and are) human reality are seen as comic, to a second perspective, from which human reality is seen as essentially pathetic. It is this movement from the first perspective to the second, a movement which is "merely" esthetic, that produces the sense of great loss and destruction in this play about losers. The play is also O'Neill's "testament to humanity at its lowest."¹⁹ But it is a testament to humanity. Ordinarily one expects reassurance about the human condition to come from viewing greater-than-
normal men in their futile but dignity-bestowing battles with life and fate. O'Neill, however, achieves something of the

same force by concentrating on men who are weaker and less impressive than the norm. And he succeeds by granting these men an aura of power and life that is almost entirely artificial, the result of the comic stance that these men seem to be in, at least for a time. Once the aura of energy and life is present, it can then be expended. The result is a strangely satisfying modern equivalent of the theatrical effect of a traditional tragedy.

But the play posits few enduring values, makes no claims in behalf of man's demi-god pretensions, and faces the pathos of man's condition without turning away. Kierkegaard claimed that the contradictions that are life produce in man a spectacle that is "comic and pathetic in the same degree." Kierkegaard's vision is a painfully modern one, but it is not necessarily a dramatically or esthetically satisfying one. By moving as he does from the comic to the pathetic in viewing man, the dreaming animal, O'Neill achieves a sense of movement and power that is not justified by the themes that can be abstracted from his play. But he is, finally, writing drama and not dramatized philosophical searching or preaching. While one might object to the lack of psychic-emotional resilience in O'Neill's characters, and while one might object to the void that is finally presented as the valueless core of modern man's perception of the cosmos, one cannot deny that O'Neill found something of worth. O'Neill found a human reality to which he

could give unwavering attention. Never once in *The Iceman Cometh* does O'Neill reach out for the "behind-life" force with which he had tried so long to grant significance to human reality. The significance in human reality is human beings, even the derelict human beings in *The Iceman Cometh*.

As F. I. Carpenter suggests, if O'Neill found transcendence at all, he did not find it in life, but in his art. An audience may well transcend the agony in *The Iceman Cometh* even though most of the characters do not transcend, but merely escape. O'Neill achieves in this failed comedy, which is as far from absurdist or black comedy as it is from traditional tragedy, a kind of theatrical experience whose magnificence is not thematic, but theatrical.

21 Carpenter, pp. 79, 81, 153.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

List of Works Cited


_________. (ed.). *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "The Iceman Cometh."* Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1968. [Individual articles from this collection are not listed separately.]


Eugene O'Neill is known to have written forty-one plays during the period 1913-1921. Of this number, thirty-two survive in either published or typed-copy form. Nine were destroyed and do not seem likely to surface even though several plays that O'Neill thought he had destroyed have been found. Seventeen of the plays have never been performed; of the twenty-four that have been performed, two—"Abortion" and "The Movie Man"—were performed long after they were written. Oddly enough, six of the plays have been identified, with varying degrees of certainty, as comedies or farce-comedies. Significantly, all of these are numbered among those plays O'Neill intended to destroy and, with a couple of exceptions, did destroy. There are twenty-seven one-act plays, and of the fourteen plays longer than one act, O'Neill had no use for those he wrote prior to Beyond the Horizon in 1917-1918. By 1919, O'Neill had settled on forms longer than one act, and he did not return to the one-act form until late in his life when he planned a cycle of one-act plays to be called "By Way of Obit." The "Obit" consists of only one play, "Hughie."

The plays are listed below with the first date given being the date of composition (insofar as it is known). The second date is the date of the first production, if there was one. Those plays which are not discussed in the text of
this study are commented on briefly. Page numbers, referring to pages in this study, are given for those plays which are discussed in the study itself.

The information contained in this compilation comes from several sources: Jordan Y. Miller, *Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic*; Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Playwright*; Timo Tiusanen, *O'Neill's Scenic Images*; and Arthur and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill*. Sheaffer's information seems the most accurate. His description of his research indicates he has probably exhausted the sources of information. However, he has published only one volume of the projected two, and he stops, in most respects, in 1920, the date of O'Neill's success with *Beyond the Horizon*. He has also chosen to ignore those plays which various sources indicate were written, but of which there are no existing copies. The location of all works not discussed in the text of this study will be given, either their published or their typed-copy forms. Many plays are available in more than one place, but only one is listed for each play.

1913-1915

1. "A Wife for a Life": a one-act play, O'Neill's first, written in 1913, never produced. It is the tale of a young miner and an old miner, the best of friends, who discover that the young woman that the young man loves is the wife, long since abandoned, of his friend. All parties are "innocent" and generous in this play, and it is noteworthy only for one line spoken by the older miner when the involutions of coincidence become clear: "What tricks Fate plays with us." Eugene O'Neill, "A Wife for a Life," in *Ten 'Lost' Plays* (New York: Random House, 1964), pp. 209-23.

3. "Thirst": written in 1913-1914, produced in 1916. It is an overwrought piece about a native sailor, a wealthy man, and a beautiful dancer who "help" each other to die after floating for some time on a raft after a shipwreck. The dialogue is the play's worst feature. Ten 'Lost' Plays, pp. 1-32.

4. "Warnings": a one-act play about a wireless operator on a ship who is caught between impending deafness and the needs of a repulsively grim family. The "joke" on this wireless operator leads to his inability to hear the distress calls radioed by a sinking ship. When he discovers what has happened, he kills himself. The play was never produced. Ten 'Lost' Plays, pp. 55-82.

5. "Fog": a one-act play, written in 1913-1914, produced in 1917, again about a shipwrecked group on a raft. This time, the poet, the businessman, and an immigrant woman and child drift around in the fog. They are eventually rescued because the rescuers hear the cries of the baby—who has been dead for twenty-four hours. The poet, who had wanted to die, "saved" himself by saving the woman and child—both of whom die before they are rescued—and there is some indication that the poet comes to believe in the incomprehensible, but very real, mystery and significance of life. An interesting little play for its "behind-life" gropings. Ten 'Lost' Plays, pp. 83-107.

6. "Recklessness": a one-act play, written in 1913-1914, never performed. It is a pot-boiler about a cruel husband who gets even with his cheating wife by sending the chauffeur-lover to his death in a car that has been tempered with. Ten 'Lost' Plays, pp. 109-37.

7. "Servitude": a three-act play, O'Neill's first long work, written in 1913-1914, never performed. Unimpressive treatment of a woman who idolizes a young playwright who recommends "self-realization," only to discover that he hasn't allowed his own wife that chance. Both parties end up discovering that love is service. Theme is a bit unusual for O'Neill, whose heroes of the mind included Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Ten 'Lost' Plays, pp. 225-303.

8. "Abortion": a one-act play, written in 1913-1914, produced only in 1959. It is an interesting piece about a college athlete-hero who gets a "common" girl pregnant, pays for an abortion that leads to her death, and then kills himself. O'Neill employs considerable irony in having the student body moving toward their hero's room.
singing "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," as he shoots himself. *Ten 'Lost' Plays*, pp. 139-65.

9. "Dear Doctor": a one-act adaptation of a short story, written in 1914 as part of the work for Professor George Pierce Baker's English 47 playwriting class, never performed. The other two plays written for the class were "The Sniper," an original one-act play, and *The Personal Equation* (also, *The Second Engineer*), a full-length play. As the story goes, Baker told O'Neill that his farce-comedy, "Dear Doctor," might make a good vaudeville piece. O'Neill discovered that the short story itself was, in fact, stolen from an already existing vaudeville sketch. The play was destroyed.

10. *Bread and Butter*: a four-act play, O'Neill's second long piece, written in 1914, never produced. It exists in the copyright division of the Library of Congress. Although it has many of the themes O'Neill was to be fond of all his career—artist vs. society, brother vs. brother, father vs. son, love vs. hate in marriage, etc.—it is unimpressive work. O'Neill himself put little stock in it and thought he had destroyed it.

11. "Bound East for Cardiff": text, pp. 30-34.

12. "The Movie Man": an amusing one-act play, written in 1914, produced in 1959. Some enterprising soul discovered this and other plays which O'Neill thought he had destroyed (but which he had copyrighted as he did even early in his career) but which existed in the copyright copy. The play can only be described as a romantic farce-comedy. It involves an American film crew stage-managing a revolution in Mexico in order to make a film of it. The hero saves the life of a senorita's father, adding a note of romance. *Ten 'Lost' Plays*, pp. 167-85.

13. "The Sniper": a one-act play, written in 1913-1914 for Baker's class, produced in 1917. The play involves an anti-war theme. A Belgian peasant man who has lost a son to the Germans is persuaded by a pious little priest to be forgiving, but when the man learns that his wife and daughter have been killed, he shoots several Germans before he is disarmed and executed. The priest is at the front of a line of inept or vicious "religious" types that show up in O'Neill's work. *Ten 'Lost' Plays*, pp. 187-207.

14. "Belshazzar": a work on a biblical theme in six scenes that O'Neill wrote in collaboration with one Colin Ford, also a member of Baker's class, in 1915. It was never acted and was destroyed by O'Neill.
15. The Personal Equation (also, The Second Engineer): the third long play O'Neill attempted, written in 1915, also for Baker's class. A copy exists in the Houghton Library, Harvard University. The play is a poor one, but it is interesting because it is one of the earlier examples of the father-son theme that runs through so much of what O'Neill was able to do well later in his career. O'Neill tried to interest the Provincetowners in the play, but failed. It was never produced.

16. "A Knock at the Door": a one-act comedy written in 1915, of which nothing more is known. O'Neill destroyed it.

1916-1917

17. "Atrocity": a one-act pantomime of which nothing is known. Written in 1916, it was later destroyed. O'Neill claimed he destroyed at least fifteen plays.

18. "Before Breakfast": a one-act play, written in 1916, produced the same year. It is a Strindbergian play, vaguely resembling the master's "The Stronger." A woman nags her artist husband, who is in the bathroom shaving, until, at the end of the play, he cuts his throat. O'Neill made his last venture into acting in this play in the part of the husband, whose role consists of reaching out his hand once and groaning at the end. The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, I, 623-33.

19. "Ile": a one-act sea play, written in 1916-1917, produced in 1917. It is a madness play, resembling "Where the Cross is Made" and "Gold." In this play the captain's madness concerns refusing to return home until he has gotten a boat-load of whale oil, even though he drives his wife mad in the process. O'Neill was aware of a similar true story concerning a man and woman who lived in New London, Connecticut, where the O'Neill family summered for several years. The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, I, 533-73.

20. "In the Zone": text, p. 38.


23. "Now I Ask You": a one-act play, written in 1916, never produced. It is a semi-comic treatment of would-be bohemians and arty types and political radicals. It reveals a capacity for self-parody that O'Neill seldom showed (until Ah, Wilderness!). A copy exists in the Houghton Library, Harvard University. O'Neill thought he had destroyed it.
24. "The G.A.N." (also given as "The G.A.M."): a one-act farce, written in 1917, never produced. It was destroyed by O'Neill.

1918-1919

25. Beyond the Horizon: text, pp. 47-56.
26. "Till We Meet": a one-act play, written in 1918, of which nothing is known. O'Neill destroyed it.
27. "The Rope": text, pp. 41-44.
29. "Where the Cross is Made": text, pp. 40-41.
32. "Exorcism": text, pp. 39-40. No copy of this play has been found. After its one performance, O'Neill gathered up all the acting scripts and destroyed them.
33. "The Trumpets": a one-act comedy, written in 1919, of which nothing is known. O'Neill destroyed it.
34. "Honor Among the Bradleys": a one-act play, written in 1919, of which nothing is known. O'Neill destroyed it.
35. "Chris Christopherson": an early version of "Anna Christie" which failed in a tryout under the title "Chris." The emphasis in this version is on the old man. A copy exists in the copyright division of the Library of Congress.

1920-1921

39. "Diff'rent": text, pp. 80-83.
41. "The Hairy Ape": text, Chapter III.
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