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EUGENE O'NEILL: THE DRAMA OF THE MYSTERY  
OF EXISTENCE

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SHARON ATKIN SUDDEATH

EUGENE O'NEILL: THE DRAMA  
OF THE MYSTERY OF EXISTENCE

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An Abstract  
Presented to  
the Graduate Council of  
Austin Peay State University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Sharon Atkin Suddeath  
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## ALSTRACT

Eugene O'Neill was perhaps the most outstanding dramatist America has ever produced. He was certainly one of the most remarkable the world has ever known. During the span of his life, from 1888-1953, he wrote many impressive dramas which were received by the public with varying degrees of success. All of the dramas revealed the dualistic mind of a creative man who was tormented by spiritual and psychological problems.

It is the religious problem in the life of O'Neill which is of particular interest since it is so closely connected to his personal life. Also, it is in the manner in which he deals with the religious question that one sees clearly the dualistic nature. Born into an Irish Catholic family, he was exposed to two views of God. The first view of a loving God was taught to him by his mother. The second view of a punishing God was taught to him by the Catholic Church. These opposing views became entangled in his mind with the idea of the natural goodness and love of mankind. O'Neill spent his entire life and career fluctuating from one opinion to the other as he strove to harmonize his thoughts about religion and mankind.

There are three stages in O'Neill's religious involvement. The first is the stage of Christianity, of belief in God and in the natural goodness of mankind. He equated the Church with man's innate ability to love. The plays

of the SS Clencairn cycle express this theory. The second stage was that of atheism, of total denial of the Church and of a denial of man's natural goodness. He saw a dualistic world in which there were good and bad Christians and good and bad atheists. But, he did deny completely the authority of the Church and the existence of God.

The Great God Brown and Dynamo express this theory.

The third stage was that of agnosticism, of the recognition of the Church's power in the lives of some people and of a mysterious force which controls the world. O'Neill personally refused to return to the Church for he realized that there was no place there for him, but he did return to a belief in the goodness of man apart from the Church.

The works of Eugene O'Neill are studied for many reasons. One primary reason must surely be for the information they reveal about the attitudes and ideas toward religion of this man. Perhaps religion would not be so important if it were not for his Irish Catholic heritage which produced much of the anxiety of this troubled soul. However, he did express his religious views in his dramas, and they certainly reveal the dualistic nature of a man who could never be content with one belief for any length of time. Christianity, atheism and agnosticism all had their part in the life of a most talented man.



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OF THE MYSTERY OF EXISTENCE

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Master of Arts

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August, 1976

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Sharon Atkin Suddeath entitled "Eugene O'Neill: The Drama of the Mystery of Existence". I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Thayer W. Beach

Major Professor

We have read this thesis  
and recommend its acceptance:

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## INTRODUCTION

The problem of Catholicism was the chief religious question which plagued the dramatist Eugene O'Neill throughout his entire life. Even though there were perhaps more difficult problems for him to face, this one is of primary importance because it was the product of his ancestry. There was no way for him to ignore it. It existed in his very being; and, as an Irishman and as a writer, he was forced to deal with its existence. The manner in which he did choose to negotiate the problem eventually led O'Neill far from the area of his home into the realm of a creative genius.

In surveying the life of Eugene O'Neill, there appear to be three distinct stages of dominant religious concepts both in his personal life and in his literary career. Yet, in each of these three areas there is an undercurrent suggesting another possible belief struggling toward the surface. This dualism is an essential part of O'Neill's mind. The fluctuations and contradictions of a troubled soul remain forever as the signature of this man.

Before examining the first period of O'Neill's life and career, a clarification of his views on Christianity and atheism will be given. O'Neill seemed to accept the theory that man is born in a natural state of goodness in which he blends harmoniously into the universe and accepts his

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fellow man for what he is. He believes that an unknown force or forces control his life, but this force has no name. This type of man loves because it is the natural thing to do. He is uninhibited by value structures imposed on him by certain parts of a supposedly civilized society. Therefore, he can make his own decisions about what attitudes he should have based on the dictates of his mind rather than on the dictates of an organized group of people. In the first period of his life, O'Neill associated this type of existence with the Catholic Church. He felt that all those who loved their fellow man did so because of the dictates of the Catholic Church. He saw only peace and happiness inside the Church. He was too young to realize that natural goodness and love in mankind are based on native instinct rather than on the regulations of an organized body. Only when family problems became so intense did he change his mind.

When O'Neill wrote the plays of his first period, he placed men in natural situations where they must rely on the primitive instincts of their minds for survival. The SS Glencairn series sought to prove that men in such an existence do love one another and do function well together. Aboard ship the seamen work together, quarrel together, and play together. The sea provides the perfect setting to demonstrate the natural qualities of these men. Only when the regulations and suspicions of civilized society are imposed on them do the seamen lose that natural goodness.

In the second period of his life, O'Neill rejected the concept of God as it is imposed on man by the Christian realm and the Catholic Church. He continued to believe in the natural love and goodness of mankind; and, because of this, he saw God and the Church as evil forces which molded men into what they thought was best. He came to realize that what he had thought was a God of love in the Church was actually the natural instinct for love shining through in spite of the Church's attempt to thwart it. Therefore, in his mind the Church and its concept of God became evil, and he rejected it in favor of the primitive belief in unknown forces and in goodness. As a man of such belief, he was truly an atheist, one who denies the existence of God and the power of the Christian Church. Being an atheist had nothing to do with his belief in an unknown force and the natural goodness of man. It was merely a rebellion against formal religion and a personified God.

In the plays of the second period, O'Neill attacked the Church most bitterly. He established a unique concept of man and his attitudes toward religion. First, he saw two types of men in the Church. There were those who could be called believing Christians because they believed in God and the rules of the Church as the best government for their lives. However, most importantly, they continued to believe in the natural forces of love and goodness with which all men are born. Since there were only a few of these, they were viewed as freaks by the majority

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of Christians. Dion Anthony in The Great God Brown was an example of this type of Christian, and he certainly was persecuted for his peculiarities.

The second type of Christian was the one who rendered lip-service to God and the Church. These were actually hypocritical Christians. They were faithful to Church doctrine, but did not have natural love and goodness in their lives. Therefore, when the Church ordered men to love their fellowman, these people could not. Ella in All God's Chillun Got Wings was this type of Christian. She was more of a destructive force than a good one.

In picturing two types of Christians, O'Neill was showing the weakness of the Church. He saw it mainly as a place of stern rules which were in many cases impossible to follow because they caused man to be unnatural. He also saw the Church as an isolated place where man was set apart from his fellow-man rather than encouraged to unite with him in harmony. He saw the Christians as predominantly hypocritical. They claimed to love because the Church said to do so, but their actual lives were a denial of love. Only a minority of Christians loved, and they would have done so even if there was no Church ordering it.

These views of the Church led O'Neill to become an atheist, a rebel against the Church. He regretted the decision because he desired to know God as the God of love and mercy he was taught in childhood. Yet, he felt Christianity was an imposition on his natural instinct



for good. So, in his mind, there existed a dichotomy in which there were good Christians and bad Christians and good atheists and bad atheists. In that O'Neill searched constantly for goodness in others, he was an atheist who accepted the primitive forces of goodness and love. In the play Beyond the Horizon, the characters are atheists of both types. Margaret is evil and destructive. Rob is loving and is directed by a dream of a better world some place. Margaret has lost her natural goodness, but Rob has not.

The middle period shows clearly the ambivalence of O'Neill's mind. He does not see all Christians as good and all atheists as evil; but, rather, he sees Christianity and atheism as beliefs imposed on civilized man which have no direct relationship to good and evil. Naturally, a good man must choose one or the other. Like O'Neill, many people fluctuate from one theory to the other because they are never content with one belief for any length of time. They realize that such doctrines are not truly natural.

In the third period of his life, O'Neill became aware of the third possible viewpoint in men's lives, that of agnosticism. The agnostic is one who accepts the concept of the Church and God as possible, but who cannot assume a personal involvement in it. He does believe that some holy and mysterious force controls the universe, but it is not the Christian God. As one who does not deny the value of Church and God, he cannot

be called an atheist, for an atheist denies the existence of God and the validity of the Church. Therefore, he is agnostic, not rejecting yet unbelieving. Just as there are good and bad Christians and atheists, so there are good and bad agnostics. As always, O'Neill continues to believe in the natural goodness of man in spite of all the tragic events in his life. The dramas of this third period are mainly ones of reconciliation to his family. In Days Without End, he wrestles with the religious question, and he establishes his final position on that topic. O'Neill was always dualistic in his belief that man was good or bad inside of Christianity, atheism or agnosticism. He was always ambivalent in his attitude toward the three areas of religious involvement. For O'Neill there was no right answer.

In O'Neill's personal life the three stages were: first, the youthful stage of personal belief in God and in the power of the Catholic Church; second, a maturing state of doubt followed by total denial of a God; third, the final stage of acceptance of the existence of divine mystery, but of a personal inability to achieve a viable faith. Connected with these religious stages, there existed O'Neill's concept of the natural goodness of man.

In O'Neill's career the three stages follow the same pattern of belief, atheism, and agnosticism. It is here in the texts of his plays that the dualism and personal struggle show themselves most clearly. There is no doubt in the mind of any biographer or critic that O'Neill was

a troubled soul. His life-long religious struggle is perhaps the principal cause of this.

## CHAPTER I

### ACT I: THE MYSTERY OF BELIEF AND THE GOD OF LOVE

The first phase of O'Neill's private religious outlook had its roots many years before his birth in his Irish Catholic ancestry. Both parents were the children of Irish immigrants. Ellen Quinlan was born August 13, 1857, in New Haven, Connecticut, to Thomas Joseph and Bridgett Lundigan Quinlan. After her birth they moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where Thomas Quinlan became a successful businessman. Ellen was educated at the Convent of St. Mary at Notre Dame in Indiana. She graduated with honors in music in 1875.<sup>1</sup>

James O'Neill was born to Irish parents, also. Edward and Mary O'Neill immigrated from Ireland in 1856, when James was nine, and they moved to Ohio the same year the Quinlans moved to Cleveland. Edward, a mystic, soon deserted his wife and six children and returned to Ireland. James went to Virginia to live with a married sister.<sup>2</sup>

James O'Neill and Ellen Quinlan first met in Cleveland where James, then a successful actor, bought liquor at her father's store. Years later they renewed their acquaintance in New York. There they were married in 1877, in St. Ann's Church, the place for fashionable

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Gelb and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), pp. 12-15.

<sup>2</sup> Olivia Coolidge, Eugene O'Neill (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1966), p. 19.

Catholic weddings.<sup>3</sup> The marriage united two completely different personalities. Ellen, or Ella as she preferred to be called, was the product of a middle-class home. She was a mystic with a romantic, innocent approach to life. James, the product of poverty, was materialistic and self-centered.<sup>4</sup> About the only common elements they shared were their Irish heritage and their Catholic religion. It would seem that these elements would have been constructive forces in the lives of their children. But, this was not to be so.

The first son, Jamie, was born in 1878. A second child, Edmund, born in 1883, died from measles while his parents were on a theatrical tour. Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was born in a setting typical of his future life. He entered the world on October 16, 1888, at Farrett House, a New York hotel. His father was 42, and his mother was 31. The attending physician was a barroom acquaintance of James O'Neill. According to the Gelbs, Ella became a drug addict through the morphine which she began taking at this time.<sup>5</sup>

As an infant, Eugene was taken on tour with his parents. This routine of travel had serious effects on him. His mother spent each day taking drugs and attending Mass. Since there was no sense of security during his first seven years, he developed a permanent sense of

<sup>3</sup> Gelbs, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 51-58.

rootlessness. He escaped into an imaginary world and became moody and oversensitive.<sup>6</sup>

In 1895, O'Neill entered the first of a long line of boarding schools. The first was Mount St. Vincent, a Catholic school for boys ages 7-12. The six years he spent there further isolated him. He was unhappy and felt homesick for his family. However, he did learn to swim there and developed an interest in nature which is reflected in his literary career. The enforced religious services and study of Catechism had a deep effect on his heart and mind.<sup>7</sup>

Eugene received Holy Communion for the first time on May 24, 1900. There was already a seed of rebellion in him against the rigid demands of the Church. At age nine, he said, "Religion is so cold."<sup>8</sup> The religion of his parents had been warm and simple. However, according to the Gelbs, on receiving Holy Communion he found comfort in the belief that he had achieved union with God, had been granted an increase of grace, and would be preserved from mortal sin.<sup>9</sup>

On October 16, 1900, O'Neill entered De La Salle Institute in Manhattan, a school which was operated by the Christian Brothers. Until 1902, he lived at home,

<sup>6</sup> Gelbs, pp. 60-64.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 64-68.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Gelbs, p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 68-71.

and it was at this time that he first saw his mother taking morphine. He challenged his faith in God for the first time by promising to devote himself to God if God would cure her.<sup>10</sup>

In the controversial play, Days Without End, the hero says:

Then his mother. . . was taken ill, and the horrible fear came to him that she might die, too. . . His God of Love was beginning to show himself as a God of Vengeance. . . But he still trusted in his love. Surely he would not take his mother from him. . . So the poor fool prayed and vowed his life to piety and good works! But he began to make a condition now--if his mother were spared to him! He abased and humbled himself before the cross---and, in reward for his sickening humiliation, saw that no miracle would happen. Something snapped in him then. . . His mother died. And, in a frenzy of insane grief---No! In his awakened pride he cursed his God and denied Him, and in revenge, promised his soul to the Devil---on his knees, when everyone thought he was praying.<sup>11</sup>

This event happened in O'Neill's life during the second year at De La Salle. He studied and made high grades. He prayed for his mother, but she did not improve. At age sixty, O'Neill said this year was the turning point of his life.<sup>12</sup>

At age fourteen, with his mother no better, he quit attending Catholic schools. He told his parents that religion had been of no use to them, so he saw no reason to force it on him. He entered Betts Academy, a non-

<sup>10</sup> Coolidge, pp. 37-38.

<sup>11</sup> Eugene O'Neill, Days Without End, in The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 511.

<sup>12</sup> Gelbs, p. 73.

sectarian Connecticut school. When he was fifteen, he stopped attending church services. The final break with conventional religion came one year later in New London. As his father left for church services, Eugene informed him that he was never going again. They argued, but to no avail. This victory over the Church was one O'Neill somehow regretted the rest of his life.<sup>13</sup>

There were other family facts which complicated the problem of religion in the mind of such a young child. His brother Jamie, ten years his senior, was a strong influence on him. He had graduated from a Catholic preparatory school and had entered a Catholic college while Eugene was at Mount St. Vincent. He was cynical about life and religion and seems to have been the worst possible influence on the boy.<sup>14</sup>

The relationship between James and Ella O'Neill was unstable. She was not prepared for marriage responsibilities. His problems included a paternity suit, the fear of poverty and a weakness for get-rich-quick schemes. Although he frequently embarrassed her, James O'Neill spent much on her care, and he built a home for her so that she would not have to travel.<sup>15</sup>

In order to gain a better understanding of the religious and personal plight of the O'Neills, one must

<sup>13</sup> Coolidge, p. 38.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 36-37.

<sup>15</sup> Gelbs, pp. 39-43.



15  
acknowledge the importance of three influences: first, the Irish heritage; second, the theatrical heritage; third, the religious heritage. According to Carpenter, O'Neill's tragedy came from his heritage as an Irish Catholic immigrant to an alien land and from conditions imposed on him by the father's career. His personal identification with the Irish grew stronger over the years. The phrase "the Yanks" is an echo in his plays of the sense of social inferiority which was bred in him.<sup>16</sup>

The theatrical heritage began with James O'Neill's first role at age 21. He combined an immigrant's uncertainty of nationality with an actor's uncertainty of identity. Both his fortune and his downfall occurred when he accepted the leading role in The Count of Monte Christo. He was a financial success in that part, but he lost forever the opportunity to act in other more rewarding parts. His sons even used the play as an opportunity for mocking him by making crude jokes on stage when they appeared during the last tour in 1911. Earlier in their lives, the boys lived in boarding schools while their parents toured with the show. There were severe repercussions because of that experience which never ended.<sup>17</sup>

As a playwright, O'Neill rebelled against all that

16  
Frederich Ives Carpenter, Eugene O'Neill (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1964), pp. 24-28.

17  
Ibid., pp. 20-27.

Monte Christo represented. As a child, he rebelled by carving "MC" on the balustrade of their New London home and by pouring green paint into a box of statues of James O'Neill as Edmund Dantes. It is obvious that he learned to hate his father's career.<sup>18</sup>

The third influence on the O'Neills, that of religion is the one which led to the deepest suffering in Eugene O'Neill. As a child he accepted faith in the God of his mother. In her teaching he did not learn of purgatory or of punishment. According to the Gelbs, his early belief was "Mystically interwoven with his mother's religious life, which, as a boy, he tenderly venerated."<sup>19</sup> In the Catholic schools he learned discipline and regulations. He began to associate these schools with his parents' neglect and betrayal of him as they went on tour. He also associated the nuns' lack of warmth with the Catholic religion. These religious institutions never provided a substitute home for him.<sup>20</sup>

In Days Without End, the hero describes his boyhood disappointment with Catholicism:

His parents' God was One of Infinite Love--not a stern, self-righteous Being who condemned sinners to torment, but a very human lovable God Who became man for love of men and

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John Henry Raleigh, "Eugene O'Neill and the Escape from the Chateau d'If" in O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. John Gassner (Engelwood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1964), p. 20.

19

Gelbs, p. 69.

20

Carpenter, p. 27.

gave his life that they might be saved from themselves. And the boy had every reason to believe in such a Divinity of Love as the Creator of Life. . . . Later, at school, he learned of the God of Punishment, and he wondered. . . . Afterward . . . he saw his God as deaf and blind and merciless--a Deity Who returned hate for love and revenged Himself upon those who trusted Him.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, at age fourteen, in a young life composed of strong inherited influences and of family instability, a lonely boy decided that belief in religion and the Catholic Church was over for him. It had not answered his problems or helped him in any way. He was disgusted with it. So, in 1902, when he entered Petts Academy, the first and the only phase of complete faith in O'Neill's tragic life ended, and the second phase of doubt and denial began. One phase of the journey of a tortured genius was over.

In looking at the three stages of Eugene O'Neill's religious struggle as depicted in his plays, one must first review a few of the important elements in his first period of belief in God and acceptance of the power of the Catholic Church. Several reasons have been given for the strong belief in Catholicism which O'Neill possessed as a youth and for his rebellion against the Church. O'Neill, of course, was a descendant of Irish immigrants who were devout believers. He developed a feeling of social inferiority as a result of this

<sup>21</sup>

O'Neill, The Collected Plays, p. 510.

heritage. His mother was a devout Catholic who conceived of God as a gentle being. She taught the young O'Neill to believe in God's love and mercy and kindness. When he was isolated from his parents in boarding schools, he was exposed to the God of vengeance and justice, and he did not care for that God. Throughout the remainder of his life, he expressed an ambivalent attitude in his struggle with religion, an ambivalence based on exposure to the different aspects of God which he had received as a youth. His attitudes toward religion and his parents were to create a tangled web which ensnared him and from which he was long unable to escape and find peace. His last play, Long Day's Journey Into Night, indicated his eventual recognition of the web.

The first period, that of O'Neill's actual belief in God and the Church, covered approximately his first fifteen years, 1888-1904. The rise of this period of belief in the dramas appears primarily in the experimental stage of his career from 1915-1920. These plays were rough and in many cases so poorly written that O'Neill later destroyed them. It was a time when he was experimenting with the drama form, both independently and in Baker's "47 Workshop". Crude though they may be, these plays are the core of a literary career unequalled by any other American dramatist. They provided the first expressions of O'Neill's attitudes toward life, and as such they also provided expressions of his attitudes toward religion. Despite the fact that ten years had passed since he stopped going to church, the outlook

shown was predominantly that of a youthful, almost naive, trust in God as the controlling power of the universe. There were overtones of the struggle against religion which had recently occurred; but, primarily, these plays presented the innocent view of a youth's concept of God and His world. He believed that man was naturally good and that God existed and controlled the world, but that man, even though ultimately under God's control, had some choice in the decisions he made. It is most important to keep in mind that in this period O'Neill equated belief in the Church with man's natural goodness and love.

The plays to examine in terms of this attitude are the four which comprise the SS Glencairn cycle. This cycle of one act plays, written between 1913-1920, is based primarily on O'Neill's own concrete life experiences--his years at sea, people he had met--and on his psychological experiences--his concepts of the value of human life, his idea of how people deal with nature and with each other, and his theory of nature as an expansion of the mind of God.

The first play of the cycle is The Moon of the Caribbees. In three basic areas it is a reflection of O'Neill's youthful religious attitude. First, the setting is an indication of O'Neill's dualistic view of God in the feminine form of peace and happiness and of man as naturally good. In that his period of faith was centered in the years of his mother's influence, O'Neill viewed

the happy God of peace in the feminine gender. In this particular play, the setting is a moonlit night on a calm sea in the West Indies. All three elements are standard symbols for an idyllic existence. The sea as a feminine image of God is a warm, gentle mother like O'Neill's idealization of his own mother. The scene is that of a world controlled by a loving God who wants men to be happy. In this play, it is not God, but men through the imposition of society's rules who disturb the happiness.

Another important element of the setting here, and in the other three plays, is the use of sound. Here it is the sad keening of the native women which upsets the seamen because it stirs up memories in them. The music becomes a type of innate conscience which opens the men's eyes to right and wrong. They ignore its warning and, consequently, get into trouble. When man ignores his natural instincts, problems arise.

The second factor is the characters. In using a British ship and a northern European crew, O'Neill is drawing on his heritage. The seamen are metaphorical figures of Irish Catholics who feel a kindred bond to one another, but who can fight with bitter feeling at a moment's notice. Three of those seamen are of particular significance. First, Smitty, the sailor, haunted by the past, appears as a personification of O'Neill. Several of his comments could very well have applied to O'Neill. For example, when hearing the song of the natives, he

says, "I wish they'd stop that song. It makes you think of--well--things you ought to forget."<sup>22</sup>

Again in reference to the music, which sounds like church music to the Donkeyman, Smitty says, "I didn't mean it was bad music. It isn't. It's the beastly memories the damn thing brings up--for some reason."<sup>23</sup>

Finally, in a state of drunkenness--a common state for O'Neill in his early life--Smitty mingles the words from Yale's "Whiffenpoof Song" with his own thoughts. "We're poor little lambs who have lost our way, eh, Donk? Damned from here to eternity, what? God have mercy on such as we! True, isn't it, Donk?"<sup>24</sup> It would appear to be significant that the primitive music which he heard would have aroused such reactions in Smitty, the sailor who remains an enigma to the others. The music is a symbol of a purity he had lost, that of a religious belief, or a belief in goodness in its natural state, and O'Neill is clearly shown in that character. The final plea Smitty makes is also a true statement that O'Neill regularly made throughout his entire career. God's mercy seems to have eluded both Smitty and O'Neill.

A second significant character is the Donkeyman, who seems to be the only character at peace with himself and the world. The primitive music does not disturb him,

<sup>22</sup> Eugene O'Neill, The Moon of the Caribbees in Seven Plays of the Sea (New York: Vintage Books, 1947), p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

and he is not haunted by memories. "Tain't sich bad music, is it? Sounds kinder pretty to me--low an' mournful--same as listenin' to the organ outside o' church of a Sunday. Queer things, mem'ries. I ain't ever been bothered much by 'em!"<sup>25</sup> In the Donkeyman, O'Neill created a character who symbolizes a tranquil believer in the goodness of man and the faith which O'Neill had lost. He is totally at peace with himself with no turmoil to upset or haunt him. He is the unique individual who can be a naturally good person and avoid Christianity simultaneously. For that reason he appears somewhat strange to the others who have lost their original nature.

Yank, the third character, is a typical sailor, totally masculine, lusty, brawny and brave. The one attribute which sets him apart from ordinary people is his honesty. One can be honest without being religious, but Yank seems devout in his concern that the women not be cheated. In the midst of his drinking and carousing, the one element of a Catholic-oriented subconscious surfaces to make him deal fairly with the women.

The last element of importance as a glimpse into the religious views of O'Neill in the first phase of his life is his choice of events to dramatize. These center on man's natural desire for women and wine. In this case the women are primitive Negresses, the typical earth



mothers who have both a calming and an unsettling influence on the sailors, and the wine is illegal rum sneaked on board by the women. The captain permits the women, but not the wine. The carousing and fighting which occur as a result of the presence of these two elements are symbolic of man's inability to control himself when forced to obey certain rules established by Christian society. Only the Donkeyman appears to control himself, for only he remains aloof from the women and fighting. Apparently, only the Donkeyman is a natural believer. Perhaps O'Neill is implying that stability exists only for those who have found that inner peace of a natural existence. It is not the enforced rules which give the peace. He and Smitty once knew it, but now they are both drinking, fighting men who know no peace.

In contrast to the calm atmosphere of The Moon of the Caribbees, O'Neill next presents another view of man and his God. Pound East for Cardiff is the second play in the quartet on the life of a seaman. Here O'Neill presents four phases of man's attitudes toward an act of God which no man can control, death. The basic idea is the futility of man's struggle against death or any other obstacle placed in his path by that unseen force. Here God is seen as an all-powerful being who is to be feared, and death as the sign of his final vengeance on man. This attitude would appear to be derived from the young O'Neill's experiences in Catholic schools where he learned to view God as a wrathful being. In the character

of Yank, O'Neill pictures himself as the son of Ella Quinlan O'Neill who had taught him to accept quietly the acts of God. Just as The Moon of the Caribbees presented those two relationships with God through the way Smitty and the Donkeyman handled the past, so Bound East for Cardiff presents them through the way Yank and Driscoll deal with death.

The setting of the second play is again aboard ship, a symbol of man's dependence on Fate or an unknown Force for safety. The sea is the literal and symbolic representation of that Force. In this play, the sea is a hidden and unsafe place due to the presence of the fog, here a symbol of evil. The fog blinds the seamen in their search for the correct course to Cardiff, or symbolically to the search for knowledge of God. In his life, O'Neill had been blinded by the attitudes of his Catholic teachers and by the illness of his mother. In this play the sound effect of the boat's whistle serves as a symbol of man's struggle to find his way when misled by error or fog. In The Moon of the Caribbees, the singing is the audio symbol of that quest. Both serve as symbols of men's consciences.

O'Neill makes a strong point about the poor conditions aboard the ship. The food is not consummable, and the captain is not trained to deal with medical crises. The ship may be meant to be a microcosm of life, and the conditions aboard ship to parallel the conditions of men's lives. Those conditions have traditionally been

bad ones which lead inevitably to death, the problem these seamen must face. There seems to be no way men can overthrow the problems of life. They have been placed here by that force which Christians call God. They view these problems as a challenge to their strength of commitment to the faith. O'Neill had no doubt been taught that view, but he could not accept it. Consequently, he shunned the Church. However, in Bound East for Cardiff, his sympathetic treatment of the dying Yank seems to show his desire to attain that faith once more.

The presence of death in the microcosm of the ship brings the same reactions as it would any place in the world. The crew realizes that death is coming to the injured Yank, yet they shun any mention of it as an end to his suffering. Only he, in his dying moments, is able to face it without fear. It should be remembered that the crewmen represent Christian nationalities, and as such one might expect a certain type of response from them. However, they merely show their human nature when they hide from any suggestion of death. It is a part of that force which they cannot control. They react to it with their natural instincts of awe and fear.

The reactions to death are shown mainly in the conversations of Driscoll, an Irishman, and Yank. They present opposite views toward death and the unknown. Driscoll is the typical man who deliberately avoids any mention of death because it is beyond his understanding and control. He refuses to accept the truth that Yank

is dying. Such comments as the following demonstrate his attitude:

"Stop your croakin'! He's not dead yet and, praise God, he'll have many a long day yet before him."<sup>26</sup>

"Divil take me if I'm not startin' to blubber loike an auld woman, and he not dead at all, but goin' to live many a long year yet, maybe." <sup>27</sup>

"Didn't I tell you you wasn't half as sick as you thought you was? The Captain'll have you out on deck cussin' and swearin' loike a trooper before the week is out."<sup>28</sup>

These comments are from the soul of a fearful man, one who cannot accept the idea of death. But, when he realizes that Yank recognizes the presence of death, he reverts to the religious nature of his youth. "Is it wishful for heaven ye are?" he asks Yank who responds, "Hell, I guess."<sup>29</sup> Driscoll crosses himself and reprimands Yank for talking that way. When Yank dies, Driscoll again makes the sign of the cross and "His lips move in some half-remembered prayer."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

Autobiographically, Driscoll parallels O'Neill, the man who knew religion as a youth and then rejected it, but who still retained some of its precepts and, most importantly, his natural love for his fellow man. As an opposing force to Driscoll, Yank, the dying seaman, reacts differently to death. He complains very little about the pain, and his only fear is that he will be left alone while dying. His remark about death demonstrates the peace that is coming to him:

You mustn't take it so hard, Drisc, I was just thinkin' it ain't so bad as people think--dyin'! I ain't never took much stock in the truck them skypilots preach. I ain't never had religion; but I know whatever it is what comes after it can't be no worse'n this. I don't<sup>31</sup> like to leave you, Drisc, but--that's all.

Yank shows no sorrow over leaving the life of a sailor. His only wish is that he could have had a home and farm of his own. His peace is momentarily interrupted by the thought of a murder he had committed in Capetown. "D'yuh think He'll hold it against me?"<sup>32</sup> He feels that God might understand it was done in self-defense.

At the moment of his death, two things occur of religious significance. First, he sees the fog entering his room. The fog, of course, symbolizes the force that obstructs God from man. Just as it obstructs Yank's

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

view, the lady in black appears. She, perhaps, symbolizes the Virgin Mary, the gentle side of religion, who welcomes Yank to heaven. It was the Virgin Mary with whom O'Neill's mother associated her religious belief. Through her Yank is victorious over death. The fact that she is arrayed in black is probably an indication of her state of mourning for those men who have lost contact with the purity of her existence and who are unable ever to see her welcoming them to a life after death. For them she mourns, just as she smiles to welcome those who have maintained an innocent faith in God.

Thus, the second play in the series ends with man conquering death, the evil force with which he has to struggle. At this point O'Neill is stating the view of one who believes in the love and saving power of God.

The Long Voyage Home is the third play in the SS Glencairn series. In it O'Neill continues to express his ideas about man's relationship to God. As in the other plays, man must deal with evil forces to prove whether or not he is worthy of God. In The Moon of the Caribbees, the forces were sex and wine. In Bound East for Cardiff, the force was death. Unlike the Donkeyman or Yank, Olson of The Long Voyage Home is a foolish man; and, when temptation faces him, he cannot resist. His intentions are good, but his self-control is lacking. Olson, therefore, becomes O'Neill's vision of the state of man who is rejected by God. God helps those who attempt to help themselves. The fact that man

must work in order to earn his salvation is a legitimate Christian doctrine. Olson knows this, and he tries to work to gain his salvation, or freedom from the sea, but, he submits too quickly to the power of evil, and God, in his vengeance, must cast him off. In this play, O'Neill attempts to come to grips with the God of vengeance which he perceived as a youth. Here he sees that there is a need for such a God, because not all men are entitled to spiritual blessing as the God of love would be inclined to give. He must be balanced by the God of Vengeance who weeds out the unworthy people such as Olson.

The setting, as in the other plays, is at night, but on land instead of sea. On land seamen are out of place, lost souls in effect. The four seamen are lured to a bar where they promptly get drunk on Irish whiskey. Olson, who wants to return home to his elderly mother and farm, refuses to drink. He says, "I bane a good boy dis night for one time."<sup>33</sup> He realizes that when he is drunk, he is not rational. However, the barkeeper has a deal to catch a seaman for the AMINORA, a reputedly horrible ship. Nick, his assistant, says, "The capt'n an' mate are bloody slave-drivers, an' they're bound down round the 'Orn. They 'arf starved the 'ands on the larst trip 'ere, an' no one'll dare ship on 'er."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

The AMINDRA could very well be called the Devil's ship. With the assistance of a girl--another of man's weaknesses-- he manages to get Olson to drink drugged wine, and then he takes him to the ship. The conversation between Joe, the barkeeper, Olson, and Freda shows clearly how they lure Olson into drinking.

Olson: Hey, Yoe! Brandy for Miss Freda.  
 Joe: Righto! 'Avin' somethink yeself, shipmate?  
 Olson: No. I don't tank so. (He points to his glass with a grin.) Dis iss only belly-wash, no?  
 Joe: 'Ave a man's drink.  
 Olson: I would like to-but no. If I drink one I want drink one tousand.  
 Freda: Ow, tike somethin'. I ain't gointer drink all by meself.  
 Olson: Den give me a little yinger beer-small one.<sup>35</sup>

Olson knows about the ship, and he knows what he wants to do, but women are his weakness. He yields to an evil force, and the God of justice punishes him.

Christian doctrine is based on the evidence of two natures of God. One nature is that of the loving, merciful God who forgives men of their sins. This is the God of O'Neill's youth. The other nature is that of a wrathful God of vengeance who becomes impatient with the wrong behavior of men. He punishes them for their sins just as he punished the Israelites by making them wander in the wilderness for forty years, or as he admonishes New Testament Christians to live properly in fear of the day



of judgment.

In this play, O'Neill portrays a man at his weakest point. He dreams of home, symbolically an ideal place or heaven, but he is incapable of reaching it. He has been rejected by God, and he has lost contact with his natural state of existence. He longs for home and says he is homesick for it, but he succumbs to the woman and the liquor. He is last seen in an unconscious state as he is being dragged to the AMINDRA. He has sold his soul to the Devil. At the time O'Neill discarded religion, it was as though he could not live up to the Church's expectations and demands on him. In one sense he was an Olson who desired to stay in the Church, but who just could not reach the perfection it demanded. And, as Olson's fate was the Devil ship, AMINDRA, so O'Neill may have felt that his fate, too, lay with the Devil.

In the Zone, the final play in the quartet, is an appropriate one if one views the plays for their religious significance. The setting is ten minutes till midnight on an ammunition boat in a war zone. All action in the four plays occurs at night, and this is significant. In Christian terminology, night represents a time of decision. As the hour grows late, man realizes that he is being given his last chance to choose the course he wants to follow throughout eternity. Knowing this, it would seem that he would always choose to follow God. But, there are obstacles placed in his way by the Devil who wants to claim him for eternity. Thus, in the evil

realm of the night, man makes his final choice. Those who choose God face a dawn of joy; those who choose the Devil face utter darkness forever. In the SS Glencairn cycle, this nighttime struggle is pictured. Only the Donkeyman and Yank choose God. The others are doomed forever. It appears that O'Neill deliberately accents man's choice of the Devil because it parallels his own choice.

This last play is set at ten minutes till midnight, the closest moment to the end of man's opportunity to choose. The fact that the ammunition ship is in a war zone lends pressure to the decision to be made. The war zone represents the Devil's attempt to lure men to him. There are no sound images in this play. The songs, whistles and clinking bottles of the others are stilled. It is an unnatural world. Complete quiet, the absence of sound, becomes the image. This again is appropriate because it intensifies the emotional battle of wills which is being fought. The battle is a psychological one between God and Devil for the control of man's mind. All exterior forces which would be indicated by sound have been eliminated as this mental struggle occurs.

The men aboard ship feel the tension, and they vent their nervous reactions on Smitty, the seaman in The Moon of the Caribbees, who is an outsider to the group because of his memories. It has already been shown that in that play he is a symbol for O'Neill. Now, the crew has discovered a black box in which he is hiding something.

Open men themselves, they repent his *secrecy* and suspect him of being a spy. Davis sums up their feelings by commenting:

No; an' he don't talk it like us, that's certain. An' he don't look English. An' what d'we know about him when you come to look at it? Nothin'! He ain't ever said where he comes from or why. All we know is he ships on here in London 'bout a year b'fore the war starts, as an A.P.--s'pose his papers most lik'ly--when he don't know how to box the compass, hardly. Ain't that queer in hiself? An' was he ever open with us like a good shipmate? No; he's always had that ole air about him 's if he was hidin' somethin'.<sup>36</sup>

led by this belief, they tie him up and open the box to discover no bomb, but a packet of love letters. They are ashamed by their act and embarrassed at having invaded his privacy, but the damage has been done. They have failed to realize that all men have some remembrance of the past which they would prefer to keep secret. In their treatment of Smitty, they demonstrate man's scorn of his fellow man, an attribute of the Devil. Therefore, the characters become symbolic of God's disappointment with mankind because they not only choose at the last hour to follow the devil, but they also reject the natural quality of love. He has placed temptation in their way in the shape of a black box, and they have yielded to it and destroyed a fellow seaman in the process. In

the other three plays, O'Neill explores God's relationship to man and man's relationship to God; but, here, he explores man's relationship to man.

Therefore, the four plays fall into a logical sequence of religious thought. As a believing Catholic, O'Neill trusted in the peaceful relationship of man and God as shown in The Moon of the Caribbees. He also believed that man could conquer his fear of death by the knowledge of God's grace as in Bound East for Cardiff. Third, he realized that man must prove himself worthy of heaven by working for it, and if he fails, as Olson does, in The Long Voyage Home, then he is not worthy of heaven. But, it is finally man's mistreatment of man, as in In the Zone, which led O'Neill away from the Church. He could not accept the idea of Christians hurting one another. Also, the pressures of family problems, and the isolation he knew as a child caused him to question God's relationship with man. He came to realize that the Church and love were not necessarily the same thing. And, as Smitty is left a sobbing victim of man's destructiveness, so O'Neill was an emotionally crippled victim of circumstances caused basically by people closest to him.

## CHAPTER II

### ACT II: THE MYSTERY OF ATHEISM AND THE GOD OF PUNISHMENT

The second stage of Eugene O'Neill's personal struggle with the question of religion began in 1902, when he was fourteen, and lasted until the composition of Days Without End in 1934. This period of his life was a time of doubt, in God's existence and the teachings of the Catholic Church, which led O'Neill to reject completely the concept of the Christian God and to turn somewhat desperately to other philosophies for a stronghold. On that fateful day in New London when the young O'Neill finally confronted his father with his refusal to attend Mass, the course of anguished searching and bitterness began. It was in this second stage of his life that O'Neill emotionally suffered the most intensely and in turn created the most soul-searching dramas as he felt the results of his decision to reject God.

When O'Neill entered Betts Academy, a non-sectarian school, in 1902, he began a period of open revolt against religion and convention in which he first preferred atheism. This revolt continued while O'Neill was a student at Princeton University in 1906-07. Since chapel attendance was compulsory, he had no choice, but he criticized the minister, Henry Van Dyke, as a stupid speaker. In conversation with close friends who thought of him as a romantic, O'Neill said, "If there is a God,

let Him strike me dead."<sup>1</sup> One friend said he was afraid God would. Shortly after this, O'Neill professed to be an agnostic, not an atheist. He acknowledged that there was something beyond the human mind that might be God and that the "human mind was incapable of comprehending infinity".<sup>2</sup>

In this particular period of O'Neill's life, the reader of biography is readily aware of the struggle in O'Neill's mind with the concept of God. There was uncertainty, and he could not decide whether to be an avowed atheist or an agnostic. This dualism and mental conflict would always exist because O'Neill was never able to decide conclusively what his beliefs were. According to the Gelbs:

Even at twenty Eugene revealed a paradoxical nature. . . Throughout his life he remained a puzzle to the people who knew him best, for he was given to swift reversals and conveyed sharply different impressions of himself--often deliberately.

Several years later, one critic stated that O'Neill attempted to escape from reality by severing contact and setting up an emotionally and spiritually independent inner kingdom. He found no salvation outside of religion, and he clung to the will to believe, but his thoughts left him no room for will or belief.<sup>4</sup> At this early

<sup>1</sup> Gelbs, p. 174.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>4</sup> John Howard Lawson, "Eugene O'Neill" in O'Neill:

stage in his life, perhaps O'Neill was still unable to sever contact with his family training and was still not mentally and emotionally mature enough to create an inner peace of mind.

As a result of a prank he committed while drunk, O'Neill was suspended from Princeton in 1907. In the spring of that year he was introduced to Benjamin R. Tucker, a man who was to be the first controlling force in O'Neill's search for a new philosophy of life. Mr. Tucker operated "The Unique Book Shop" in New York. Of New England Quaker ancestry, he was similar to O'Neill. Tucker had also rejected religion and conventional formalities and had become an anarchist. Through Tucker, O'Neill became acquainted with Max Stirner's book, Ego and His Own, which was the forerunner of the American anarchist period. One particular quotation from that book served as a guideline to O'Neill personally and in his professional writing career.

I am I, and I am neither good nor evil. Neither has any meaning for me. . . My concern is. . . not the True, the Good, the Right, the Free, etc. . . but simply my own self, and it is not general, it is individual as I myself am individual. For me there is nothing above myself.

However, Tucker's most significant contribution to the young O'Neill's philosophical development was in introducing him to Friedrich Nietzsche's book, Thus

A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. John Gassner (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1964), pp. 42-43.

Spake Zarathustra. At this point O'Neill initiated a lifelong enthusiasm for Nietzsche. His book became a replacement for the Catechism. O'Neill probably felt such a response to Nietzsche because of their similarities. Nietzsche, the son and grandson of Protestant pastors and a descendant of theologians, had undergone a loss of faith and had become a critic of Christianity.

From Thus Spake Zarathustra, O'Neill accepted these views as his guides:

Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman--a rope over an abyss.

'Body am I and soul'-so saith the child. And why should one not speak like children? . . . the awakened one, the knowing one, saith: 'Body am I entirely and nothing more, and soul is only the name of something in the body.'

Do I advise you to neighbor-love? Rather do I advise you to neighbor-fight and to furthest love! Higher than love to your neighbor is love to the furthest and future ones; higher still than love to men, is love to things and phantoms. My brethren, I advise you not to neighbor-love--I advise you to furthest love.<sup>6</sup>

The year 1909 marked an important new phase in O'Neill's life. Kathleen Jenkins, a girl whom he had met as a double date, became pregnant; and, over the objection of his father, O'Neill married her. He immediately deserted her, and it was not until the boy was eleven that O'Neill saw their son.

After this event, James O'Neill arranged for his



son to join a gold prospecting trip to Central America. The next three years spent in travel served to widen O'Neill's view of life. After contracting malaria, he returned to America and toured as an actor in his father's vaudeville show. In order to escape the demands of his father, he next shipped to Buenos Aires where he sank to a low point in his life as a drunken bum wandering from job to job. Again he returned to America, and this time he continued his life of dissipation on the New York waterfront in a saloon called "Jimmy-the-Priest's". Then, for the final time, he became a seaman and sailed to England and Africa. For the remainder of his life he was proud of the fact that he was classified as an Able Bodied Seaman. It is interesting to note that thirteen of his plays are set aboard ship and six others use the sea as a setting.<sup>7</sup>

This period of restless wandering seems to be directly related to the young man's search for identity. The religious problems and the family problems seemed almost to overwhelm him. The sea became a cleansing force for him, and in later years, he used it as a symbol of such. But, now, O'Neill was thoroughly confused in his searching for an answer to his existence, and he could not face the demands it made, so he lived primarily in a drunken stupor.

<sup>7</sup> Gelbs, p. 157.

In late 1911, O'Neill returned to New York and again settled down at "Jimmy-the Priest's". He associated with prostitutes, drunks, sailors and drifters. As he listened to their stories, he absorbed information for future plays. In 1912, in order for Kathleen to be granted a divorce by New York law, he arranged to be caught with a prostitute. He then continued to drink heavily and attempted suicide. It seems that O'Neill sank to the lowest depths of his personal existence then, and there was nothing to sustain him.

In terms of his future career as a dramatist, 1912 was to be significant in O'Neill's life. After a talk with his father, he left New York and moved to New London, Connecticut, where he obtained a position as reporter for the New London Telegraph. He also wrote poetry and began composing dramas. Although he remained aloof, he did express an interest in a rather sheltered girl named Maibelle Scott. To her he wrote love poetry, some of which was published in the Telegraph.

While in New London, O'Neill was hospitalized for tuberculosis for six months at Gaylord Farm. Of this experience, O'Neill later said:

It was at Gaylord that my mind got the chance to establish itself, to digest and valuate [sic] the impressions of many past years in which one experience had crowded on another with never a

second's reflection. At Gaylord I really thought about my life for the first time, about past and future.<sup>8</sup>

At Gaylord Farm there was a patient named Catherine Mackay who loved O'Neill. He merely teased her and mocked her belief in Catholicism. It appears that the doubting O'Neill could not tolerate the peace and satisfaction he saw in the lives of those who believed in that which he had scorned. And, there seemed also to be an underlying current which made him cover his desire to return to a religious belief with an outward show of scorn.

After dismissal from the sanitarium, O'Neill began writing independently. His father financed the publication of his first work, Thirst and Other One-Act Plays by Eugene Gladstone O'Neill. Then in 1914, again with his father's financial support, he enrolled in George Pierce Baker's "47 Workshop" at Harvard. He wrote three plays there: The Sniper, The Personal Equation and The Dear Doctor. While at Harvard he read avidly and was drawn to writers such as Conrad, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche who spoke of forces behind individual lives. Still unable to select a substitute for Catholicism, he wavered between socialism and individualism.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of one year in the workshop, O'Neill

<sup>8</sup>  
Quoted in Gelbs, p. 231.

<sup>9</sup>  
Doris M. Alexander, "Eugene O'Neill and Light on the Path," Modern Drama III, 3 (December, 1960), p. 260.

moved to Greenwich Village where he lived with criminals and intellectuals. Instead of writing, he became interested in political and social causes. He lived in another saloon similar to "Jimmy-the-Priest's". This one was aptly called the "Hell Hole". Here he met Terry Carlin, a man who was to make a greater impact on O'Neill's philosophy than any other living person.<sup>10</sup> Like Benjamin Tucker, Carlin was similar to O'Neill. He was a disciple of Nietzsche; he was an Irishman; and he was a former Catholic. He had resigned from working in a protest against the capitalist system, and he spent his days drinking and preaching a philosophy which was a mixture of Nietzsche and Eastern wisdom.

O'Neill's decision to become a mystic, a choice he had contemplated earlier, was made in 1915-16, when Terry Carlin gave him a copy of Light on the Path, a book of Hindu wisdom. It supposedly was written by two gentlemen centuries ago. The opening lines became his personal and philosophical inspiration.

Before the eyes can see, they must be incapable of tears. Before the ear can hear, it must have lost its sensitiveness. Before the voice can speak. . . it must have lost the power to wound. Before the soul can stand. . . its feet must be washed in the blood of the heart.

Light on the Path was the beginning of O'Neill's

<sup>10</sup> Travis Bogard, Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Oxford Press, 1972), p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander, pp. 260-61.

readings in Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism and comparative religion. The religious search continued, moving from Catholicism to Nietzsche to Eastern religions. The man O'Neill was still searching for a value structure in his life. At this point in his life, the Gelbs note, "The farther he withdrew, personally and artistically, from his Catholic roots, the more keenly he felt the terror of his flight."<sup>12</sup> Francis Thompson's poem, "The Hound of Heaven", exemplified the terror of his flight. He literally felt "hounded" by God; and, Dorothy Day, a friend, said she believed O'Neill suffered from the rejection of the love of God.<sup>13</sup>

So, at the threshold of his career, O'Neill again lived among anarchists and prostitutes. Abnormal though it may seem, this could be considered O'Neill's last fling with what was normality for him. Even though he had still not reached a definite conclusion to his religious struggle, he was free to do much of what he wanted. From this time on fame would prevent such freedom, and his life would be greatly restricted. Yet, the soul and personality had been structured, and he would remain much the same as he was at this moment. Although his theological views might shift, his belief in the natural goodness and mercy of mankind would always exist. It

<sup>12</sup> Gelbs, p. 359.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 359-61.

would be the fluctuation of his religious views that would make him such a mystery.

In 1916, O'Neill joined an avant-garde group of writers and artists who had an amateur theatrical company. They were led by George Cram Cook and his wife Susan Glaspell. It was Cook who first introduced O'Neill the playwright to the public by staging his early plays. Shortly after this the group officially organized itself as the Provincetown Players. Two members of this group were John Reed and his wife Louise Bryant. It has already been noted that O'Neill's personal code of ethics fluctuated. With Louise Bryant he was the liberal-minded man of the world. They conducted an affair in the absence of her husband but with his knowledge.

When Louise Bryant travelled to Russia to be with Reed, O'Neill met Agnes Boulton, a writer, and she became his second wife. They were married in Provincetown in 1918. O'Neill's religious struggle surfaced when he commented on the Methodist minister who married them: "I caught myself wishing I could believe in the same gentle God he seemed so sure of. This sounds like sentimentality, but it isn't."<sup>14</sup> His mother never approved of the marriage because Agnes was not a Catholic. Their marriage, like O'Neill himself, was full of contradictions. There was affection, sexual passion and an undercurrent of mistrust, resentment and hostility. His dualism

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Gelbs, p. 372.

invaded even his family life.

In the year of his marriage, only three plays were staged, and in the following year only one. The O'Neills moved to New York City to be close to the rehearsals and productions of the plays. O'Neill still drank heavily with his brother Jamie; yet, he drew closer to his father. James O'Neill even purchased the abandoned Coast Guard Station at Peaked Hill Bars on Cape Cod for him. His second son Shane was born on October 30, 1919, at a time when O'Neill's energy had flagged, and alcohol was again a problem for him.

With the awarding of his first Pulitzer Prize in 1920, for Beyond the Horizon, the situation improved, and this brought about the final reconciliation between father and son. O'Neill said of this, "And I thank whatever God may be that Beyond came into its own when it did and not too late for him."<sup>15</sup> On August 10, 1920, James O'Neill died from cancer after months of severe pain. O'Neill never was able to understand why God made his father suffer when his father believed in Him.

After her husband's death, Ella O'Neill was cured of drug addiction, and Jamie stayed away from liquor for one and one half years. Then, on February 28, 1923, during a trip to California, Ella died, and Jamie returned

<sup>15</sup> Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist (Boston: Little Brown, 1973), p. 97.

to drinking. This caused his death shortly thereafter. Eugene O'Neill had both loved and hated his mother, and her death left him empty. Unable to face his responsibilities at her funeral, as in the death of his father, he got drunk. The critic Chaitin later said that he always felt remorse for this as only a Catholic could.<sup>16</sup>

Prior to his mother's death, O'Neill received a second Pulitzer Prize for Anna Christie, and with Kenneth Macgowan and Robert Edmond Jones he took control of the Provincetown Players. Of the Pulitzer Prize he said, "I seem to be becoming the Prize Pup of Playwriting and the Hot Dog of Drama."<sup>17</sup>

The year 1922 was a personally momentous one for O'Neill. He met his oldest son for the first time; he was introduced to the actress Carlotta Monterey; and his mother died. He returned to heavy drinking, and a nervous tremor began which foreshadowed later tragedy for him.

When his brother Jamie died, O'Neill said:

I have lost my father, mother and only brother within the past four years. Now I'm the only O'Neill of our branch left. But I've two sons to carry on. However, neither of them will be pure Irish, so I must consider myself the real last one. It makes me feel old and a bit weary sometimes.<sup>18</sup>

O'Neill's two sons did reflect the tragedy of his exis-

<sup>16</sup> Norman Chaitin, "O'Neill: The Power of Daring," Modern Drama III, 3 (December, 1960), p. 234.

<sup>17</sup> Sheaffer, pp. 92-3.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 117.



tence. Eugene O'Neill, Jr. was a fine student who became a professor and faced a bright future. Yet, partly because he felt cheated of his heritage as O'Neill's son, he killed himself at age forty. Shane Rudraighe O'Neill grew up as a dreamer. He was virtually ignored by his father, and when he turned to drug addiction, he was following a family pattern.

In 1925, O'Neill received a Gold Medal from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and his daughter Oona was born. The following year he received an honorary degree from Yale University. In 1927, he joined the Theatre Guild which assumed responsibility for production of his plays. Marital problems with Agnes caused a separation. At first she refused to divorce him even though he left the United States in the company of Carlotta Monterey. They were finally divorced in 1929, and he married Carlotta. After the marriage, they settled in France in a solitary existence. Although twice divorced, O'Neill had a Catholic conviction of the sanctity of marriage. The marriages also seem to be proof of the turmoil O'Neill faced as a result of his religious struggle. The theological questions weighed upon him so heavily that his personality and nature were consistently unsteady. This problem made him a difficult husband.

According to Carpenter, O'Neill possessed three different selves. The first was the rebellious, violent and drunken self of his youth. The wife of this period

was a symbol of purity. The second self was the dedicated creative artist of the middle years, and his wife was a symbol of unlimited love. The third self was the compassionate one who understood human tragedy. He retired and brooded, and his wife was the image of worldly sophistication.<sup>19</sup> These three different selves correspond to the three religious selves of O'Neill. In the first religious period, he associated the Church with natural behavior. In the second period, he shunned the Church and concentrated on writing. In the third period, he accepted the Church as good, but he remained a part of the world. All elements of his life were entwined in the religious struggle.

When the O'Neills returned to America in 1931, O'Neill had already received his third Pulitzer Prize for Strange Interlude in 1929. They began an endless search for a permanent home, which again paralleled his search for religious peace. The first home was "Casa Genotta" at Sea Island, Georgia. When his health failed, they moved to "Tao House" in California. He began writing the autobiographical plays at that time, and the second phase of his search for religious peace ended.

Early in the second stage of his career, O'Neill had written to George Jean Nathan, "I am familiar enough

19  
Carpenter, p. 37.

with the best modern drama of all countries to realize that, viewed from a true standard, my work is as yet a mere groping. I rate myself as a beginner with prospects . . . God stiffen it, I am young yet and I mean to grow!"<sup>20</sup> According to Dobree, as he comments on the time, "O'Neill feels very definitely that he is struggling to say something, that he has a vision however obscured it may be, which seems to him of great and permanent importance in the understanding of humanity."<sup>21</sup>

O'Neill was born with the tragic sense of life. He had no illusions about happy endings. As he wrote his plays, O'Neill struggled with many philosophical concepts. When he rejected Christianity, he attempted to find a philosophy that would reconcile a rationalistic view of the universe with man's need for something beyond it. In all his major works, he was in search of an aesthetic and spiritual center. His impressiveness is the result of an effort to trace a thread of meaning in a universe almost emptied of meaning by scientific and sociological thought. He did not find any comforting assurance, but he acknowledged his failure and dramatized it.<sup>22</sup>

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Quoted in Sheaffer, p. 13.

21

Bonamy Dobree, "The Plays of Eugene O'Neill," Southern Review II (1936-37), p. 439.

22

John Gassner, Eugene O'Neill (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965), p. 6.

During this middle period of his life, there hung on the wall of his workroom an eight-inch crucifix which had been given to him by Stark Young, a writer and critic whom he knew. Young commented about this later that "Gene always was a Catholic. . . You never really give it up."<sup>23</sup> Although the Gelbs believe that he kept the crucifix for its dramatic appeal, one cannot help but believe that there was a link between its location in his workroom and the Church which he had rejected. Perhaps it served as a reminder of that which he had rejected or as a reminder of the time when he believed that natural love and mercy were one and the same as the Catholic Church. The crucifix, a symbol of God's love for mankind, corresponded to the view he had been taught as a child by his mother. It is highly improbable that O'Neill forgot the Church of his youth.

Thus, in the middle period of O'Neill's life, he denied the power and truth of the teachings of the Catholic Church. It has already been shown that the second stage of Eugene O'Neill's personal life was marked by doubt in the Christian God and in the Catholic Church. In denying the power of these forces, O'Neill existed in revolt. He deliberately chose a life-style which reflected his atheistic inclination. He roamed the oceans with no sense of direction; he became a chronic alcoholic; he attempted suicide; he lived in slums with

the world's rejects; he practiced a succession of philosophies. Not only did he deny the existence of God, but he also denied his own body the right to existence through the abuses he rendered it. It was as though the death of God was to be equated with the death of man. O'Neill appeared to see no value in the spirit or in the body of man. He came close to losing his belief in the natural goodness and love of mankind.

During this degenerating period of body and soul, the prolific mind of O'Neill functioned, and he wrote numerous plays. The majority of the plays are clear indications of a predominantly atheistic viewpoint. Of these plays, two will be examined to demonstrate O'Neill's philosophical atheism and his attitude toward what occurs as a result of the denial of God. The plays are dualistic in that each contains both atheistic and Christian characters. The fact that both are shown as evil beings is an indication of the dualistic attitude which O'Neill held toward religious creeds. He was able to see the evil in both groups of people. This may have been one reason why O'Neill could not long remain with any particular belief.

The first play which explores the results of man's denial of the faith is The Great God Brown. This play, written in 1925, shows what happens when man goes against his nature. He destroys not only himself and his family, but also his acquaintances. In the play O'Neill presents a study of the radically different natures of William

Brown and Dion Anthony. The Prologue sets up the concepts of individuality and aloofness through the family conversations. Masks are used to accent the fact that few of the characters can ever reveal their true natures to the others. Each one fears knowing the truth about himself and about the others.

William Brown and Dion Anthony are first presented as youths. William's father is employed in the contracting company which is owned by Dion's father. William's parents want him to study to become an architect so that he can join the company. He is agreeable to this but does not seem to be very concerned about the future. Dion's parents do not understand their son any better than William's do. The Anthonys want Dion to join the firm for they see an artistic talent in him. However, he balks at the idea because he does not get along well with his parents. Already, Dion is masking his true nature so that his parents cannot know his true feelings about them and the company. He actually realizes that he has artistic talent, but his masked identity prevents him from developing it. So, as totally different personalities, the two youths whose lives will be so entwined are introduced.

Dion Anthony becomes a symbolic character who is both Pagan and Christian as his name suggests. It is the radical differences of these natures which causes him great pain. For Margaret, his wife whom he dearly loves, he must wear the mask of Dion, the carefree romantic

who is passionate, undependable and unpredictable. Even though he prefers not to be like this, he must remain masked, never to show her his true self because it frightens her. Her maternal instinct responds to the false nature of Dion. Also, Dion must wear this mask in the presence of his acquaintances, and his soul questions this in anguish.

Why am I afraid to dance, I who love music and rhythm and grace and song and laughter? Why am I afraid to live, I who love life and the beauty of flesh and the living colors of earth and sky and sea? Why am I afraid of love, I who love love? Why am I afraid, I who am not afraid? Why must I pretend to scorn in order to pity? Why must I hide myself in self-contempt in order to understand? Why must I be so ashamed of my strength, so proud of my weakness? Why must I live in a cage like a criminal, defying and hating, I who love peace and friendship? Why was I born without a skin, O God, that I must wear armor in order to touch or to be touched? Or, rather, Old Graybeard, why the devil was I ever born at all?<sup>24</sup>

This statement demonstrates clearly the torture of the real Dion as he endures the pretenses of his life so that his wife and friends will be satisfied and comfortable in his presence. He realizes that what he is doing is wrong because it is contradictory to his nature, but he cannot change for fear of losing his wife's love and his friendships.

As a young adult, Dion continues to show the contr-

dictory nature of his life in his actions. He reads the Bible and uses the household money to buy liquor. He refuses to work while watching his wife get a job to support them. The real Dion desires to paint, to support his family and to be a Christian. But, his wife prefers the false mask because it brings out her mothering instinct, and she finally comes to view him more as a child than as a husband.

About the time things are really going badly for the Anthonys, William Brown, now a successful architect who has taken control of the company which Dion's father once owned, steps in to offer Dion a job in the company. He actually needs Dion's artistic ability, but he extends the offer more as a favor to Margaret whom he has always loved. His inner nature deeply offended by this offer, Dion retreats to the parlor of Cybel, the prostitute. She is the only person with whom he can be unmasked, for as an earth goddess figure, she understands him in his natural state. When Billy Brown finds him there, he chastizes Dion for his behavior, thinking only that Dion is being unfaithful to Margaret. He is blind to the truth in the situation. Angrily, Dion equates Billy with God: "the Omnipresent Successful Serious One, the Great God Mr. Brown".<sup>25</sup> Dion realizes that the religious part of his nature must remain masked permanently as he seeks to serve his new master in order to help his



family, and that Brown is more concerned about Margaret than he is about Dion. From this point on, Margaret never knows the love and affection which the real Dion has for her. He masks it behind the carefree countenance of one who has sold his soul to the Devil. She prefers this because she thinks he is doing the right thing in working for Brown. Blind to Dion's true nature, she is trying to mold him into something he cannot be. She is destroying him.

As the years pass, the evil nature of Billy Brown is revealed in his behavior toward Anthony. He has a jealous compulsion to take anything which rightfully belongs to Dion. He frequents Cybel's parlor in his effort to claim her as his own. The chief difference is that she is always masked in his presence, so he never succeeds in knowing the real Cybel. She is merely a professional prostitute with him. About this time, Dion begs his wife to accept the real person that he is. He says, "Behold your man-the sniveling, cringing, life-denying Christian slave you have so nobly ignored in the father of your sons!"<sup>26</sup> Her shrieks of horror when she looks on his unmasked face bring an end to his hopes for the future. He realizes that she does not love his real self.

At this point Dion makes a decision to end his life.

But first he talks to Brown about the life which circumstances have caused him to live. First, he reminds Brown of the reason that he began wearing the mask as a protection for himself from the God of the supposedly Christian world with which Brown is associated.

One day when I was four years old, a boy sneaked up behind when I was drawing a picture in the sand he couldn't draw and hit me on the head with a stick and kicked out my picture and laughed when I cried. It wasn't what he'd done that made me cry, but him! I had loved and trusted him and suddenly the good God was disproved in his person and the evil and injustice of Man was born! Everyone called me cry-baby, so I became silent for life and designed a mask of the Bad Boy Pan in which to live and rebel against that other boy's God and protect myself from His cruelty.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, it can be understood that Dion Anthony is a Christian in his belief in the natural goodness and love of mankind and that William Brown is the hypocritical Christian who knows nothing about natural goodness. His religion is evil, and Anthony rejects it.

Anthony points out that he has been the one who has made Brown a successful man, and he comments on the design for a cathedral he has just finished:

I've been the brains! I've been the design! I've designed even his success-drunk and laughing at him-laughing at his career! Not proud! Sick! Sick of myself and him! Designing and getting drunk! Saving my woman and children! Ha! And this cathedral is my masterpiece! It will make Brown the most eminent architect in this state of

God's country. I put a lot into it-what was left of my life! It's one blasphemy from sidewalk to the tips of its spires!-but so concealed that the fools will never know. They'll kneel and worship the ironic Silenus who tells them the best good is never to be born! Well, blasphemy is faith, isn't it?<sup>28</sup>

The masked Anthony is bitter because he has given the best of his talents to a creation for Brown's gain. His real nature is proud of his work, but he has intentionally put Pagan features into its design as a means of scorning the false religion of modern Christians who are more interested in outward appearances than in the thoughts of a person's heart.

When Anthony dies, his mask has fallen off, and his real face, described in the stage directions as like a Christian martyr's, is exposed. His last words are a blessing upon Brown:

Forgive me, Billy. Bury me, hide me, forget me for your own happiness! May Margaret love you! May you design the Temple of Man's Soul! Blessed are the meek and the poor in spirit.<sup>29</sup>

Dion Anthony has died like a martyr for a cause in which he believes. He has been killed by those closest to him through their denial of his true nature. In death he becomes the Christian which he was not allowed to be in life. Only Cybel, who is perhaps more pagan than the others, has known his true self. Brown and Margaret represent O'Neill's comment on the hypocritical nature

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 297.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

of modern believers. They are blind to what they claim to believe in. Again, O'Neill is critical of Christians because of their efforts to hurt others, that element which he first exposed in the SS Glencairn cycle. This factor is the most important one in his rejection of the Church.

Immediately after Dion's death, Brown assumes his identity through the use of his mask so that he can claim everything which belonged to Dion. His first conquest is Margaret who throws away her own mask which she has always worn in the real Dion's presence. She does not understand what has caused the change in her husband's behavior, but she does respond to his new sexuality and awareness of her. Brown can give her this type of a relationship whereas Dion was prevented from doing so because she would not respond to his real nature. From this time on, she cannot tolerate the real Brown and constantly defends her husband to him when she sees him at the office. She knows nothing of her husband's death and assumes that he is still employed by Brown. In order to protect his new relationship as her husband, Brown decides to murder himself theoretically. He has learned to hate his real self, as he now sees himself for what he really is. He tells Margaret, "I'll murder this God-damned disgusting Great God Brown who stands like a fatted calf in the way of our health and wealth

and happiness."<sup>30</sup> In a frantic moment of insanity, he murders his own facial mask, the one the public associates with him. When he does this he is wearing Dion Anthony's facial mask, so the police hunt for Anthony. In panic Brown knows that his God has deserted him, and he cries out:

Mercy, Compassionate Savior of Man! Out of my depths I cry to you! Mercy on thy poor clod, thy clay, the Great God Brown! Mercy, Savior! Beh! I am sorry, little children, but your kingdom is empty. God has become disgusted and moved away to some far ecstatic star where life is a dancing flame! We must die without him.<sup>31</sup>

From what he says, it is obvious that in a time of trial this "Christian" does not really know his God.

When the police locate him and kill him, Cybel, who is with him, removes Dion's mask and places it on its stand. This leaves the real face of William Brown exposed. The police assume he is an accomplice to Dion in the murder of Brown, because they do not recognize him. In effect, William Brown killed himself when he murdered his mask. Margaret never knows that her real husband has been dead for some time, nor does she ever know that Brown assumed his identity. She thinks that her real husband has killed William Brown.

At his death the unmasked Brown is alone except for Cybel. Stripped of his false appearances, he can now see the living God which Anthony knew, and he dies praising that God in a manner which he could never have done in

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 319.

the other part of his life.

I know! I have found Him! I hear Him speak!  
'Blessed are they that weep, for they shall laugh!'  
Only he that has wept can 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!<sup>32</sup>

What all this amounts to is that a real Christian who retains an understanding and belief in the natural goodness and love of man is prevented from existing by two people who wear the masks of hypocritical Christians and who do not know the natural goodness of man. Margaret destroys Dion's love for her, and Brown destroys Dion's ambition and talent by managing to get all that should belong to Dion. Thus, people cause other people to reject their natural beliefs. The result is tragic. Dion is forced to live and die in an unnatural manner. Brown, who assumes his mask as a worldly man, destroys his own nature and dies as an unknown person called "Man". This rather complicated view is made clearer when one realizes that O'Neill was concerned with men's natures and felt the struggle between atheism and Christianity to be the result of men forcing certain doctrinal beliefs upon other men. Like Dion who chose to live as others directed, O'Neill lived according to the dictates of others who tried to mold him to fit their philosophical formulas. The difference is that O'Neill fluctuated

regularly as he strove to remain true to his real nature which was the most important part of his being to him.

The next play in this discussion is Dynamo. Written in 1928, toward the end of the middle period, this play exposes O'Neill's conflicting feelings about Christianity and atheism. Although O'Neill was currently practicing the beliefs of various atheistic doctrines, he does not show a preference for the atheistic characters. Actually, both groups are presented as samples of man's thwarted attempts to achieve peace of mind. Neither philosophy gives this peace to its followers. Rather, they become tormented extremists in their devotion to the sacraments of their professed beliefs. This occurs because they have neglected their natural states of love and goodness in their frenzied desires to follow man-made doctrines.

Dynamo presents two families, the Lights, who are the Christians, and the Fifes, who are the atheists. Ramsay Fife, the superintendent of a hydro-electric plant, is a plain-spoken man who understands electricity and rejects Christianity. He has challenged his neighbor, the Reverend Light, to debate the existence of God, but he knows Light never will do this. Fife alone sees the Lights for what they really are, hypocritical Christians who have denied natural love and goodness, and he takes great delight in scorning them. Although he represents the viewpoint O'Neill was currently following, he is not characterized as an admirable person. If anything, O'Neill appears to emphasize his weaknesses and faults.

Perhaps this is because he sees his own weaknesses in this man. However, Fife is eventually the only one who survives with full control of his senses because he alone has not allowed his attitude toward religion to control his life. He is not obsessed as the others are; therefore, he is more of a natural man who relies on his instincts for survival rather than on the tenets of his belief.

May Fife, his wife, is a bovine dreamer who lives in a world of fantasy. She has lost touch with reality in a different way from the other obsessed characters. She is atheistic in her devotion to the Dynamo, but she does not see it as a symbol of electrical power. She views it as a mother earth symbol, and it blends with her total return to nature worship. She is predominantly a natural person fitting the qualifications which O'Neill seemed to give to this category of people. However, she has allowed her atheism to distort her mind; therefore, her natural character is obstructed from existing.

The Fife's daughter Ada is an evil force. As the product of union between a deranged nature-worshipper and a science worshipper, she embodies the anti-Christian powers. Hence, she delights in tormenting Reuben Light when he is Christian, but she becomes his victim when he himself becomes evil. She struggles to return to a state of natural goodness and love, but she cannot because she is Reuben's victim.

The Lights, the second family, are the Christians who have been exposed to the "Light of the world." As



children of God they are followers of the Light. However, though one may expect joy and happiness in such Christians, this is not the case. They are unhappy with each other to the extent that they are critical and suspicious. Like the Fifes, they have denied their natural state of goodness. Also of importance is the fact that they live in a home which is without electricity or light. Symbolically, they are blind to the truth as professed by the Fifes and O'Neill that there is no God. O'Neill exposes a supposedly Christian home in which the only emotions are negative. He is deliberately ridiculing the hypocrisy which he sees existing in Christendom by showing the Lights as completely unnatural people.

Hutchins Light is a Protestant minister who, like many believers, has inherited his belief from his ancestors. He is not personally committed to his beliefs. Rather, he mumbles scripture to himself as an escape mechanism from his wife's nagging and from the taunts of his atheistic neighbors. He is actually perturbed with God for not punishing Fife, and his main concern is that his son is becoming too involved with Ada. Light is a defeated man. Nothing good happens to him, and he can find no comfort in spiritual thoughts. He is truly one who practices the outward form of religion but does not possess the inner commitment to belief. In his own life O'Neill had seen people who practiced the visible rites of the Church, but who did not make Church doctrine a part of their everyday lives, and he rejected them.

Even though Light is a Protestant minister and not a Catholic priest, he is still an example of Christendom, and O'Neill wanted no part of that world. So Light is intentionally shown as a hypocrite to reveal the major flaw that O'Neill saw in Christians.

Amelia Light is definitely not the stereotyped minister's wife. She is a nagging, complaining woman who despises the life she has been forced to live. Her bitter feelings have caused her to direct her unhealthy attentions to their only son. She spies on him jealously, causes him to be whipped, and lies to him to get the information she wants about his relationship with Ada. She is a deceptive woman who changes roles like masks to become the person who can get the most from the moment. On her deathbed she says to her husband, "Don't be a fool!"<sup>33</sup> When Reuben is told about this, he bitterly replies to his father:

We have electrocuted your God. 'Don't be a fool'. . . that's what I kept writing her. . . her last words!. . . then I'd converted her away from his God!. . . the dying see things beyond. . .<sup>34</sup> she saw I'd found the right path to the truth!. . .

O'Neill deliberately makes a supposedly Christian woman see the "truth" that belief in God is foolish to substantiate his own current conviction that religion is foolish.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 466.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 466.

The most important character, Reuben Light, is surely a representation of O'Neill himself. He is seventeen when he denies Christianity, and O'Neill had done so while in his teens. The problems that plague Reuben are the frustrations of O'Neill. At first Reuben is presented as an overprotected and innocent boy. He loves his mother and fears his father. Like his father he has an overwhelming fear of lightning, a symbol of the natural force in life. Neither Christian nor atheist can control it.

Into the calm of his life enters Ada Fife. Reuben is fascinated by her and believes himself to be in love. She considers him to be a rather dumb kid and helps her father to play a joke on him to prove this. Fife claims to have murdered his wife's sweetheart twenty years ago and then to have escaped prison and married her under the assumed name of Fife. He makes Reuben swear never to tell anyone about this matter. Not knowing that the story is one Fife had read in the newspaper, Reuben is quite upset to think that Ada is the daughter of an adulteress and a murderer. He confides to his mother what he has heard, and she betrays his trust by telling Reuben's father the story. He naturally thinks this is an act of God, so he goes to Fife's home planning to turn him over to the police. Of course, he learns the truth; the Fifes have their laugh; and Reuben is mortified with embarrassment.

Reuben's innocence rapidly disappears because of this incident. It causes him to reject his parents and to leave home. To his mother he says:

But you're yellow, too. And I'm yellow.  
How could I help being? It's in my blood. But  
I'll get him out of my blood, by God! And I'll  
get you out, too!<sup>35</sup>

Seeing the look of satisfaction on her face as he is whipped, something clicks in his mind, and he changes, never to believe securely in the Christian God again.

You'll never dare touch me again, you old  
fool! I'm not scared of you or your God any more!  
There is no God! No God but Electricity!  
I'll never be scared again! I'm through with the  
lot of you!<sup>36</sup>

In Act II, Reuben, who has been gone for two years, returns home, still an embittered person. During his absence he has converted to the worship of electricity, a natural force, and this seems to be as much a personal denial of his family as a spiritual denial of God. Of his change Reuben says:

I'm studying a lot of science. Sometimes I've gone without eating to buy books-and after I've read all night-books on astronomy and evolution. It all comes down to electricity in the end. What the fool preachers call God is in electricity somewhere.<sup>37</sup>

Like O'Neill, Reuben can even pinpoint his reverse conversion to a certain time and place. He tells Ada:

35 Ibid., p. 449.

36 Ibid., pp. 452-3.

37 Ibid., p. 458.

We'll walk to the top of Long Hill. That's where I was all during the storm that night after I left here. I made myself stand there and watch the lightning. After that storm was over I'd changed, believe me! I knew nothing could ever scare me again-and a whole lot of me was dead and a new lot started living.<sup>38</sup>

After learning of his mother's death, Reuben decides to stay and get a job at Fife's power plant because of his desire to be close to the source of electricity. Rather quickly he changes into an unstable condition in which he rejects physical love and devotes himself like a monk to the worship of the Dynamo. In a moment of frenzied excitement and worship, Reuben dedicates his life to the Dynamo. He reverently describes it as being

like a great dark idol. . .like the old stone statues of gods people prayed to. . .only it's living and they were dead. . .that part on top is like a head. . .with eyes that see you without seeing you. . .and below it is like a body. . . not a man's. . .round like a woman's. . .as if it had breasts. . .but not like a girl. . .not like Ada. . .no, like a woman. . .like her mother. . . or mine. . .a great, dark mother!<sup>39</sup>

Then he prays to it:

Mother of Life, my mother is dead, she has passed back into you, tell her to forgive me, and to help me find your truth!<sup>40</sup>

At this climactic moment Reuben has substituted the female idol for his real mother as well as for God. This kind of idea haunted O'Neill throughout his life.

38 Ibid., p. 460.

39 Ibid., p. 474.

40 Ibid., p. 474.

The love-hate relationship with his mother was shown in his dramas through the lives of men who worshipped a female god form. O'Neill rejected the male God of vengeance and worshipped the female mother god of love. Reuben and others, such as Dion Anthony in The Great God Brown, do the same thing. In Strange Interlude, written just before Dynamo, the godhead is discussed as a split between Mother-god and Father-god.

Act III shows Reuben in his devotional behavior toward the Dynamo. Like an ascetic monk, he has beaten himself to bring the lusts of his body under control. As a religious leader would do, he has made a convert in the form of Mrs. Fife whom he tells:

But there must be a center around which all this moves, mustn't there? There is in everything else! And that center must be the Great Mother of Eternal Life, Electricity, and Dynamo is her Divine Image on earth! Her power houses are the new churches! She wants us to realize the secret dwells in her! She wants some one man to love her purely and when she finds him worthy she will love him and give him the secret of truth and he will become the new saviour who will bring happiness and peace to men! And I'm going to be that saviour\_ 41

Later on, as proof of his devotion, Reuben offers Ada as a sacrifice to the Dynamo. In making love to her, he feels he has offended the Dynamo, and he seeks to correct the wrong. The crazed Reuben exclaims, "I won't be a murderer. . .I'm your executioner, Mother

. . .that's why I'm so calm. . ."42

The drama's ending pictures a world of madness. Hutchins Light is crazed by the death of his wife and is incapable of doing anything. Mrs. Fife is enamored of the Dynamo. Reuben kills Ada and then destroys himself on the Dynamo. Only Mr. Fife remains sensible for he is the only one who has an intelligent approach to life. All the others are driven by their obsession with religion. It can be gathered from this play that O'Neill's statement about religion rests on this point. Only the person who uses his native powers of intellect can find a workable philosophy. Since most men are governed primarily by their emotional responses to man-made organizations, there can be no natural peace for them in life. Like Reuben, they destroy themselves in their unnatural worship of the man-made.

It is apparent that these plays are the work of an atheistic man who cannot forge his link to the Church, but who now hates it. Through elements such as masks, science, human relationships, and nature, he establishes an atheistic world and then demonstrates the way in which both Christians and atheists exist in it. The Great God Brown presents the inner conflict of Christianity and atheism. A man who is a natural Christian is

forced to wear the mask of atheism by unnatural hypocritical Christians. A hypocritical Christian sees the truth revealed to him at the moment of his death. Since both denied their true natures, both lose their dreams for the future. One is really a Christian character because he has always believed in Christianity. The other character is atheistic because his death bed confession is more a matter of convenience than an expression of true belief. In Dynamo, there are unnatural Christians who deny their faith through the manner in which they live, and there are atheists who cannot function normally because of their determination to prove Christianity a myth. Only the one not obsessed by either creed survives, because his atheism is harmonious to his natural instincts.

O'Neill certainly does not present a happy view of life in his period of atheism. In turning toward it, he almost lost his natural instinct for good. Through his mask of atheism he saw both the problems of Christianity and atheism. Feeling that neither form was superior to the other, he seemed to conclude that neither was worth his concern. So, in the final period of his life, he regained his natural instinct and turned to the agnostic state in which he recognized a value in all organized religions but did not join himself to any of them.



### CHAPTER III

#### ACT III: THE MYSTERY OF AGNOSTICISM AND THE UNKNOWN GOD

Already in this paper the first two periods of Eugene O'Neill's personal relationship to religion and the Catholic Church have been examined. It has been established that in the first period O'Neill possessed a trusting faith in the Christian God and in the teachings of the Catholic Church, and that he equated the Church with natural goodness and love. In the second period of rebellion, he denied the faith and became an atheist, but he still managed to maintain a wavering faith in the goodness of mankind. The plays of that period demonstrated the dualistic nature of O'Neill's struggle with skepticism and atheism to find a substitute for that faith. In the third phase to be discussed now, there again was dualism. At this time, from 1934 until his death in 1953, when he was haunted by ghosts from his past, O'Neill found an answer for his questions about religion. He accepted the fact that there was a mystical force at work in the world and in the lives of men, but he denied himself entrance to a fellowship of believers in a force called God. He realized completely the impossibility of returning to the Catholic Church, and he really did not have the desire to do so. Therefore, the third stage has become the period of agnosticism toward religion and of a belief in an unseen power which controls the

lives of men. That power might be called God, but he was personally unable to worship the Christian God. This was also a period of belief in the natural love and mercy of man, and his dramas most forcefully indicated his merciful spirit.

When one examines the third phase of O'Neill's life, he is reminded of one of O'Neill's favorite quotations from Walt Whitman, "Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself."<sup>1</sup> For it was in the third period that O'Neill seemingly contradicted all he had said at earlier times. Yet, he had verified the existence of his ambiguous dualistic attitude toward religion nineteen years earlier when he wrote to the critic Arthur Hobson Quinn:

And just here is where I am a most confirmed mystic too, for I am always trying to interpret life in terms of lives, never just lives in terms of character. I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind (Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it)-Mystery certainly.<sup>2</sup>

This statement, made at a time when O'Neill predominantly scorned religious concepts, reflects an undercurrent foreshadowing the attitude of a more mature O'Neill, of a dramatist who attempted to reconcile himself to life, especially to the events of his new life and family. For in the final account, it was his love-hate relation-

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by John Henry Raleigh, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 243.

<sup>2</sup>

Quoted by Alexander, p. 262.

ship to his family which produced his attitude toward religious dogma.

One must remember the traditional attributes of Irish character in order to understand O'Neill's ambivalence in theological matters. According to Raleigh, those attributes are family ties, a noncommunal nature, a belief in sexual chastity, turbulence, drunkenness, both a sentimental and an ironical attitude toward love, fear of betrayal, both a religious and a blasphemous nature, and a loquacious nature.<sup>3</sup> The Irish heritage of dualistic attitudes contributed to O'Neill's responses to his family and to religion. Thus, he was most normal and most contradictory when he was religious-blasphemous.

In order to comprehend O'Neill's personal attitude toward religion in the third stage, one must examine him as a playwright, for this was the period of his most magnificent achievement as a dramatist. The plays were a thorough indication of all O'Neill believed as an ailing and aging man. Therefore, the study of this period must begin in the year 1934, with the presentation to the public of Days Without End.

At the time of writing Days Without End, O'Neill was engaged in a personal religious struggle. According to the Gelbs, the Hound of Heaven came very close to overtaking him.<sup>4</sup> The fact that O'Neill ended the atheistic

<sup>3</sup> Raleigh, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, p. 128.

<sup>4</sup> Gelbs, p. 763.

period of his life with an emotional struggle which centered on the Catholic Church is plausible if one has remembered that, for O'Neill, all of life was linked to his family relationships. The Catholic Church was a part of that family background, and so it was reasonable that he began the final struggle for peace of mind with an inner struggle to determine finally if the Church of his youth was truly the place for him.

In October, 1934, O'Neill wrote to his friend Lawrence Langner:

For after all, this play, like Ah, Wilderness!, but in a much deeper sense, is paying of an old debt on my part, a gesture toward a more comprehensive, unembittered understanding and inner feeling--the breaking away from an old formula that I had enslaved myself with, and the appreciation that there is their own truth in other formulas, too, and that any life-giving formula is as fit a subject for drama as any other.<sup>5</sup>

This is a key statement in interpreting the attitude of O'Neill in his final stage of life. It blends with his desire to make things right in his life before he died, but it is not a statement of his return to the Church.

On January 11, 1934, Phillip Moeller wrote his impressions of a conversation with the O'Neills on the night before the play opened in Boston.

She said Gene was and is still a Catholic and that she hopes he will return definitely to the faith and that she would gladly go with him,

whenever he is ready, but he must not be forced.

He said the end of the play was undoubtedly a wish fulfillment on his part.

He told me about the simple trusting happiness of some of his Catholic relatives. He wants to go that way and find a happiness which apparently he hasn't got.<sup>6</sup>

Although he came close, he did not return to the Church, and, according to the Gelbs, "this was his last flirtation with Catholicism."<sup>7</sup>

As a dramatist, O'Neill considered the subject of faith in conflict with skepticism to be the big subject behind all little subjects. The play expressed torment and the desire to receive forgiveness, and it had a definite Catholic aspect. O'Neill wrote to Langner about this in 1933, "Days Without End is nothing if not controversial, especially in its Catholic aspect. It is sure, fail or succeed, to arouse much bitter argument."<sup>8</sup> O'Neill's projection proved accurate, and the play was badly received by the critics.

Most critics thought it was a failure. Richard Dana Skinner summed up their attitudes in Commonweal: "The trouble as I see it, is this--that the reality of the struggle toward faith is exceedingly remote from the Broadway consciousness."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by the Gelbs, pp. 776-79.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 763.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 769.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted by the Gelbs, pp. 781-82.

The Catholic critics viewed it as a religious work, not as a literary work, and they disagreed on its meaning. O'Neill was incensed over the criticism. He wanted the play evaluated on its own merits, not just as a religious piece. He told Bennett Cerf:

It is a play about a Catholic. It is an attempt to express what I feel are the life-preserving depths in Catholic mysticism-to be fair to a side of life I have dismissed with scorn in other plays. But it is also a psychological study whose psychological truth would be the same essentially, if a Buddhist, or a Greek Orthodox hero were involved. It is not Catholic propaganda! If, after it comes out, the Church wants to set the seal of its approval on it, that's up to them. But I don't give a damn whether they do or not-and I certainly will not make the slightest move to win that approval in advance.<sup>10</sup>

Days Without End marked the end of O'Neill's active life in the theater. Socio-economic causes were popular, and he was not interested in them, so he became a lost dramatist in that he retired from active Broadway production and focused on private writing. In the following twenty years, he retreated into the past where he explored himself. It was a time of spiritual and physical illness; however, his two best plays, The Iceman Cometh and Long Day's Journey Into Night, were written then, and he found a more comfortable relationship to the religious matters.

From 1934-1953, O'Neill worked on a cycle of plays called A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed and on his

autobiographical plays. It was a loss to drama that only two plays of the cycle were completed. According to Bogard, O'Neill isolated himself in two cells. The first was the outer cell of the past in which he saw the history of the country. The second was the dark inner cell of self and the dead. The cycle was written in the first cell, and the autobiographical works in the second. The two were separated by a door which opened from the outer room to peace and forgiveness and from the inner room to escape from loneliness and hell. In all but two of the last plays, the door was an important scenic element.<sup>11</sup>

It would seem that the door may have other importance in that it stands for the entrance to a religious belief or the exit from such a belief. O'Neill moved frequently through the door which separated these rooms. He did not close the door until after he had made his peace with the ghosts of his family.

O'Neill received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936, while living in Seattle. As with other honors, he was not overly impressed. He was a sick man with a severe nervous disorder later diagnosed as Parkinson's Disease, and he disliked publicity.

Written in 1934, as the first play of the middle period, Days Without End is a controversial play. Many Catholics have tried to interpret it as a strictly relig-

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Bogard, pp. 369-71.

ious statement of O'Neill's desire to return to the faith. Even though O'Neill denied that it was a religious play, preferring to call it a psychological study, the fact remains obvious that it is religious in its topic, its characters, and its statement to the world. However, it is not religious in the way the Catholics have viewed it. Rather than being a glorious affirmation of the Christian life and the Catholic Church, it is a statement of a man's right to live without the entanglements and pressures of an organized Church. As such, Days Without End is an agnostic's view of the Christian Church, an affirmation of self rather than Church.

In this drama, there exists a battle between the mind of John and the mind of his alter-ego, Loving. John is a man who believes in the power of an unknown Force and in the goodness of man, but he is not totally committed to the Church nor to a belief in God. He is content with his life as it is. The problem for him is his alter-ego, Loving, who, although unseen by other characters, speaks on many occasions where a response from John is expected, and his voice is not that of a loving man. Rather, he is cynical and critical of religion and man. He is the antithesis of John, the one who creates many problems and embarrassing situations for John. It is apparent that John and Loving represent the two stages of O'Neill's life in the early and middle periods. John is the young O'Neill who loves God and his family and who would do nothing to harm them them for he sees only good in humanity. Loving is the atheistic



O'Neill of the middle period. He scorns the organized Church and sees primarily the evil in men. As the halves of one self clash in this drama, so the halves of O'Neill's self clashed, and from this war a victor had to emerge. On that point lies the controversy in this play. As has been stated previously, the Catholics view the Christian self, John, as the victor, and O'Neill denies this. The important factor to remember is that the name of the victor is John Loving, a merger of the individual parts. Could such a person be only a Christian or only an atheist? It seems highly improbable.

Throughout the play, the opposite powers attempt to lure John into their circle. Father Baird, a Catholic priest who reared John, represents the call of the Catholic Church. Through his emotional link with John he is able to exert great pressure on him. As stated, Loving, the alter-ego, represents the call of atheism, and as a part of John's mind, he also has great influence. The unfortunate John is trapped in the middle.

An examination of some of the remarks these characters make in Act I points out the strong similarity to the life of O'Neill. First, Loving makes such remarks to John as, "Afraid to face your ghosts-even by proxy? Surely, even you can have that much courage!"<sup>12</sup> or, when

<sup>12</sup>

O'Neill, The Collected Plays, p. 495.

John states that he wants the hero of his book to have a faith, Loving replies, "Now I wonder what hides behind that somewhere? Is it your old secret weakness-the cowardly yearning to go back-?"<sup>13</sup> Autobiographically, both remarks refer to the struggle O'Neill faced in the last period of his life. He had to deal with the ghosts of his family and the urge to return to the Catholic Church.

Father Baird also exposes John's past life, and again it parallels closely the life of O'Neill. First he tells Eliot, John's business associate, about the letters John once wrote to him:

Did you hear him throw the word preaching in my face, Mr. Eliot-with a dirty sneer in his voice? There's injustice for you. If you knew what a burden he made my life for years with his preaching. Letter upon letter, each with a soap box inclosed, so to speak.<sup>14</sup>

The most startling insight into the parallel of John's and O'Neill's religious involvement is the extended statement Father Baird makes on the various doctrines John has embraced:

. . . First it was Atheism unadorned. Then it was Atheism wedded to Socialism. But Socialism proved too weak-kneed a mate, and the next I heard Atheism was living in free love with Anarchism, with a curse by Nietzsche to bless the union. And then came the Bolshevik dawn, and he greeted that with unholy howls of glee and wrote me he'd found a congenial home at last in the bosom of Karl Marx. He was particularly delighted when he thought they'd abolished love

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 501.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 501.

and marriage, and he couldn't contain himself when the news came they'd turned naughty school-boys and were throwing spitballs at Almighty God and had supplanted Him with the slave-owning State-the most grotesque god that ever came out of Asia!

I knew Communism wouldn't hold him long-and it didn't. Soon his letters became full of pessimism, and disgust with all sociological nostrums. Then followed a long silence. And what do you think was his next hiding place? Religion, no less-but as far away as he could run from home-in the defeatist mysticism of the East. First it was China and Lao Tze that fascinated him, but afterwards he ran on to Buddha, and his letters for a time extolled passionless contemplation so passionately that I had a mental view of him regarding his navel frenziedly by the hour and making nothing of it!

. . .By the next I knew, he was through with the East. It was not for the Western soul, he decided, and he was running through Greek philosophy and found a brief shelter in Pythagoras and numerology. Then came a letter which revealed him bogged down in evolutionary scientific truth again-a dyed-in-the-wool mechanist. That<sup>15</sup> was the last I heard of his peregrinations-

Father Baird quite naturally interprets all of this as an indication of John's return to the truth of the Church. John prefers not to think this, and Loving is furious at the thought. There were probably many times when O'Neill questioned the direction of his own searching. Undoubtedly, he also could distinguish the various periods of his searching.

The final plea from Father Baird in Act I is centered on a poem which was very familiar to O'Neill, "The Hound of Heaven" by Francis Thompson. He quotes a verse

from it as encouragement to John:

'Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,  
I am He Whom thou seekest!  
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me.'<sup>16</sup>

In his own life, O'Neill must surely have felt the Hound of Heaven following him as he strove to settle the religious problem in his mind. In fact, this was a poem to which he himself frequently made reference in his conversations with others.

The most startling autobiographical elements are shown in John's comments. John is writing a novel which is startling in its likeness to his own life and in turn to O'Neill's life. In the first act, he recounts the childhood of his hero and says:

And the boy had every reason to believe in such a Divinity of Love as the Creator of Life. His home atmosphere was one of Love. Life was love for him then. And he was happy, happier than ever afterward. . .

He then tells of the family tragedies that came to this hero and concludes his account of the first period of his novel by saying, "In his awakened pride he cursed his God and denied Him, and, in revenge, promised his soul to the Devil. . ."<sup>18</sup> How closely this parallels the first stage of O'Neill's life, the time when he loved God and equated God with human love.

In Act III, as Father Baird visits in the home of

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 508.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 510.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 511.

Elsa and John, John continues to relate the plot of his story as Loving and Father Baird view it from diametrically opposite positions. It presents the second part of his hero's life, and it parallels the second stage of O'Neill's life. John states that his hero attempted suicide but could not and that he changed his philosophic viewpoint.

Well, finally, he came out of this period of black despair. He taught himself to take a rationalistic attitude. He read all sorts of scientific books. He ended up by becoming an atheist. But his experiences had left an indelible scar on his spirit.

His hero even undergoes the period in which his faith in happiness and in mankind slips.

And in after years, even at the height of his rationalism, he never could explain away a horror of death-and a strange fascination it had for him. And coupled with this was a dread of life-as if he constantly sensed 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.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the hero recovers himself in the love of his wife, but he is unfaithful to her. She becomes ill and dies, and again he has lost the source of his strength. When she dies he remembers childhood teachings

He knows she knows of his sin now. He can hear her promising to forgive if he can only believe again in his old God of Love, and seek her through Him. She will be beside him in spirit in this life, and at his death she

19 Ibid., p. 534.

20 Ibid., p. 535.

will be waiting. Death will not be an end but a new beginning, a reunion with her in which their love will go on forever within the eternal peace and love of God!<sup>21</sup>

In this state of mind he goes to a church and kneels at the Cross and "feels he is forgiven, and the old comforting peace and security and joy steal back into his heart."<sup>22</sup>

Instead, "He realizes he can never believe in his lost faith again. He walks out of the church-without love forever now--but daring to face his eternal loss and hopelessness, to accept it as his fate and go on with life."<sup>23</sup>

It is remarkable how closely this parallels the second stage of O'Neill's life. He sank to his lowest depths, attempted suicide, sought comfort in various philosophies, and lost confidence in man's goodness. In this period his only source of comfort was his wives, but even they received his mistreatment.

Of course, Loving and Father Baird interpret these events according to their beliefs. Loving says, "He was never courageous enough to face what he really knew was true, that there is no truth for men, that human life is unimportant and meaningless."<sup>24</sup> When John states that men need a new leader to make them noble, Father Baird reminds him that men have a Savior. When John relates his hero's experience in the Church, Loving says:

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 544.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 545.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 545.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 535.

And under the influence of his ridiculous guilty conscience, all the superstitions of his childhood, which he had prided himself his reason had killed, return to plague him. He feels at times an absurd impulse to pray. He fights this nonsense back. He analyzes it rationally. He sees it clearly as a throwback to boyhood experiences. But, in spite of himself, that cowardly something in him he despises as superstition seduces his reason with the old pathetic lie of survival after death. He begins to believe<sup>25</sup> his wife is alive in some mythical hereafter!

Loving and Baird disagree on what happens afterward.

Father Baird sees the experience as a miracle; Loving sees the hero's pride saving him from this moment.

Obviously, O'Neill is attempting to make a point about his own life. He has wrestled with religion and atheism and has felt the inclination to return to the Church. It seems at this time that O'Neill is personified in the hero of John's story rather than in John himself. For the hero neither follows Loving's atheistic advice to curse God nor Father Baird's insistence that peace is at the cross. Rather, he understands that he can never regain his lost faith. When he leaves the Church, he accepts the fact that life must continue without Christian faith. This is important as an indication of O'Neill's message. The life decision of O'Neill is found in this statement rather than in the actions of John at the end of the play.

In Act IV, Elsa is quite ill because she has taken the novel as a literal interpretation of her life with John. In Act II, her friend Lucy had told her of an affair she has had. Now, Elsa realizes the man involved is John. In the case of the hero in John's novel, the wife dies, and now Elsa feels her own illness and death are inevitable. Under the influence of Loving, John begins to feel that he has actually murdered his wife. In an anguished moment, Loving and Father Baird argue over Elsa's future. Father Baird appeals to John to pray to the God of love while Loving reminds him that God always answers with death. In a furious exchange, each tries to take control of John's mind. Loving reminds him that death is the end of everything. Father Baird implores him to pray for Elsa. In all this confusion, they practically hypnotize John. He decides to go to the Church to pray as his hero did. At this point the story changes from his novel plot. Elsa recovers from the coma and says she forgives John. In the novel, the hero finds comfort at the Cross after his wife's death, but he finally rejects the Church.

As the play concludes, John finds peace at the Cross, and Loving, his atheistic alter-ego, dies. His death and John's statement that "Life laughs with God's love again"<sup>26</sup> obviously seem to imply O'Neill's acceptance of



the Church. However, two points contradict that idea. First, John is now John Loving, a merger of Christianity and atheism creating a new being, an agnostic. One belief does not dominate the other. Rather, they blend to create a new belief. John is in an emotional frenzy created by the encounter with Father Paired and Loving. Although it is left unsaid, one feels that he too will come to accept the belief of his hero that there is goodness in life, but no God for him. Second, one must remember that the hero, whose life story has been equated with O'Neill, came to a rational recognition of his place in life. The playwright and the hero are of the same nature. He and John are entirely different.

Therefore, Days Without End opens the door to the agnostic period of O'Neill's life. Although physically his worst period, it is philosophically his best. The door has opened and shut on Christianity and atheism. It will close only one more time and that will be at the moment of his death.

In order to appreciate the plays of this period, as always it is useful to remember the religious-blasphemous dualism in Irishmen. As Raleigh describes it, this involves the concept that typically, Irish fathers were pious with no deep commitment. Mothers were honestly pious, and the Virgin Mary was most important to them as a symbol of innocence and childhood.<sup>27</sup> Long Day's

Journey Into Night is a good example of the applicability of this theory.

Begun in 1940, a year after he wrote The Iceman Cometh, Long Day's Journey Into Night was O'Neill's autobiographical look into his past. Again emphasizing the Irish family ties, Sheaffer said:

The primary image of Eugene O'Neill that emerges from his writings is that of an eternal son, a man constantly examining and dramatizing his ambivalent feelings toward his mother and father, forever bound to them emotionally, a man never able to mature fully, never free to be a real parent himself. In a basic sense, he was free only to be a writer, a man trying to make peace with himself.<sup>28</sup>

When he wrote Long Day's Journey Into Night, O'Neill began to live with the ghosts of his past and to search there for an answer to the meaning of his life. He was fascinated by the effect of one generation on another. Engel called Long Day's Journey Into Night "O'Neill's most religious play, and his most genuine tragedy."<sup>29</sup> The Gelbs said it was "a brutal baring of the forces that had shaped him, an evaluation of his tragic viewpoint, an explanation of his failures as a human being and a celebration of the fact that he had become, in spite of these failures, the consummate artist he was."<sup>30</sup>

Long Day's Journey Into Night was followed, in 1943, by another autobiographical play, A Moon for the Misbegotten.

<sup>28</sup> Sheaffer, p. 49.

<sup>29</sup> Edwin A. Engel, "O'Neill," Modern Drama III, 3 (December, 1960), p. 223.

<sup>30</sup> Gelbs, p. 49.

a play in which he puts to rest the tragic life of his brother Jamie. In both of these plays, O'Neill re-examined the religious attitude of his family and confirmed that it was not for him. He was able to accept their beliefs, but unable to practice them. This fact was of great significance in that, prior to this, he refused even to acknowledge the validity of their beliefs.

Throughout the forties many problems occurred which prevented him from writing: for example, his failing health, the death of his eldest son, and the marriage of his daughter to Charles Chaplin, a man her father's age. After Oona married in 1943, O'Neill refused ever to mention her name, because of his anger. Ironically, she was the only one of his children who ever amounted to much of anything. Eugene, Jr. could have, but he committed suicide.

At age 56, a bitter O'Neill expressed a vitally important opinion to his friend Sophus Winther.

Man has been told the truth. He has been shown the way to the good life in simple language. Jesus, Confucius, Lao-tze, a little more complex . . . Socrates, but it has been futile. Great and simple truth has been perverted into worldly power by organized institutions. The Church in our world has no relationship to Christianity. The Church is a fraud.

There could be no clearer an indication of O'Neill's final outlook toward religion. He believed in the truth of inspired teachers, but he also abhorred the behavior of

the Church-of organized religion. For that reason O'Neill could not return to the Church, but rather he chose to work out his own peace of mind and to live a life of belief in the natural goodness and mercy of mankind untouched by the Church.

By 1946, the good years of his life were gone. His oldest son divorced and then committed suicide in 1950. His only grandson died unexpectedly. Not only did O'Neill view his own life as depressing, he saw the rest of the world as a failure. Family problems continued. He and Carlotta O'Neill quarreled and separated. However, they reconciled as O'Neill neared death. The pain of existing in a state wherein the body could not respond but the mind remained alert was the culmination of O'Neill's tragic existence. He contemplated suicide and in a bitter mood told his friend Sophus Winther that he wanted on his tombstone the inscription:

Eugene O'Neill  
There Is Something  
To Be Said  
For Being Dead<sup>32</sup>

Always somewhat overprotecting, Carlotta O'Neill prevented him from seeing visitors in his final years. When he was at the point of death, a Catholic priest attempted to see him to offer the Sacrament, but she

prohibited that, saying O'Neill was not a Catholic.

Just before death, on November 27, 1953, O'Neill's last clearly spoken words reflected the tragedy of a man who never really had a home, physically or spiritually. "Born in a goddam hotel room and dying in a hotel room."<sup>33</sup> Because of the ambivalence of his nature, he was never satisfied with any place or any idea for any length of time. Even in death there were problems. First, an autopsy proved the cause of disease and death was a familial tumor, not Parkinson's Disease. Then, he could not be buried in the New London Catholic cemetery with his parents since he had not re-entered the faith. According to Carlotta O'Neill his burial request was, "Get me quietly and simply buried. And don't bring a priest. If there is a God and I meet Him, we'll talk things over personally, man to man."<sup>34</sup> Shortly after the burial, it was discovered that he was interred six inches beyond the correct plot, and the body was exhumed and reburied. So, even in death it seemed that there was no peace for a man who knew no peace in life.

In his last years, O'Neill wrestled with the ghosts from his past life and absolved himself of the critical family problems which had tormented him for so long. He found a measure of peace in this absolution. It was

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Sheaffer, p. 670.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Gelbs, p. 939.

then that he accepted fully the concept of man's love which goes beyond the limits of the Church into the personal life of one's heart.

There are only two plays of this last period which demonstrate effectively the religious decision which O'Neill made. Both plays, Days Without End and Long Day's Journey Into Night, prove that the religious struggle of O'Neill's life was a part of the love-hate relationship which had always existed in his family. In both plays O'Neill reconciled himself to his family and to the Church in a style which is dualistic in that he found peace with the Church and his family outside of the body of believers and outside of the family circle. He developed an acceptance toward them in which he remained independent to be himself and to live his life his own way, but in which he recognized the value of religion for some people and the motivations which directed the lives of his parents and brother. He did not place himself in a position whereby he had to return to the Church and to the family circle for that would have been hypocritical, an attitude which he had always criticized when he saw it in others. But, rather, he objectively discussed the strong qualities and the weaknesses of the Church and of his family without personal praise or criticism. In that manner, once and forever, O'Neill learned to live with the ghosts of his past.

The play Long Day's Journey Into Night is the one in which O'Neill directly encountered his family ghosts and in which he strove to understand them. In the drama, there is neither praise nor criticism; there is merely the presentation of the facts of his early life as he remembers them. He dramatizes the arguments over his father's career and his impulses to buy worthless property, the effects of his brother's drinking and his mother's drug addiction, and the concern over his own illness.

The setting is the middle period of O'Neill's life at the time when he followed various philosophies and suffered from tuberculosis. The primary visual image is the fog, and it seems to have been deliberately chosen for the symbolic meaning it had for O'Neill in the first period of his writing. He had used the fog in Bound East for Cardiff as a symbol of evil which blinded the seamen on their search for the correct course or on their search for truth. In the fog, the seamen were at God's mercy. The fog has the same meaning in Long Day's Journey Into Night. Here it represents the evil power of the morphine which prevents Mary Tyrone from functioning normally and the apathy which appears to have consumed the entire family.

Mary Tyrone first associates the fog on the ocean with her inability to sleep at night. She says, "I mean, take advantage of the sunshine before the fog comes back.

Because I know it will."<sup>35</sup> However, Mary realizes that the fog which disturbs her is not the one on the ocean at night, but the one in her mind which develops as she succumbs to the compulsion to take morphine. To her servant, Cathleen, she remarks that the fog does not bother her because she loved the fog. "It's the foghorn I hate. It won't let you alone. It keeps reminding you, and warning you, and calling you back."<sup>36</sup>

Here it is apparent that the fog she speaks of is the trance-like state produced by the morphine. The foghorn is a symbol of warning to her just as one warns the ships at sea. For her, the foghorn is the looks of dismay and pity that she sees on the faces of her family as they realize she is again taking drugs. In that the foghorn warns her of the danger in taking morphine, it becomes the image of good fighting evil. Many problems for the Tyrones would be solved if she would heed the warning. Instead, as evening returns, the fog is thick, and Mary is deeply drugged by a new prescription of morphine.

Later in the play, Mary expresses her inability to cope with the reality of Edmund's illness and her other problems.

I must go upstairs. I haven't taken enough.  
I hope, sometime, without meaning it, I will take  
an overdose. I never could do it deliberately. <sup>37</sup>  
The Blessed Virgin would never forgive me, then.

<sup>35</sup> Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night  
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 41.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 121.



Obviously, the morphine is her escape mechanism from the reality of her problems. It has overpowered her, and she cannot fight it any longer.

The home situation is so bad at this point that the others are enticed by the power of the fog, also. The father and sons leave the house to spend the evening drinking, the means by which the fog has ensnared them. Edmund, the son who suffers the most from his mother's problem, seeks for peace in the New England fog for it obscures from sight the problems of his home.

The fog was where I wanted to be. Halfway down the path you can't see this house. You'd never know it was here. Or any of the other places down the avenue. I couldn't see but a few feet ahead. I didn't meet a soul. Everything looked and sounded unreal. Nothing was what it is. That's what I wanted-to be alone with myself in another world where truth is untrue and life can hide from itself. Out beyond the harbor, where the road runs along the beach, I even lost the feeling of being on land. The fog and the sea seemed part of each other. It was like walking on the bottom of the sea. As if I had drowned long ago. As if I was a ghost belonging to the fog, and the fog was the ghost of the sea. It felt damned peaceful to be nothing more than a ghost within a ghost.<sup>38</sup>

Later, it is Edmund who finally puts into words what his mother is like.

The hardest thing to take is the blank wall she builds around her. Or it's more like a bank of fog in which she hides and loses herself. Deliberately, that's the hell of it! You know something in her does it deliberately

--to get beyond our reach, to be rid of us,  
to forget we're alive! It's as if, in spite  
of loving us, she hated us!<sup>39</sup>

The final appearance of the family is that of a group lost in the fog. Mary has regressed to her youth and has lost all contact with reality. The power of evil has overcome them, and the men sit passively and watch her performance. No one has the will left to fight the evil. They realize that they are lost souls on the sea of man's life, and they accept that as their fate.

As O'Neill focuses on the tragedy of his family, he appears to acknowledge the fact that the problems are centered on a denial of what was a natural way of life for them. This idea of a natural way of life centers on the place of religion in the lives of an Irish Catholic family. The first indication of its importance is in a conversation among James Tyrone and his sons, Jamie and Edmund.

Tyrone: Shut up, both of you! There's little choice between the philosophy you learned from Broadway loafers, and the one Edmund got from his books. They're both rotten to the core. You've both flouted the faith you were born and brought up in--the one true faith of the Catholic Church--and your denial has brought nothing but self-destruction!

Edmund: That's the bunk, Papa!

Jamie: We don't pretend, at any rate. I

don't notice you've worn any holes in the knees of your pants going to Mass.

Tyrone: It's true I'm a bad Catholic in the observance, God forgive me. But I believe! And you're a liar! I may not go to church but every night and morning of my life I get on my knees and pray!

Edmund: Did you pray for Mama?

Tyrone: I did. I've prayed to God these many years for her.

Edmund: Then Nietzsche must be right. 'God is dead: of His pity for man hath God died.'

Tyrone: If your mother had prayed, too- she hasn't denied her faith, but she's forgotten it, until now there's no strength of the spirit left in her to fight against her curse. But what's the good of talk? We've lived with this before and now we must again. There's no help for it.<sup>40</sup>

Both father and sons make strong points about the denial of faith. Tyrone is right that self-destruction has come to his sons. They, in turn, see the hypocrisy in his practice. They also believe that God is dead because he has not healed their mother. This opinion, of course, was one factor in O'Neill's leaving the Church. For Irish Catholics, worship is supposed to be a natural part of life. Actually, all the Tyrones have turned away from the Church, and now they seek to place the blame for their problems on religion. Mary is the only one who desires to return to the Church because she associates it with being cured. She says:

But some day, dear, I will find it again-some day when you're all well, and I see you healthy and happy and successful, and I don't have to feel guilty any more-some day when the Blessed Virgin Mary forgives me and gives me back the faith in Her Love and pity I used to have in my convent days, and I can pray to her again-when She sees no one in the world can believe in me even for a moment any more, then She will believe in me, and with Her help it will be so easy. I will hear myself scream with agony, and at the same time I will laugh because I will be so sure of myself.<sup>41</sup>

However, Mary knows this is only a dream, and she later admonishes herself for these thoughts. "You expect the Blessed Virgin to be fooled by a lying dope fiend reciting words!"<sup>42</sup>

The last religious comment is made by Tyrone in criticism of Edmund. Of the literature Edmund reads, Tyrone says:

Morbid filth! Where the hell do you get your taste in literature? Filth and despair and pessimism! Another atheist, I suppose. When you deny God, you deny hope. That's the trouble with you. If you'd get down on your knees-<sup>43</sup>

This is a pitiable statement. None of the Tyrones can erase his mistakes and get down on his knees. In her final appearance, Mary is lost in her memories of happier days at the convent school, but her last statement gives the bitter reality of the moment. She speaks of her desire to become a nun which she expressed to the Holy Mother.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

After I left her, I felt all mixed up, so I went to the shrine and prayed to the Blessed Virgin and found peace again because I knew she heard my prayer and would always love me and see no harm ever came to me so long as I never lost my faith in her. That was in the winter of senior year. Then in the spring something happened to me. Yes, I remember. I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time.<sup>44</sup>

O'Neill apparently presents this particular view of religion in his family for a deliberate purpose. He is factually examining his family, and he comes to a logical conclusion. They are hypocritical Christians who speak words they would like to believe but do not. They have lost contact with the natural goodness of man. Pawns of the Devil, they are lost in his fog. Once, they had a faith, but it was lost in the many problems they faced. Therefore, it is not logical to believe that O'Neill returned to the faith of his family in Days Without End. O'Neill perceived that there was no faith there awaiting his return. There was only the memory of a lost faith. So, his final view had to be that of an agnostic. He saw that there was a God or a Force which helped some people, but he could not believe that this Force had helped his family. In reconciling himself to his family, he had to take the agnostic's view and refuse himself personal involvement in religion, for this was

the view he saw existing in his family. None of the O'Neills believed God would help them; thus, O'Neill did not turn to Him in the last days of his life.

#### CHAPTER IV

##### EPILOGUE: GOD IS; GOD WAS; GOD MAY BE

In this study of Eugene O'Neill, it has been established that there is a correlation between the views toward religion and the views toward humanity in the personal life and in the public life of the dramatist. O'Neill was a man of constant changes. Throughout his life he fluctuated in his ideas on nearly every subject that he ever studied in detail. Apparently a restless person by nature, it seems he could never be satisfied with one final answer to any question. For this reason, he was truly a unique individual.

The fluctuations in religion were centered on the concepts of Christianity, atheism and agnosticism. At three distinct periods in his life, O'Neill practiced a belief in each of these. Born into a Catholic family, educated in an isolated existence, and misunderstood by most people who knew him, he was situated in the position from which he could most readily question the validity of doctrines and philosophies.

The period of belief in God centered in the first stage of O'Neill's life. In that time of happiness, O'Neill spent the most peaceful years of his life. The plays written at that time were the most serene ones of his career. They projected the inner peace of one who believed in God as a personal Savior and who equated

God with a belief in the natural goodness and love of mankind.

The second stage of his life was the one of atheism in which he denied the existence and the value of the organized Church. He saw it only as an ugly place of trouble and heartbreak. In the plays of this period, O'Neill distorted his view of mankind in order to show the bitterness and cruelty which he had found in the Church. When O'Neill broke away from the Catholic Church, a vital part of him died, and the death becomes a viable experience in the dramas. In this period, his only views toward the Church and toward mankind are ugly ones.

The final period was one of agnosticism. It was the time when the creative genius of a brilliant man searched into his background and attempted to answer the many questions which still lingered there. In coming to terms with his family ghosts, O'Neill also came to terms with religion. He decided that, as in the case of his parents, he must accept the Church for what it was, a man-made form which could help some people. He realized it was not for him. So, he did not return to a belief in the religion of his youth. Yet, he did return to a recognition of the goodness of man as a result of the purification he received from writing about his family.

In conclusion, one is again reminded of the poem by Francis Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven", which was so much a part of O'Neill's life. Truly, he was hounded by heaven. Perhaps the religious question would not



have been such a problem for him had he not been a Catholic through his birth into a firmly committed Irish-Catholic family. However, the fact that he did feel the need to express his doubts about religion is one of the best things that has ever happened to the world of drama. For it is Eugene O'Neill, the hounded man, who has made a distinct place for America in the world of drama and who, most importantly, made the world recognize him as a genuine literary talent yet unmatched by most dramatists.

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