

CHAPTER I

FATHOMING O'NEILL

A SURVEY OF O'NEILL CRITICISM

*Whatever is unclear about Eugene O'Neill, one thing is certainly
clear — his genius.*

Lionel Trilling.

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill (b 1888 - d 1953), America's greatest dramatist "is an excellent example of reputation's roller - coaster ride". Hence, a prolific critical literature of diverse interests about him and his creative works have evoked an eloquent response from the critics worldwide. He is rated among the classic playwrights of the world. This present survey will provide some interesting glimpses about O'Neill the man, O'Neill the playwright and O'Neill the father of modern American theatre.

Few artists have been as overwhelmingly and relentlessly autobiographical as was Eugene O'Neill. And without a proper knowledge of the man, O'Neill's works could not be properly understood. Accordingly, a biographical literature was produced after him. A good many biographies have been written to present the man before the readers. In this connection we would refer to Arthur Gelb and Barbara Gelb's very important biography O'Neill (New York : Harper, 1962). This work records every detail of O'Neill's life; his relationship with the parents and brother, his seafaring, his remarkable final years with his last wife, Carlotta Monterey O'Neill. The Gelbs' massive biography very subtly captures the dramatist and the stress and strain of O'Neill's life. Another very interesting and informative biography has been presented by Louis Sheaffer. The first part entitled O'Neill : Son and playwright (J. M. Dent & Son Ltd. London, 1968) covered the dramatist's life upto 1920 when Beyond the Horizon, O'Neill's first full length play in three acts opened on Broadway. The second volume (1973) probes further O'Neill's meteoric rise to celebrity, his dramatic excellence till the period of

the decline of his reputation. Ironically this very later period in O'Neill's life is now seen as the time of composition of his greatest two plays - The Iceman Cometh and Long Day's Journey Into Night.

There are other studies of his life. For his being too much an autobiographical writer, O'Neill's life has generated much interests among the biographers. In the 1920s, Barrett. H. Clark published Eugene O'Neill (New York : McBride, 1926). This was revised and reissued in 1929 with a slight change in the original title, Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays. This work is hailed as a pioneering biographical work on the playwright. As such, its importance cannot be oversimplified. In this connection reference should be made to an interesting memoir - Part of A Long Story, 1958 by Agnes Boulton, O'Neill's second wife. This work records O'Neill's tales of attempted suicide, his alcoholism, his struggle in Greenwich Village and Provincetown. In 1959, was published a very remarkable biography of O'Neill, The Curse of the Misbegotten (New York : McGraw - Hill, 1959) by Bowen Crosswell with the cooperation of O'Neill's son Shane. In each successive year, an interesting biography is seen coming up. Doris Alexander in the 60s, writes The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill (New York : Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962). The canvas of this biography is not vast. However, the biographer focusses on some important periods of O'Neill's life to show how such periods have gone a longway in formulating a distinct form which O'Neill followed in his later best plays. In the 70s was published Frederick I. carpenter's Engene O'Neill (New York : Twayne, rev. ed. Boston : Twayne,

1979). This book is both a biography vis-a-vis a brief study of O'Neill's plays.

All the biographies written so far have observed that O'Neill is eminently an autobiographical dramatist.

Apart from biographical works, O'Neill criticism is vast and varied. From the 1920S his achievement as a playwright was established and many prizes and awards were bestowed on him for a good many of his dramatic works.

In 1928 was published a significant work on O'Neill. It was Joseph T. Shipley's The Art of Eugene O'Neill (Seattle : Univ. of Washington Book store, 1928). It was the first critical work devoted exclusively to O'Neill studies. Six plays of Eugene O'Neill published in 1928 by Alan D. Mickle, has placed O'Neill in the company of the world's greatest playwrights.

In 1934 Sophus Keith winther published a brilliant criticism on O'Neill, entitled, Eugene O'Neill : A critical Study (New York : Random House, 1934). This book has made a highly favourable estimation of O'Neill. What is more, the book has explored the world of O'Neill's thought which his plays so distinctly manifest.

In the 1930S, there was another significant work, Richard Dana Skinner's Eugene O'Neill : A Poet's quest (New York : Longman's Green,

1935). This book has looked for an inner continuity in the plays. Accordingly, the author has studied the plays chronologically from Bound East for Cardiff to Days Without End.

In the 1940S O'Neill temporarily receded in oblivion. The United States went to war. And the playwright was silently languishing in distress. We do not remember any such critical work which was written about the playwright during this period. Again in the 1950S, with the New York premier of The Iceman Cometh in 1946, revivals of Anna Christie and Desire Under the Elms in 1952, O'Neill's death in 1953, O'Neill criticism was seen coming up afresh. The first extensive scholarly analysis appeared in 1953 by Edwin A. Engle, The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill (Cambridge, Mass; Harvard Univ. Press 1953). The importance of the book lies in the fact that it does a close literary analysis of the plays in relation to the themes and merit of the plays themselves. There is another significant publication in the year 1958, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension : An Interpretive Study of the Plays (New Burnswick : Rutgers Univ. Press, 1958) by Doris V. Falk. This book examines the plays in order of performance. It is psychological in approach and examines the mind of the man behind the plays.

1960S being the prolific years in O'Neill criticism, have seen a number of works which have widened the horizon of O'Neill studies. A useful comprehensive anthology, O'Neill and his plays : Four Decades of criticism having criticisms, reviews, memoirs, and an extensive bibliography,

edited by Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin and William J. Fisher was published in 1961. In 1962 was published Doris Alexander's The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill. Further Critical introductions by Clifford Leech's Eugene O'Neill (New York : Grove, 1963) and John Gassner's O'Neill : A collection of Essays (1969) provide a handy sampling of differing approaches to O'Neill's work. Critical literature of O'Neill is further enriched by John Henry Raleigh's book, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Carbondale : Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1965). The author has studied the plays not in chronological sequence but as an one organic whole made up of a variety of themes, characters and preoccupations. The importance of the book can be traced in the writer's observation that the great late plays of O'Neill are no departures from his earlier plays so far themes and dramatic techniques are concerned. Chester Clayton Long in The Role of Nemesis in the Structure of Selected Plays by Eugene O'Neill (The Hague : Mouton, 1968) avoids the biographical part in the examination of the plays. The critics have looked upon this work as an important piece of O'Neill scholarship. Published earlier, Jordan Y. Miller's Eugene O'Neill and the American critic (1962) provides a comprehensive biography of O'Neill Criticism. It shows, what importance O'Neill assumed during these years as a playwright. Perhaps the best scholarly studies of O'Neill are those provided by Timo Tiusanen. Egil Tornqvist, and Travis Bogard. Timo Tiusanen in O'Neill's Scenic Images (Princeton : Princeton Univ. Press 1968) concludes that the later plays of O'Neill are in fact his great plays. Egil Tornqvist's A drama of Souls : Studies in O'Neill's Super-naturalistic Technique (New Haven : Yale Univ. Press, 1969) is a

very important contribution to O'Neill criticism. Here Tornqvist has made a comprehensive study of the plays. **Contour in Time : The Plays of Eugene O'Neill** (New York : Oxford University Press, 1972) by Travis Bogard contains outstanding discussions of the individual plays having their main focus on the autobiographical elements in the work. This work is one of the best studies on O'Neill.

In the 1970S there has been no dearth of O'Neill criticism. Leonard Chabrowe published **Ritual and Pathos : The Theatre of O'Neill** (Leiwisburg : Bucknell Univ. Press, 1976). In 1977 appeared Harry Cronin's **Eugene O'Neill Irish and American : A Study in Cultural Context** (New York : 1977). These critical studies indicate that as the years move on, newer investigations in the plays have surfaced O'Neill criticism. Jean Chothia in **Forging A Language : A Study of the Plays of Eugene O'Neill** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) centers on the linguistic medium of O'Neill's plays from low-colloquial through Irish dialect, Broadway slang and idiomatic American English to poetic prose. Chothia further shows that O'Neill's dramatic language is much more poetic and effective than is commonly acknowledged.

In the 80S with the publication of a few important works on O'Neill, O'Neill was viewed in other perspectives. **Eugene O'Neill at work : Newly Released Ideas for Plays** (New York : Ungar 1981) edited by Virginia Floyd, released much new O'Neill material. Critics and scholars have welcomed the

publication of Normand Berlin's Eugene O'Neill (New York : Grove, 1982). Berlin has made all out efforts to bring to the fore all important areas of O'Neill's plays. John Orlandello's O'Neill on Film (Madison, N. J : Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1982) compares nine O'Neill plays with their film adaptations. In Eugene O'Neill's New Language of Kinship (Syracuse : Syracuse Univ. Press, 1982), Michael Manheim has discussed that the early plays of O'Neill are a series of the autobiographical motifs which his last play, Long Day's Journey so distinctly manifests.

O'Neill criticism does not rest on the individual publications of O'Neill scholars. In the collections of critical essay, O'Neill appeared again and again triumphantly. John Gassner edited O'Neill : A collection of critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N. J. Prentice-Hall, 1964). Jordan Y. Miller in Playwright's Progress : O'Neill and the critics (Chicago : Scott, Foresman, 1965) has reprinted over sixty reviews and essays. So does Ernest G. Griffin in Eugene O'Neill : A Collection of criticism (New York : McGraw - Hill, 1976). This book includes a selected bibliography. Among such lists of publications, Eugene O'Neill : A world view (New York : Unger, 1970) edited by Virginia Floyd presents essays with a European perspective including works by Tiusanen, Leech, Tornquist, Frenz and Peter Egri, among others. In the second section there are six essays of which one essay by Frederick Wilkins and two by Raleigh are of special importance. The comments of performers on O'Neill by Florence Eldridge, Geraldine, Fitzgerald, Ingrid Bergman and stage director Arvin Brown have added special interests to this work.

This above survey has accommodated only a small corpus of O'Neill Criticism in general. In this study we have referred to only such works as have their distinctions in O'Neill studies. The scholarly journals have published from time to time articles on O'Neill by O'Neill scholars. Such articles have shed much light on some aspects which have not been properly investigated before. In the universities around the world, scholars pursued their Ph. D. studies on O'Neill and wrote their dissertations. Such studies of course have enriched the critical literature on O'Neill.

In course of my reading of O'Neill plays, I was drawn to his one-acters. Before O'Neill tried his hand at writing full-length plays, his experiments were launched through one-act plays. While major O'Neill studies are on his full-length plays, his one-act plays have not been to that extent fully attended. There were only a handful of individual studies on these plays. It was Charles Fish in his "Beginnings : O'Neill's *The Web*" (Princeton University Library Chronicle, 27, No. 1 Autumn 1965, 3-20) did this maiden effort. Though Fish focussed chiefly on "*The Web*", he considered briefly other early plays too. Fish had indicated themes that would be recurrent. The four-acters clustered together as the Glencairn cycle were part of the discussion in Ivan H. Walton's Eugene O'Neill and the Folklore and Folkways of the Sea, (Western Folklore, 14, 1955, 153-69). He has studied the use of chanties, sailor lore, superstition and language of the seamen. R. Dilworth Rust also discussed the Glencairn cycle with primary focus on "The Unity of O'Neill's S.S. Glencairn," (AL, No. 3, November 1965, 280-90) and established Driscoll

as the major linking character in all the plays. "O'Neill's Use of the Displaced Archetype in *The Moon of the Caribbees*", (West Virginia University Bulletin Philological Papers, 19 July 1972, 41-44) by Alex Scarbrough pointed to the difference by O'Neill in using the essential elements of the ship, island and sea in his works.

While critics like Travis Bogard and Virginia Floyd have discussed separately each play in their books, there is paucity of critical studies on the one-acters in comparison to the prolific critical literature produced after his great late plays.

The psychological probing for the inner O'Neill needs separate attention. Even with the risk of repetition we must mention **The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill** (Cambridge, Mass :Harvard University Press, 1953) by Edwin A, Engel. Engel traced back O'Neill's debt to Nietzsche and Jung in developing the dominant theme of death in his plays. Same is true for a recent reissue (Staten Island : Gordian Press, 1981) of Doris V. Falk, **Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension : An Interpretive Study of the Plays** (New Burnswick : Rutgers University Press,1958) reflecting the early psychological approach in search of a unifying pattern in O'Neill's plays.

Arthur H. Nethercot dedicated a decade and a half to study "The Psychoanalyzing of Eugene O'Neill", **Modern Drama**, 3, No. 3 (December 1960, pp. 242-56) and "Part - II" - **Modern Drama** 3(February 1961), 357-72, then "The Psychoanalyzing of Eugene O'Neill : Postscript,"

Modern Drama, 8, No. 2, (September 1965, 150-155), and " The Psychoanalyzing of Eugene O ' Neill : P.P.S ", Modern Drama 16, No. 1 (June 1973, 35-48). Nethercot started with O Neill's Works but ended with a psychoanalysis of the playwright himself. A step further was Thomas P. McDonnell in " O ' Neill's Drama of the Psyche", Catholic World 197, No. 1, 178, (May 1963) pp. 120 - 125. McDonnell examined the entanglement of O ' Neill's life with his plays with the important revelation that he never ceased to struggle with his Catholic conscience. N. Bryllion Fagin on " Freud on the American Stage" Educational Theatre Journal 2, (1950. pp. 296 - 305) and Egil Tornqvist on " Nietzsche and O ' Neill : A Study in Affinity " Orbis Litterarum 23, (1968, 97 - 126) were other important studies on this aspect. The recent revival of O ' Neill study throughout the world has rather concentrated on this topic. Stephen Watt in his " O ' Neill and Otto Rank : Doubles, Death Instincts and the Trauma of Birth" remarks, "Perhaps the most valuable addition to current understanding of O ' Neill's appropriation from and manipulation of Freudian psychoanalysis is Robert Feldman's recent examination of the death instinct ... "(Critical Approaches to O ' Neill. P. 18).

Hence, to study death wish in relation to Eugene O ' Neill's one-act plays is the main objective of the present dissertation.