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Pipe Dreams and Primitivism: Eugene O'Neill and the Rhetoric of Ethnicity

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PIPE DREAMS AND PRIMITIVISM: EUGENE O'NEILL
AND THE RHETORIC OF ETHNICITY

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

This work is dedicated to all of the valued teachers who have encouraged and challenged me to become the person and student I am. Special thanks to Dr. Jack Moore, teacher, collaborator, and great soul, for his personal and professional contributions to my work; to my partner Lance Smith for everything that may not be seen within these pages but remains an invaluable part of my studies and my life; and to my parents, Robert and Yvette Gagnon, whose patience, confidence, pride and love are as essential to my life as they have been to my education.

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Pipe Dreams and Primitivism: Eugene O'Neill
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Donald P. Gagnon

Abstract

Eugene O'Neill included within his vision of humanity a series of complex, emotionally and psychologically developed black characters. Despite critical controversy over his methods or effectiveness, from his eerily silent mulatto in "Thirst" through the grandiose incarnation of *The Emperor Jones* and the everyman of Joe Mott in *The Iceman Cometh*, O'Neill created characters of African descent that thrilled and infuriated critics and audiences alike.

A closer exploration of the issues involved in his portrayal of ethnically identified characters seems necessary, an exploration that does not limit itself to an interrogation of ethnicity *per se* in O'Neill's plays, but one that addresses the portrayal of black characters and whether O'Neill privileges one "race," or socially and culturally identifiable population.

O'Neill's infusion of "psychology" into his black characters may have delineated them as fate-driven primitives at the mercy of their atavistic histories, but he did the same with his Irish and other ethnic characters. In fact, many critics argue that his Irish characters are particularly subject to caricature, yet O'Neill is not generally understood to

be anti-Irish. Are we then to understand O'Neill's portrayal of ethnicity in the superstition and fear of *The Dreamy Kid* and Brutus Jones, or in the context of the playwright's bold and dismissive retort to the Ku Klux Klan's condemnation of interracial casting in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*?

It would be a spurious examination that intentionally disregards perceived racist phenomena in O'Neill's plays. However, his depiction of racialized behaviors (and his own possible racism) must be seen to function as an extra-discursive element that ultimately does not disrupt the development of a unified body of work. His major black characters, tragic or otherwise, are not limited by their deceptively stylized portrayals but rather reflect O'Neill's quest to understand and examine the nature of a common human experience, a view that is ultimately consistent within the entirety of his canon.

Introduction

In Lorraine Hansberry's play *Les Blancs*, a character named Tshembe says, "I am simply saying that a device *is* a device, but that it also has consequences; once invented it takes on a life, a reality of its own" (92). I suggest that Hansberry's words must be kept foremost in mind as one reads through the following study of Eugene O'Neill's use of race and ethnicity. For O'Neill, unlike many of his white contemporaries, black characters often played significant, if not central, roles in many of his plays. Indeed, the playwright's inclusion of these characters was a device, but one that would continue to have critical and political consequences throughout and beyond the playwright's lifetime.

One challenge, as I have discovered in writing about O'Neill and characters of African descent (American or otherwise), is that the device itself complicates any critical interrogation of the plays. Terms often (and entirely too casually) used in grouping and labeling such characters are problematic in ways that O'Neill himself may not have grasped but that our post-postmodern critics (and others) are eager to seize upon in order to question the nature of the language and its function. Whereas O'Neill lived at a time when Americans of African descent were known (at least in polite white society) as "Negroes" or "colored people," our twenty-first century world dictates that these words are not only politically incorrect, but also that such typographic signifiers be routinely scrutinized, almost *ad infinitum*.

Trying to maintain my balance on the shifting grounds of theory and criticism, I first had to find ways to validate/employ/define terms such as “race” and “ethnicity” before attempting to create a workable—even useful--critical approach to studying O’Neill.

Unfortunately, the hard-copy and ether-bound worlds of published research provided little that seemed to be stable enough to support unconditionally my application of the terms under scrutiny—a reassuring finding to a post-postmodernist, perhaps, but one that contributed more to graduate student angst than to doctoral candidate satisfaction. Like contemporary African American author Randall Kenan, I, too, felt like a hypocrite in using the most obvious ethnographic term of “race,” since I don’t subscribe to it as a biological absolute—whatever that might be—to determine the characterization of one’s physical being. In biological terms, there is only a single human species, and no one has succeeded scientifically in defining significant differences between peoples who sometimes simply look different from others, according to Kenan’s argument (5). In scientific terms, then, “race” is a myth, often put forth by those, at least in the United States, whose interest in developing a caste system to support the economic development they required to support such institutions as legal slavery also demanded “scientific” proof of distinction. As Martin J. Favor states, “Race becomes a way of insisting on the merits of difference rather than acquiescing to all dominant aesthetic and topical concerns,” a suggestion that in trying to overcome notions of some inherent physical inferiority, many have reconstructed the concept of race to hinder the ease with which distinct cultural practices can be assimilated into (or phased out of) mainstream U.S. culture (18). Or, as Tommy L. Lott says, “All races are political inventions” (1). Either

way, the term “race” is fraught with rhetorical challenge. It may be considered authentic (at least in non-scientific terms) or inauthentic, and perhaps much of the word’s impact derives from this play between conflicting constructions. However, “race” is not an incontestable fact but rather a social construction.

If we are then to see “race” as a less politically correct signifier for qualifying (or quantifying) culture than some other term might be, we must also be careful not to essentialize social patterns that a word such as “race” might have signified in earlier times, though “race” may refer chiefly to cultural, rather than biological characteristics. There is, despite its ineffability, an important distinction between race and culture. And while, according to Lott, the strength of a group lies in its cultural integrity (66), an essentialist view of blackness (for our purposes) goes hand in glove with the idea of race as fact, where the defining culture becomes inextricably bound up with the idea of a “race” (Kenan 9). Such an idea also suggests that race is therefore performable, an accepted supposition during O’Neill’s time, when minstrel shows featuring white performers in black face continued in their popularity and depended on the performers’ abilities to adopt certain stereotypical behaviors in order to “act black” a hundred years ago.

What then to do in our brave new century? Favor suggests that the best way to meet the rhetorical argument that a definition of race based primarily on sociohistorical—read “cultural”—criteria confuses race with ethnicity is to accept it (57). My own solution is not too far off Favor’s mark. In a rare move of critical *hubris*, I have chosen to redefine “race” as a literary trope (at least for the purposes of this study), one that helps preserve cultural diversity in its history of literary expression rather than dismissing its

significance and therefore allowing its referents to fall victim to essentialization.

Therefore, my interpretation of “race” may be imprecise in any denotative sense but of tremendous value as a tool by which to forge some sort of aesthetic examination. It is an epistemological, rather than a biological, tool.

If it is true, as Homi Bhaba claims, that race, class, gender and other differences are always being “constituted and negotiated in a cross-boundary process” (Olson 362), then my study of O’Neill’s major black characters will continue to encourage boundary-hopping even while attempting to play down the biological essentialization that limits a valid and unrestrained use of “race.” At the same time, “ethnicity” must be understood to refer not to some inherent and inherited culture programmed into the genes of all black people—an essentializing view that limits the signifier’s value. Instead, I will use “race” and “ethnicity” (and their variants) as literary devices that suggest, in general terms, a malleable set of cultural, ethnic and physical characteristics. Since the two terms are related, I will attempt not to shift interchangeably between them, but rather to rely primarily on “ethnicity,” in an attempt to mitigate biological connotations of “race” that have historically problematized the question of where genetic heritage ends and cultural heritage begins. However, I will use “race” when I choose to acknowledge the problematic biological understanding of the term and its historical use in literary study, even as I recognize that such a term remains subject to equivocation.

Another such term, though one that will be used with much less frequency, is “primitivism.” As with the terms I’ve already discussed, “primitivism” assumes different denotations depending on the discipline. It, too, is highly imprecise. However, I will rely less on its significance as an aesthetic movement (of western Europe in the late

nineteenth century, for example) and more on its flexibility as a marker of cultural attitude, one that has, at its base, a belief in the intrinsic common interests of all humankind (Guggenheim 1). In addition, “primitivism,” as it describes cultures outside of European (and Western) tradition, can easily be seen as degrading. In trying to mold the category of “primitive” from a time-and-place-locked referent to one that suggests primarily an alternative mode of being, I will attempt to, as Lisa Rado describes, make the historical and cultural past into an ever-accessible present, one that is “ready and willing to serve modern cultural needs” (284). She states that moderns sought only to appropriate ideas that they either found or projected onto a rather broadly defined “primitive” culture in order to remake their own (298). Such was O’Neill’s case: an attempt to disrupt convention, not a desire to reinscribe it by maintaining outdated or even imprecise cultural views. For our purposes, then, “primitivism” will signify an ontology that operates outside of the development of culturally fixed behaviors and technology.

And where does O’Neill himself fit into this dialectic? As one of the foremost modern American writers and most significant early modern playwrights, O’Neill was living in a country where black people—and people of many other ethnic designations—were largely second-class citizens. His affinity for these peoples—indeed, his own presence among them—indicates the importance of understanding, at a basic level, how one of our most significant American voices spoke humanistically during a time in which the country itself was busily and noisily redefining itself politically. “Race” and “ethnicity,” in terms either derogatory or not, remain forces in manipulating ideas and ideals. O’Neill was keenly aware of the concept’s power, and I hope that this study

succeeds in illustrating how this vital and challenging playwright undermined, rather than acquiesced to, an essentialized view of blackness in America. In accepting the challenge, I, too, am saying that a device is simply a device, and I hope that this one also takes on a life of its own.

Chapter One

“The lie of a pipe dream is what gives life to the whole misbegotten mad lot of us.”

--Larry Slade, *The Iceman Cometh*

Eugene O’Neill’s body of work displays an obvious progression in its sympathetic depiction of humanity, from the playwright’s tentative early one-act plays through his more developed expressionistic period and finally his primarily realistic full-length dramas, with each stage of development delineating the struggle of both bourgeois and working classes, “fog people” and realists, men and women to escape from their too-human primal urges and their weaknesses for booze, affection, and recognition. O’Neill’s character development keeps pace with the increasingly rich structural and thematic achievements of his plays, with the early works inhabited by characters that are sometimes more caricature than character—Captain Keeney, Nat Bartlett, Mammy Saunders—and his late plays peopled by more complex, emotionally and psychologically articulated men and women, such as Lavinia Mannon, Con Melody, and any of the tortured Tyrones. Critic John Gassner claims that, as a result of O’Neill’s efforts to simultaneously develop character and dramatic method, “The American drama *entered*

the century and made contributions to world theater that could be considered significantly modern” (*O’Neill* 1).

Despite critical controversy concerning his methods and results, the same process of development evidences itself with particular notice among several of O’Neill’s plays wherein black characters bear significant dramatic weight. From his early, eerily silent mulatto Sailor in “Thirst” and the fatalistically superstitious protagonist of “The Dreamy Kid,” through the grand and extravagant Brutus Jones and the pathetic and defeated Jim Harris in *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*, and finally with the hopeless Joe Mott in *The Iceman Cometh*, O’Neill’s most significant black characters serve a similar, if not the same, purpose as their white counterparts: to portray honestly the human condition as seen through the dark, naturalistic gaze of the playwright. Critics continue to debate whether these portraits rely for their effect too much on stereotype, whether they are harmfully and knowingly racist, or whether they are simply misunderstood. Is Brutus Jones no more than a minstrel-era caricature, strutting about in his gaudy plumage, gold braid, and broad dialect, or is he the first truly tragic American dramatic creation, black or white? Does Jim Harris exhibit a submissive racial consciousness, a self-created, ethnically charged sense of corroded cultural and personal esteem, or is his obsequiousness to his wife no more tinged by their differences in skin color than the subservience of Orin Mannon to Lavinia in O’Neill’s *Electra* trilogy, or of Mary Tyrone to her husband James, or of Joe Mott to the taunting of his cohort at Harry Hope’s saloon?

Such questions are difficult to answer with certainty, though easy to debate, as critics seem only too enthusiastic to demonstrate. A frequent O’Neill scholar, Edward L.

Shaughnessy finds that O'Neill creates "sympathetic portraits of intelligent and tragic Black characters," especially in the longer plays, in which they show "a great depth of emotional capability" ("Portraiture" 91, 87). On the other hand, Deborah Wood Holton claims that O'Neill's attempts to interpret black life between 1919 and 1923 were "blind stereotypic reflections of then prevailing superior attitudes toward black people in general, and also subtle, complex investigations that revealed a possibility for deeper cultural understanding" (29). In Peter J. Gillette's "O'Neill and the Racial Myths," Harlem Renaissance critic William Stanley Braithwaite comments that even a well intentioned writer like O'Neill apparently portrayed black people as "primitives" because he conceived of blacks as "inferior, superstitious, half-ignorant" (119), while Holton herself points out O'Neill's sensitivity to and successful troping of W.E.B. DuBois' concept of double-consciousness in "The Dreamy Kid," in Dreamy's difficulty with self-definition as a result of trying to survive within a society in which the majority's view of his ethnicity was overrun with cultural stereotypes.¹

So where does that leave O'Neill, undoubtedly one of the most significant of American dramatists, in the matter of how well he has understood, constructed and incorporated ethnicity, particularly the ethnicity of his black characters, into his tragic vision of life? Is he to be castigated for propagating even an unconsciously ethnocentrist aesthetic agenda or applauded for bringing sympathetic and significant black characters to the forefront of American drama? In actuality he created sixteen black characters in a total of six plays between 1913 and 1939. From 1919 onward, he demanded consistently, beginning with "The Dreamy Kid" (and counter to common practice of the time), that his plays be cast with black actors rather than white actors in blackface. With such an

awareness of O'Neill's attempt to close the ethnic divide, at least within the world of American drama, a closer exploration of the issues involved seems necessary, an exploration that does not limit itself to an interrogation of how sensitive or insensitive O'Neill was regarding ethnicity *per se* in his plays, but one that addresses his portrayal of black characters and whether or not it is consistent with that of his white characters. After all, we may assume that on a sliding scale of inter-ethnic relations, even O'Neill was a man of his time and that a subconscious manifestation of societal ethnocentrism seems not only likely but also unavoidable. As Mary Tyrone says in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, "None of us can help the things that life has done to us" (749).

Nevertheless, we must determine whether O'Neill grants privilege to one "race" or ethnic group, or whether his portrayal of black characters is tinged by a general, pervasive and unconscious cultural perception prevalent in his era. While O'Neill must be held responsible for the ultimate success or failure of his plays, can we hold him responsible for being a man of his time, or must we also count him as liable for his lack of cultural and political prescience in not propounding a more progressive and aggressive ethnic vision or agenda? Is *All God's Chillun Got Wings* less successful because O'Neill does not find the time to delve into the motivations for Jim's self-defeating acts? Is Brutus Jones representative of the stereotype of the "black beast" or is his atavism of a more universal nature? Critics hold O'Neill responsible for reflecting the dominant, enculturated behaviors of his time, even while they miss the fact that the black characters themselves are not treated any better or worse within O'Neill's uncaring universe than other characters. Indeed, the playwright's black characters approach dramatic and tragic

heights accessible only through full and honest articulation, which would be a dramatic impossibility for simple caricatures.

While critics continue to debate the ultimate success or failure of O'Neill's politics, his canon seems to indicate that despite the overwhelming social forces and demeaning stereotyping of the period, O'Neill made a consistent and progressively successful effort to include black characters as part of the illusory American "pipe dream." The focus of this study, then, is to move the discourse beyond one of labeling into an understanding of the sources of the labels and accusations and to discover the extent to which O'Neill's black characters either further or obscure the playwright's greater vision: his tragic vision of life as depicted in his plays. How successful O'Neill was in portraying the humanity of his black characters is as important as the degree to which he was able (or unable) to transcend the pervasive racism of the time. It is important to keep in mind that O'Neill was operating within a white society in which the black man was popularly perceived of as primitive, even atavistic, with such beliefs reinforced by the scientific community and often supported by the black community as well.

Discussion of Goals

In this study, I hope to analyze how successfully or unsuccessfully O'Neill's black characters demonstrate the playwright's concept of humanity's ultimate shared doom in a dangerous and often deadly universe in which, according to Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh*, there is no tomorrow. This study's five plays present a fertile context for the exploration of O'Neill's aesthetic, allowing for a focus on the portrayal of

ethnicity as narrative strategy throughout his career and consideration of whether or not the playwright was consistent in the use of cultural and social indicators in his portrayal of a wide variety of sub-classes within the dominant culture. The most significant and individualized black characters in O'Neill's plays appear in "Thirst" (1916), "The Dreamy Kid" (1919), *The Emperor Jones* (1920), *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924), and *The Iceman Cometh* (1939), all collectively constituting a wide and inclusive vision of black (American and otherwise) people. *The Moon of the Carribees* (1918) also includes black characters in the figures of the native Caribbean women who board the S.S. Glencairn, but since the play functions largely (and most successfully) as a kind of "mood play," so do these characters seem to function more as part of the setting and background than as pro-active forces within the context of the white protagonist's dilemma. While I will refer briefly to the play and its black characters as part of O'Neill's canon, the nature of the characters' collective difference as rhetorical devices—dramatic devices rather than fleshed-out characters--recasts them as less central to the concerns of this study in comparison to the central figures in the five plays that serve as the basis for this study.

O'Neill's significant characters in these five plays remain subject to the residual and still threatening effects of bigotry. They are condemned to live in a world that continues to subjugate them and subvert their humanity, forcing them to exist in a context of hatred, fear, dissipation and doom even while embodying the divisive nature of DuBois' double-consciousness. The mulatto Sailor in "Thirst" is suspected of cannibalism and eventually succumbs to the naturalistic forces of the playwright's fictional universe; the Dreamy Kid is hunted by a gang and victimized by residual

superstition, afraid of the moral consciousness represented by his dying grandmother and ensnared by the American dream of material gain even at profound psychological cost; Brutus Jones is haunted and hunted by physical and mental demons that inhabit both his collective and ethnic unconsciousness; Jim Harris' fate rests at the feet of his increasingly unstable wife and her racist fears; and Joe Mott inhabits the same den of despondency and failure as his white comrades at Harry Hope's bar, while the doom of his hope for as bright a future as theirs is gloomily foreshadowed by his status as a minority within the white majority. These situations may at first appear to do little to rescue the characters from the critics who cite them as examples of O'Neill's possibly racist sensibilities (particularly under the then-prevailing shadow of residual Jim Crowism), but we must question whether or not *any* of O'Neill's characters—black, white or otherwise—are free of the same bleak forces inherent in an uncaring, naturalistic universe and the human constructs that reinforce the attending despair. If so, does O'Neill's locating of his black characters in their physical, cultural and social circumstances function as racist stereotyping or merely equal treatment within the sphere of the playwright's own doom-plagued world view? O'Neill's eventual infusion of developed psychological forces into his black characters may have inscribed them as fate-driven primitives at the mercy of their atavistic histories, but it can be argued that he did the same with his Irish and Catholic characters, as well as their Protestant (and often New England-bound) derivatives. The fortune-driven Captain Keeney of O'Neill's early short play "Ile" will eventually become the much more complex Con Melody in *A Touch of the Poet*, just as the silent mulatto in "Thirst" and the minor female characters in *The Moon of the*

Carribees lay the groundwork for richer dramatic realizations in Brutus Jones and Joe Mott.

In fact, many critics argue that O'Neill's Irish characters are particularly subject to caricature: Keeney is limited by his desire for personal gain; Melody is a disillusioned, drunken dreamer. Ella's pugilistic brother in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* and *The Iceman Cometh*'s despondent Larry Slade also provide evidence for O'Neill's equally jaundiced view of supposedly Irish traits. Are we then to understand O'Neill's view of ethnicity in the superstition and fear of Dreamy and Brutus Jones, or in the context of the playwright's bold "Fuck you!" to the Klan's condemnation of inter-ethnic casting in the original production of *All God's Chillun Got Wings*? Is his stage description of the bloodstains on the ocean in "Thirst" as "black" more significant than his real-world refusal to attend a segregated dinner? Is Dreamy's superstition superseded by O'Neill's published statement that "Prejudice born of an entire ignorance of the subject is the last word in injustice and absurdity" (Gelb 550)? What seems more important in this and similar debates is whether or not the universe O'Neill depicted in his plays is equally oblivious to the petty human concerns of all the playwright's characters, enveloping them within the same deterministic, universal despair. O'Neill's moral imagination does not seem to permit his protagonists to become mere victims, for such characters are forced to participate in the progression of their own respective fates. If O'Neill had wanted to use issues of ethnicity merely as plot devices, his theatrical acumen and modern sensibility would most likely have made him realize the difference encoded in his use of ethnic minorities and in the immediately noticeable difference of the actors' skin color.

In fact, if we are to accept the deterministic forces that rumble beneath the surface of O'Neill's plays as a functioning principle, then we must also accept the deeper, tragic nature of his despairing characters who are subject to the same cosmic indifference or even a more deterministic victimization, since such forces will lead to, and are indeed necessary for, the tragedy inherent in their stories. The overarching racism and fear that limn the world of these characters may not function as specifically in their determinism as does what the author called the "psychological approximation of fate" that underscores his *Electra*, or the specific familial legacies that doomed the Melody, Tyrone and Leeds families. Racism is not restricted to specific individuals or families except as such people or groups of people may inhabit particular ethnic classifications, but the psychological, spiritual and cultural forces of racism function in granting his black characters the same degree of nobility required by his white characters. Indeed, the quest for the meaning of existence for either black or white characters proves itself to be spiritual or even religious in nature for O'Neill, according to Virginia Floyd, in that the playwright's concern is not the relation between people, but "between God and man and between man and his divided soul, seeking, as was the playwright himself, for a faith to make it whole" (*New Assessment* 6). It is in that provision of equality under the deterministic forces of a dark universe that O'Neill succeeds in overcoming the allegedly racist portrayals for which some critics take him to task.

Much of the critical focus on the playwright's supposed racism stems from his problematic use of dialects—O'Neill's self-acknowledged reputation for having a "tin ear" for realistic, dramatic dialogue notwithstanding—or his broad and seemingly superficial descriptions of his characters' physical appearance.

These dialect and language issues lie at the center of much O'Neill criticism, and they can be easily interpreted as a sort of linguistic masking. For example, the debate continues on the correct semantic interpretation of such words as "yet" in his physical description of Brutus Jones: "His features are typically Negroid, *yet* [my italics] there is something distinctive about his face. . . ." (5). Some critics debate the connotative and the denotative meanings of the word but stop short of full contemplation of the character that actually exists in performance. Similarly, Jones' minstrel-like diction invites criticism: "Oh, dat silver bullet! Sho' was luck. But I makes dat luck, you heah?" (8) The criticism seems to extend the debate over O'Neill's aesthetic achievement: on the one hand, some critics see him as a clumsy writer whose difficulties in developing a consistent dramatic language for his characters limit the effectiveness of his drama; on the other hand, he is acclaimed as a major influence on subsequent American dramatists and a creator of true American tragedy. Perhaps the answer to our question regarding O'Neill's inconsistent language lies in questioning the nature of that critical ambivalence itself. For example, does the lower class dialect of Yank, the "hairy ape," function differently as narrative strategy from the lower class dialect of Dreamy? Is Brutus Jones' pleasure in wearing his regalia any more ethnically based or significant than Con Melody's desire to wear his own military uniform as a badge of his superiority? The fear and hatred resounding throughout the houses of the Cabot, Mannon, and Leeds families do not appear as pervasive in O'Neill's portrayal of the black family unit in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*. Even the troubled household of Mammy Saunders and Dreamy is infused more with familial affection than suspicion. Might we then be able to claim that

the playwright is in fact more favorable to his black families? If so, how do such realizations inform our understanding of his purported racism?

It would be a spurious examination that intentionally disregards perceived racist phenomena in O'Neill's plays. In 1919, O'Neill fully engaged the politics of culture in the stereotypes he presented in "The Dreamy Kid": the superstitious "black beast" Dreamy, the matriarchal Jemimah-esque Mammy. O'Neill continued to rely consciously on the rhetorical shortcuts provided by use of stereotypes in his later plays, as we can see with the primitivism of the white Yank in *The Hairy Ape*, primitivism we can see reflected even in the works of some contemporaneous black writers such as Claude McKay, whose *Home to Harlem* was generally praised by white critics, though it was condemned by some black ones such as W.E.B. DuBois, who objected to the purportedly stereotypical licentiousness of the black characters. But O'Neill was also able to portray his black characters as worthy of sympathy, with complex human emotions, family relations, and aspirations, just as he did with characters of other ethnic (and social) backgrounds. However, my main concern is that the achievement of his theatre be not lessened as a result of critics' efforts to put the rhetorical cart before the horse. I plan to point out some of the unfortunately negative stereotypes O'Neill uses as a semiotic shorthand, not for the sake of condemning or demeaning his art, nor to label him as unquestionably either racist or not. Rather, I hope to show how his depiction of his ethnic characters' behaviors, as well as his own culturally influenced understanding of ethnicity, functions as a narrative strategy that ultimately does not disrupt the development of a coherent, unified and self-reflective body of work. I also hope to examine how his major "black" plays are not limited by their deceptively "racist"

elements but rather reflect O'Neill's quest to understand humanity, a view that is finally consistent within the entirety of his canon and an articulation of his personal philosophy: "To me, there are no good people or bad people, just people. The same with deeds. 'Good' and 'evil' are stupidities, as misleading and outworn fetishes as Brutus Jones' silver bullet" ("Star is Rising"). This statement itself seems to indicate O'Neill's cultural awareness.

O'Neill's Experience

Eugene O'Neill was familiar with the profound effects of ethnic prejudice, even when it was incorrectly perceived merely in terms of skin color. Constantly aware of the bigotry among the New London Yankees toward his own family because of its Irish ancestry, O'Neill understood the degradation and prejudice often leveled against culturally marginalized populations. In at least one way, O'Neill's Irish Catholic heritage was one of the most significant factors in his dramatic efforts in this and other early plays, since he remained haunted by the discrimination his family had faced both in Ireland and in their adoptive New England, the geographical designation of which should probably have warned O'Neill's father that the hated "English" had merely relocated and would continue to cause difficulties. Such discrimination can be seen in the social ostracism his family faced as both Irish and "show people" in conservative New London, Connecticut. This ostracism undoubtedly contributed heavily to O'Neill's ability to identify with and faithfully recreate the outcasts he encountered throughout his life.

O'Neill's friendship with Joe Smith, the black gambler with whom he often shared lodgings at the Hell Hole in 1915, illustrates the playwright's keen awareness of

the insidious nature of bigotry and the close relationships he established with the black community during his days in Greenwich Village. Smith would serve as a partial basis for several future O'Neill characters, including the complex and fully realized Joe Mott in *The Iceman Cometh*. Almost uncannily foreshadowing the attitudes of Hickey in that play, O'Neill tried to afford Smith the moral support to work his way out of his despair: "Buck up, Joe!" he told Smith. "You're not going to confess the game has licked you, are you? That isn't like you! Get a new grip on yourself and you can knock it dead yet!" (*O'Neill at Work* 176). Clearly, O'Neill felt a personal connection to his down-and-out-comrade.

Smith was also the basis for the "Negro gambler" who was the subject of O'Neill's never-completed play, "Honest Honey Boy," begun in 1921. The playwright's italicized notes for another play further indicate his awareness of ethnic prejudice. In his first recorded notes for *All God's Chillun Got Wings* in 1922, O'Neill reveals that the germ of the play originated in his own knowledge of black life: "Play of Johnny T.—base play on his experience *as I have seen it intimately*" (*O'Neill at Work* 176). As we will see in the next chapter, the black protagonist is undone by bigotry, his intelligence and self-esteem are ravaged, and he is reduced to accepting his own incompetence by the machinations of his white wife and by the dominant white culture that ultimately overwhelms him.

Further evidence of the playwright's sensitivity toward and experience with marginalized ethnic groups lies in the unproduced play, "Bantu Boy." Between 1927 and 1934, O'Neill worked sporadically on the play, in which a noble African chief is stolen from his homeland, brought to the United States as a slave and eventually proves the

superior of his white oppressors. To O'Neill, the play would reflect black peoples' "whole experience in modern times—especially in regard to America" (*A New Assessment* 181). That the chief/slave in the play proves to exceed the nobility and humanity exhibited by his white captors is significant, especially regarding many critics' responses to *The Emperor Jones* and O'Neill's allegedly pejorative atavism of black peoples. One might criticize the troubling diminution of characters in their titular nomenclature—"Honest Honey Boy," "The Dreamy Kid," "Bantu Boy"—but while there is little support to the supposition that the play about the chief may have been written to appease such critics, it is possible to see that even a cursory glance at the scope of the aforementioned plays indicates that O'Neill was familiar with and concerned about the plight of black people in America beyond their perceived diminished manhood. However, even his "intimate" familiarity with their experience was necessarily and unavoidably limited, though his interest was not.

Focus of Study in the Plays

I will begin by examining "Thirst" and "The Dreamy Kid," the two earliest of the plays, in which the black characters are more simply articulated than the characters in the three later plays. I will examine the controversial elements of purported racism in each, and then show how "race"—or a non-essentialized ethnicity—and its portrayal function as narrative strategy in developing O'Neill's pervasive concept of the life-lie—the necessary illusions that allow his characters to accept their fates—as well as how racism itself is one of those life-lies that O'Neill (like *Iceman's* Hickey) tries to explode. For example, in "Thirst," the white Gentleman and Dancer are afraid that the mulatto Sailor

has stolen the dwindling supply of fresh water and that he represents a threat of cannibalism to the Gentleman and physical violence to the Dancer, fears that result from black, especially slave, stereotypes and perceived “primitivism.” In “The Dreamy Kid,” the first recognized attempt in American drama to provide roles for an all-black cast, the unseen and threatening white figures converge stealthily and unrelentingly on the title character, presumably as a result of Dreamy’s self-defensive killing of a white man. At least according to Dreamy, the white man threatened him for no reason, though in the play’s eerie foreshadowing of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, it is the white people’s fear of black people that triggers the conditions that nurture tragedy. Both the mulatto Sailor and Dreamy exhibit an ability to survive against monumental odds, including a lack of nourishment for the sailor and a lack of clear escape routes for Dreamy, within their respective “white prisons”: the confined white space of the shark-filled sea and Dreamy’s encroaching white enemies.

In addition, I will proceed to illustrate how *The Emperor Jones* functions as central to the critical interpretation of O’Neill’s ethnic creations and how Jones himself incorporates the positive and negative social and personal characteristics that earmark not only ethnic others, but all characters in the O’Neill canon. In discussing *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*, I will focus mostly on how ethnicity informs and influences the black/white conflict at the heart of Jim and Ella’s relationship, as that relationship itself represents a microcosm of O’Neill’s view of race relations in the United States. I will also discuss how the play exists as a significant step forward in the psychological and structural craftsmanship of O’Neill’s drama. In this play, the social forces of racism

represent psychological forces, showing how the white reaction to blackness and the reciprocal response were both the product of the same degradation.

I will conclude with a discussion of Joe Mott in *The Iceman Cometh* and how he represents the culmination of O'Neill's development of black characters in the way that the playwright finally created a fully realized and valid existence for his black characters that parallels that of his white characters, an existence free of the negative portrayals that may have informed and detracted from his earlier plays. In *The Iceman Cometh* as in his other late plays, O'Neill returned to the study of the individual's struggle against fate and death, and the search for the true self behind self-constructed masks. In these plays, he asks what happens when the fugitive characters become aware that their masks are transparent, when they learn that their illusions are false and intrinsically, ultimately useless. I will show how the dissolution of the false self-image leads to an equilibrium between the character and that character's ideal, a dramatic achievement that leads directly to psychic paralysis and eventual doom, as seen either in the darkened bedroom of Dreamy's grandmother or in the last-ditch hideaway of Harry Hope's saloon. Here it is the self, not the skin color, that proves to be the worst enemy of the characters, the unrelenting force that spells their sad endings yet ultimately affirms their mutual link to the rest of the human race and indicates O'Neill's respect for all levels of humanity.

My study also touches on the contemporaneous efforts of black artists to render their lives on their own terms. Instead of relying on white writers to portray the black experience, black artists tried not only to celebrate that experience but also to differentiate it from the white-created myths. According to Bill Ashcroft, language itself is the key to the differentiation, since "it is in language that the colonial discourse is

engaged at its most strategic point” (14). White writers such as O’Neill and Carl Van Vechten may have created “a sympathetic audience for the serious treatment of Negro subjects” (Bone 60), but in 1925, Alain Locke would declare, “The day of ‘aunties’ and ‘uncles’ and ‘mammies’ is...gone” (5). Somewhat ironically, Richard Wright’s *Bigger Thomas* would later seem to embody much of the experience of the main characters in the three earliest plays that comprise this study: the mulatto Sailor’s revitalization (in “Thirst”) after the death of the white woman (a professional performer, just as Mary Dalton is clearly “performing” as an enlightened liberal and Communist), Dreamy’s crime (which, like *Bigger*’s, sets up the tension and ensuing hunt by white people whose fearful perceptions nurtured the tension), and Jones’ mad flight (which parallels *Bigger*’s own self-defeating charge through the urban jungle of Chicago). If Wright is dealing significantly with some of the same motivations as O’Neill, albeit a couple of decades later, then what basis is there in ascribing racism to the use of such similar dramatic plot devices in the work of (the white) O’Neill?

This study will show how O’Neill’s ethnic portrayals validate his idea of a common humanity; that is, he subjects his black characters to the same forces, both internal and external, as he does his white characters, and as a result, they are equally as likely to share similar fates. As O’Neill progresses from the minor successes of “Thirst” to the major achievements of *The Iceman Cometh*, he seems to develop a greater understanding of humanity in all its shades, eliminating reliance on widely perceived ethnic myths and developing his idea of universal brotherhood in a universe governed by psychological fate.

As with all other significant characters in his plays, the progressive complexity of characterization does indicate the playwright's developing skill at investing them with increasing depth. The black men are portrayed as psychologically real, like white men in every way except in the color of their skin. In fact, O'Neill's greater skill in portraying complex psychology as he moved through the 1920s contributed to the creation of his black characters as being destroyed by the very psychological depth that defines them as real and equal to their white brothers, rather than as stereotypes. That O'Neill used the same strategies for future *white*, tragically fated characters such as Con Melody, Mary Tyrone, and Lavinia Mannon serves to further support his use of ethnicity as indicator of the common bond of ultimate doom within the ultimately hopeless universe. No one gets special treatment, and no one is free from fear or death, the great equalizers in the playwright's universe. Indeed, O'Neill was engaged in a quest to verify the existence of an eternal principle in human existence, a principle I hope to show that is not only eternal but also universal throughout O'Neill's body of work.

There are at least two forms of discourse pervading O'Neill's "black" plays. One is the discourse of the critical tradition that was and remains dominant in the corpus of criticism on American literature. Another is the varied discourse of the black characters as seen through the white lens of O'Neill's worldview: their dialects, their aspirations to success in a predominantly white world, their attempts to bridge cultural gaps. However, neither of these rhetorical traditions should be essentialized as a totalistic entity that emphasizes the immutability of its respective category. Analysis of the plays in question will illuminate the relative positions of the characters in terms of both discourses. It is just such a varied and shifting nature of discourse, I believe, that lends further credence to

a fuller understanding of O'Neill's supposedly theatrical ambivalence. Such a Modernist ambivalence— fragmentation, destabilized meaning, despair, bleakness—can be perceived in the outcomes of each of the plays considered in this study. None of the plays seem to be able to extract themselves from the binary opposition between the attractive but dangerous white world and the equally mysterious and dangerous black one. It seems that the major black characters face alienation in whichever world they choose, whichever discourse they attempt to embody or mask.

Critics continue to disagree as to the level of achievement in O'Neill's portrayal of alienation. Some find parallels between the author's characterization of African and Irish Americans. Shaughnessy recognizes the potential for universality in O'Neill's ethnic portrayals and, in fact, he indicates his belief that O'Neill went so far as to intentionally incur doubts about his sympathies in his creation of the memorable Brutus Jones and Jim Harris. His conclusion that O'Neill is guilty only of "faithful realism" underlies his mostly even-handed investigation of both African and Irish Americans ("Realism" 161). Shaughnessy draws other comparisons in *Down the Nights and Down the Days: Eugene O'Neill's Catholic Sensibility*, focusing as he does on the common psychological and spiritual underpinnings of significant characters of all ethnicities and ultimately placing the question of racism within the context of O'Neill's struggles with determinism and freedom. He contends that O'Neill's position against racism was possibly rooted in his awareness that African and Irish Americans both fell victim to similar stereotypes portrayed with great frequency in the American theatre, particularly since the mid-nineteenth century, and subsequently appropriated by the masses. Without necessarily contradicting Shaughnessy, I suggest that while O'Neill is keenly aware of

the isolated effects of such deterministic forces as ethnic intolerance, economics, and religion, his characters—black or white—are perhaps more notably victims of a larger fatalistic force. Such a force might be more easily understood as a combination of individual forces that affect all people. O’Neill’s plays with central characters who are black therefore focus less on the characters’ ethnicity per se than on the more pressing challenge of what it means to be part of the human race. With this deeper commonality emphasized, O’Neill was able to afford his ethnic characters greater equality, at least in their doomed existences. In providing this equality, O’Neill simultaneously enhanced the image and deepened the complexity of all marginalized people in the face of their inevitable naturalistic despair.

Research Basis of Discussion

Joel Pfister describes how O’Neill would have been aware that nineteenth-century blackface minstrel shows also characterized the Irish as “shiftless, ignorant drinkers.” In addition, he charts the origination of the appellation “Irish nigger” in the antebellum South, where the Irish were often employed as expendable laborers on jobs too dangerous to be performed by black property (123-24). It is therefore possible to draw a plausible link between O’Neill’s description of Brutus Jones’ face as “typically Negroid” and his description of Larry Slade’s “gaunt Irish face.” By incorporating both early and late works, I will try to show how the patterns of ethnic portrayal elicit further support for O’Neill’s rhetorical strategy in portraying alterity. Both faces can be immediately perceived in terms of their existence as “masks” (a theatrical device O’Neill experimented with often) and the behaviors and character indicated by them, but they

both also serve to cover up the real, more complex psyches lurking beneath the masks of these two fascinating and complicated characters.

Further support for these ideas can be found in the standard biography of Eugene O'Neill by Arthur and Barbara Gelb, first published in 1960 and recently updated to include a new focus on O'Neill's (and the biographers') dramatic interpretations of his immediate family, particularly in their chronicling of the playwright's personal interactions with his actors and audiences. The Gelbs paint a multi-faceted portrait of the artist caught between the reactionary nature of conservative public perception and acceptance of ethnic stereotypes and his own apparent ambivalence to other ethnic groups. Perhaps the most startling contrast the Gelbs draw is in recounting O'Neill's ebullient praise of Charles Gilpin—the original Brutus Jones—as the only actor who ever carried out O'Neill's every idea of the character as written, and his subsequent eruption at Gilpin for changing what the actor considered “racist” language in the play, calling Gilpin a “black bastard” (449). Gilpin complained, for example, about the repeated use of “nigger,” though an examination of the play will, I believe, indicate the word is used accurately as Jones or Smithers would have within the context of the play. Indeed, it is a term that the denizens of Harry Hope's bar will later use to describe Joe Mott as well. O'Neill's real-life friendship with Joe Smith, a black man with whom the author shared quarters at Jimmy-the-Priest's, lends credence to claims for O'Neill's open-mindedness within his closed-minded society.

Travis Bogard's *Contour in Time* (1972) provides a thorough literary analysis of all of O'Neill's published plays, including the five that function as the basis for my study. Bogard's chronological discussion provides a developmental context not only for

O'Neill's craftsmanship—details of the characters' origins in O'Neill's own life, the playwright's struggles to recreate his experiences in theatrical terms—but also for his thematic and personal achievements. In fact, Bogard uses his study of the playwright's canon as an examination of O'Neill's quest for his own identity. While he claims that the characters functioned independently of their creator as rhetorical and dramatic constructs, he also suggests that the characters' masks were very thin and barely hid characters derived from the playwright's life. Such a consideration is important when we realize that O'Neill's examination of the lives of his black characters derived from his own experience and would of necessity be reflected in his work, albeit with the ambivalence that marks his modern sensibilities. The two-part biography by Lewis Sheaffer—*O'Neill: Son and Playwright* (1968) and *O'Neill: Son and Artist* (1973)—also examines the playwright's own response to racism and, in particular, clarifies O'Neill's part in his feud with Gilpin.

In addition to the authoritative work of the Gelbs, Sheaffer, Bogard, and Shaughnessy, a number of other primary and secondary sources are of special value to this work. Important biographical treatments include *Part of a Long Story* (1958), written by O'Neill's wife Agnes Boulton, chronicling their stormy eleven-year marriage, the birth of their first child, and the development of O'Neill's work within the period. Another significant look at O'Neill as father and husband more so than as playwright is *The Curse of the Misbegotten: A Tale of the House of O'Neill* (1959), written by Crowell Bowen with Shane O'Neill, the author's son. The curse of the title refers to the inability of the O'Neill family to communicate their deep capacity for love to each other. While Bowen's book reads more like a story than a biography, it is one of the most complete,

factual accounts of O'Neill's personal history prior to the Gelbs'. An important early contribution to understanding the reaction of O'Neill's contemporaries to the playwright's art is Barrett H. Clark's *Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays*. Originally published in 1926, it was the first book to be devoted entirely to O'Neill. It includes a brief biography, play analyses, passages from letters and bibliographic material, though it was later revised. While this volume provides an important look at the early critical reaction to the playwright, its value is limited in that its critical lens is tainted by the same era-specific racist thought that O'Neill was trying to overcome. On the other hand, *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill* (1998), edited by Michael Manheim, the author of *Eugene O'Neill's New Language of Kinship* (1982), is a wide-ranging collection of up-to-date articles that focus on both biographical and artistic matters. The well known O'Neill scholars who contributed spend a significant amount of time examining the context of early criticism and reaction to the plays and thereby provide a useful contemporary and broad approach to O'Neill on both stage and page.

One of the most useful of references is Stephen A. Black's *Eugene O'Neill: Beyond Mourning and Tragedy*. Largely a biography, its exploration focuses on O'Neill's interest in psychology and the playwright's own psychological development. As my own work relies on the depth of psychological discourse among the characters, Black's book provided key insights into both playwright and character.

Secondary sources that focus on dramatic criticism of O'Neill's work include the indispensable anthology *O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism* (1961), edited by Oscar Cargill. It is a comprehensive collection of pre-postmodern criticism, reviews, memoirs, production records, and an extensive bibliography. Similarly useful is Leonard

Chabrowe's 1976 volume, *Ritual and Pathos: The Theater of O'Neill*, which looks at the playwright's sense of art and the aesthetic, as well as the pursuit of his craft. *Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension: An Interpretive Study of the Plays* (1958) by Doris Falk is an expansion of her own doctoral dissertation that studied the plays as the development of a common theme: O'Neill's conception of the inward, uniquely personal experience of modern man as tragic hero. The book is therefore narrow in focus, but it does concentrate on developing an idea of O'Neill's thematic unity across the body of his work. In fact, Falk's book provided the structural idea for my own study, relying on a specific thematic concern to unite an exploration of several of his plays. Virginia Floyd's trio of books provides a broad base of criticism and incorporates information from O'Neill's notes and notebooks to provide a new, more comprehensive assessment of O'Neill's methods and achievement. Margaret Loftus Ranald's 1984 volume, *The Eugene O'Neill Companion*, is one of the most important sources for bibliography, biography, and chronology, though its date of publication makes it less valuable now than when originally released. However, it provided a set of early leads in beginning my research and as such was valuable as a springboard into understanding the broad scope of O'Neill criticism.

Significant individual articles by important critics of O'Neill's era include work by Eric Bentley, whose "Trying to Like O'Neill" surmises that a dislike for O'Neill suggests a dislike for the times themselves. It comments on the characteristics of Modernism and the Modern period. Other writers such as Deborah Wood Holton, Gabriele Poole and Edward Shaughnessy contribute critical discussions of O'Neill's continuing challenges in dramatizing black characters.

Although I rely primarily on the primary and secondary sources listed, I supplement my readings of those works with studies of general works about twentieth century literature and drama. Chief among such works is C.W.E. Bigsby's *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama* (1985). Several volumes by John Gassner provide an earlier look at the development of American drama, as does Arthur Hobson Quinn's history of American drama through 1935, *A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day* (1936). Internet and electronic database research provide an even broader base of support for my inquiries. The resources available through the special collections of O'Neill material in the Beinecke Library at Yale University, the Charles E. Shain Library at Connecticut College, and the archives at Monte Cristo Cottage, part of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in New London, Connecticut, provide additional support.

Clarification of Terms

At this point, a caveat may be in order. In a work of this type, the stated aim is to locate relationships from which a general theory can be developed, qualified, or even ultimately repudiated in light of alternative interpretation. The varied nature of the current body of criticism indicates the need for a new appreciation of O'Neill's methods and solutions. However, the link between O'Neill's life and his work makes it extremely difficult to establish absolute relationships, so perhaps this study may act more as a point of departure from which, someday, a more fully developed theory may be launched. In addition, the use of the general term "black," rather than more specific and contemporary "African American," while more or less arbitrary, provides a more generally appropriate

terminology that allows for greater flexibility in discussion and study of individual plays. Using comparable terms such as “European American” or “Irish American” would detract from the nature of the black/white categorizations that underscore critics’ analyses, despite the terms’ greater ethnic specificity. Indeed, not all the black characters are American, nor would they necessarily acknowledge their African heritage as part of their contemporary identity. Brutus Jones’ regression to his sub-consciousness is evidence that suppression of his African heritage in part led to his tragic end. While study of the era in question might dictate the use of the period-specific terms “Negro” or the subsequently used “colored,” I will use such terms only in regard to criticism that employs them and in the instance of O’Neill’s own use of the terms. Other terms denoting ethnicity—Afro-American, Africanic, and their many variations—are more subject to identification with period or attitude than the more general “black.”

Similarly, I will employ the word “ethnicity” in place of “race,” except as specified in the preface, as the latter term, while perhaps more commonly (and loosely) used to define differences based upon physiology and traditionally (if too casually) used to define a difference between black and white people, is less useful in my study. While O’Neill himself used “race” in defining black from white subjects, the term, as discussed in the preface, is perhaps too readily understood in a biological sense. While O’Neill’s characters may indeed have been subjected to a time-specific perception of a biological distinction between black and white people, our temporal distance allows for a classification of greater empirical validity and usefulness. Early anthropologists may have relied upon biological attributes to classify various living populations throughout the world into distinctive “races,” according to Raymond Scupin, but these scientists have

developed more advanced research techniques and methods that have led to the abandonment of simple constructions of “race,” and indeed, “the vast majority of anthropologists have rejected the concept of ‘race’ as a useful scientific concept” (“Anthropology” 5). In this study, I will use the term as a tool, not a precise descriptive signifier but rather a literary trope that does not essentialize the experience of O’Neill’s black characters. I will rely primarily on the use of “ethnicity” rather than “race,” as it is based on a conception of a shared history, culture, or ancestry. Indeed, the ways in which we perceive, interpret and evaluate ethnic difference in the United States might even be better understood as a kind of performance that gains meaning from what history or tradition has deposited on the performing bodies (Lee 72).

I will rely on both objective and subjective aspects of ethnicity, as outlined by Scupin, in which the objective aspect is found in “the observable culture and shared symbols of a particular group” and “may involve a specific language or religious tradition” (“Ethnicity” 68), while the subjective aspect involves the internal beliefs of shared origin or ancestry, including, in some cases, a belief that their ethnicity is linked to some specific, common physical characteristics (ibid). As Homi Bhabha states, the dominant culture produces stereotypes based on such characteristics out of his or her own “phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body” (*Location* 92). Occasionally, I will use the terms “racism” or “racist” to indicate the continuing actions that suggest fear of or action taken against people based upon their skin color. While such a use may seem inconsistent with the mitigation of the term “race” in this study, I include it occasionally because of the history of physical and psychological violence and political maneuvering connoted within the term, connotations that a more contemporary signifier such as

“ethnocentrism” may lack. When I do use “racism” or “racist,” it is to underscore the acknowledged subjective negativity still associated with the term rather than the less connotative “ethnocentrism” or “ethnocentrist.” Since the characters’ actions are based on their own (probably) biological understanding of “race,” the actions can be termed similarly: “racism” and “racist” apply to their (false) biological understanding of the differences between black and white people.

In addition, I hope to clarify the use of the terms “primitive” and “primitivism” in hopes of destigmatizing them as signifying something suggesting “less developed” cultures than similar subjects in the dominant culture. In fact, Tracy McCabe states that primitivism is not a monolithic discourse to be simply labeled as either subversive to or supportive of a dominant ideology (475). She describes the primitive as not being necessarily “savage, backward, or exotic other than to the Western civilized,” but rather as that which suggests origins in a distant past “whose calm simplicity is defined by contrast to the anxiety of modern life” (486). Since O’Neill fits squarely into study as representative of fractured “modern life” in the early decades of the twentieth century, McCabe’s definition seems apt and useful in application to the playwright’s tragic view of humanity.

Furthermore I limit the use of the term “tragedy.” For Eugene O’Neill, tragedy is not the result of an Aristotelian concept of action and unity as much as it is a given, an understood and even essential condition of his universe. It is not limited to the noble, to the great or near great. All characters, regardless of ethnic or economic backgrounds, experience the simultaneous indignity and nobility of the human condition and its shared fate. All of his characters rely on the comfort provided by their illusions. In the plays

comprising this study, ethnic prejudice leads to a fate as certain as death. According to Shaughnessy, O'Neill's talent lay in being able to peer deeply into the damage wrought as a result of prejudice ("faithful realism" 150). Through a faithful attention to psychological detail, O'Neill succeeds in revealing his characters' inner natures, according the same tragic human nature to his black characters as to his white ones. That O'Neill was able to accomplish his dramatic goals within the burgeoning Modernist movement and prevailing literary naturalism indicates a particular skill in concurrently mythicizing and historicizing. He used and expanded myth—ethnic, cultural, and otherwise—to endow the human experience with significant, even expansive, meaning rather than to propagate a negative or even specific view of race. To consider his work as a whole is to understand the recurrence of thematic patterns so obsessive that, from another point of view, they might well be understood as complexes.

Another primary concern in the study of O'Neill's plays is the connection between the plays themselves and the playwright's conscious narrative strategies and themes. It is important to focus particularly on the shadowy psychological and social conflicts that generally take place within the characters' psyches, not to shine a glaring light on O'Neill's possibly ambivalent and often ambiguous world view, but to draw out the characteristics of O'Neill's use of ethnicity as narrative strategy. Indeed, it is the characters' embodiment of their masks or life-lies that serves as a constant in their failure to achieve happy endings. My aim is to examine the manner in which O'Neill's aesthetic re-shapes the psychological and socio-cultural elements that converge and collide in his plays dealing with significant black characters, rumble menacingly throughout his uncaring universe, and lay bare the falsity of pipe dreams and illusions.

Notes

¹ DuBois says that the American “Negro” always feels a sense of doubleness in his existence: “ An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Fawcett, 1903, rep. 1961) 16-17.

Chapter Two

“Bah! You are nervous. Anything is better than dead silence.”

--Gentleman, “Thirst”

Once his plays began to be performed in 1916, Eugene O’Neill was one of the most active of American playwrights. He wrote approximately forty plays that eventually saw production, at least that many more that went unproduced, and he continued throughout his writing career to experiment with technique and form. Incorporating Expressionism, modernism, Greek masks, Elizabethan soliloquy, and realism (at various times and often in different combinations concurrently), drawing from influences as varied as Shakespeare and Strindberg, O’Neill is widely considered to have brought recognition and respect to an American theatre previously ignored outside the country. Eminent critic C.W.E. Bigsby states, “If any one writer can lay claim to having invented that [American] theatre it was” O’Neill (14). However, O’Neill’s lingering reliance on melodrama, an almost self-conscious introspection in his characters, and, more to my purposes, his apparent reluctance to edit more liberally in the face of his acknowledged difficulty in creating a suitable dramatic language, has also created a sense of discomfort in critics about his ultimate success as a significant American dramatist.

Critics seem to know that O'Neill qualifies as one of the great American playwrights. Described by many, including John Gassner, as "America's first dramatist of international standing" ("Nature" 166), O'Neill is also, according to Richard Moorton, a challenge to critics who must justify allegedly problematic dialects and attitudes in the works of a "world-class author" (xviii). Critics just don't seem to know exactly how to measure—or recognize—O'Neill's achievement.

O'Neill and the Rhetorical Challenge

One way to address O'Neill's contributions to both American and world theatre is to examine the characters that populate his complex and vast universe, to investigate the languages that create the intricate psychologies that define them. Indeed, it is the language of the characters and of O'Neill himself that may indicate how successful the playwright was at creating a consistent universe in which all characters exist as cogs in the uncaring, mechanical vastness in which they all must eventually perish. In their efforts to somehow overcome the power of their respective life-lies, the characters rely heavily on a rhetoric that defines them as much as it conveys plot information to the audience. "How we poor monkeys hide from ourselves behind the sounds called words," declares Nina Leeds in *Strange Interlude*, aware of her own downfall developing behind those very sounds (40). Throughout his canon, O'Neill critiques language itself, even as he relies on it to develop a sense of the difference between the intrinsic self and its expression (Biggsby 19). He indicates his own awareness of the ultimate inadequacy of language and its subsequent subversion of an objective truth.

Such a distrust of language can be seen throughout his body of work, populated as it is by a preponderance of schemers, liars, dreamers, hucksters and actors, men and women who use language not to define reality but in an attempt to simultaneously conceal and transcend it. They are indeed a theatrical lot. However, as his body of work indicates, O'Neill feels a sense of camaraderie with people in all walks and stations of life, for if there is a certainty unmasked behind the facade of language in O'Neill's work, it is that we are all doomed. In fact, his affection for what he, in his post-post-Victorian terminology, might call the lower classes may illustrate how he found the experience of those on the lower rungs particularly suited to his attack on the certainty of language. After all, it is these bottom-dwellers, the hopeless visitors to Harry Hope's saloon, the misbegotten refuse of modernity, who most obviously fail to make their way successfully into a society that esteems facility with language. Perhaps his fondness for this downtrodden group and their inability to use language to make their way fully into society may result from the rhetorical bravura of his father, James, whose reliance on the grandiloquent and patently false melodrama of *The Count of Monte Cristo* doomed a once-promising career. Thus, the trappings of theatre served to illuminate even as they masked the "sincerity of life" (Roberts 44).

What further seems consistent in O'Neill's plays is the playwright's awareness of the false rhetoric, of his characters expounding in a theatricalized language because, in one sense, they are all self-conscious and vulnerable, and they seek safety in role-playing that blunts the impact of their real dilemmas; that is, they use artificial language to create an artificial refuge. As exemplified by the hopeful yet hopeless inhabitants of Harry Hope's bar, O'Neill's characters consistently deny their rhetoric in their very actions,

pointing up the innate falsity of their language. His sense of the contradictions inherent in language derives from his dark, modernist worldview that a coherent language was no longer possible in the “discordant, broken, faithless rhythm of our time” (Chothia 106). Language in itself becomes a life-lie, often hiding behind a figurative or even literal mask. Critic Richard Moorton examines O’Neill’s achievement:

In an age when postmodern criticism’s audacious reduction of literature to nonsignifying texts with no relationship to reality is coming into question, the incessantly autobiographical O’Neill reminds us that there is indeed an “outside” of the text and that in his case the impact of that outside on the text is pervasive and profound. (xxi)

In his exploration of O’Neill’s African and Irish Americans, Edward L. Shaughnessy asks, “Did O’Neill trade in stereotypes?” (148) I suggest that by examining the language of the plays, and particularly the inherent and acknowledged rhetorical falsity of the language of the characters, we can move beyond a simple answer of yes or no, along with a misplaced emphasis on whether O’Neill must be classified as either great or “a perpetual embarrassment” because of his portrayal of ethnicity. I believe what matters more than whether or not O’Neill set out to marginalize or embrace his ethnic characters is whether or not they were granted the same privileges, hopes and disappointments as other characters populating his dramatic universe. Does O’Neill use ethnicity as a rhetorical mask, much as his characters use language to mask their own truths? Are they linked through O’Neill’s language to the greater population at large, or do O’Neill’s ostensible word choices leave people adrift, isolated, and unable to attain the

common brotherhood O'Neill seems to use as a controlling function of thematic development in his plays?

A thorough understanding of the playwright's rhetorical techniques and aims in creating his black characters should begin with the earliest of his plays to feature characters of African descent. Published in 1914 but not produced until 1916, the one-act play "Thirst" provides a fascinating, if frustrating, introduction into O'Neill's ethnic interpretations. "The Dreamy Kid," first performed in 1919, builds upon the earlier one-act play and foreshadows the grand incarnation of the soon-to-follow Brutus Jones. These two plays will allow us to examine O'Neill's work in terms of his use of rhetorical masking and unmasking, for, O'Neill himself asks, "What, at bottom, is the new psychological insight into human cause and effects but a study in masks, an exercise in unmasking?" ("Memoranda" 166)

Beginnings: "Thirst"

"Thirst" was the second of O'Neill's plays to be produced, preceded by "Bound East for Cardiff." The play centers on the struggle of three shipwreck victims to survive on a small white raft adrift on a "glassy" sea. Descending into madness as a result of their thirst, they prey on each other until they sacrifice their humanity to the uncaring, black-stained sea. Despite their common predicament, the three are separated by social, as well as psychological, forces. The Gentleman and the Dancer represent the upper class white world, while the Sailor, a mulatto, represents the lower class, and obviously non-white, world. The Gentleman and the Dancer are materialistic, having been more concerned with saving their worldly goods—a wallet and a diamond necklace,

respectively—than with their own survival, while the Sailor’s sole concern is saving his life. Yet it is not so much their differences that is startling in this opening tableau. Upon the white deck of the raft, all three are literally linked by “blackness.” The Sailor is defined by his skin color—in the original production, O’Neill himself played the character in blackface—and he wears a navy blue—almost black—outfit. While the sailor is alternately described as “Negro” and “mulatto,” it is clear that the black/white dichotomy is a functioning, almost expressionistic, element of the play’s theme. The term “mulatto,” indicating parentage of mixed “race,” is perhaps even more appropriate to O’Neill’s aim in that the mixed cultural background of the Sailor is yet one more means of establishing a common bond among the three lost souls.

The Gentleman wears a white shirt with black slacks, a black tie, has black hair, and perhaps in a most telling detail, is marked by a line of black moustache dye running down the side of his face. Providing an additional image of blackness, O’Neill also describes how the man “licks his swollen lips with his blackened tongue” (20).

The Dancer is also clad in black, her costume of velvet and spangles set off by her blonde hair. However, “continuous weeping has made a blurred smudge of her rouge and black eye makeup” (20), furthering O’Neill’s depiction of the false nature of color as a determinant of reality. As he will do with the riot of colors against the white walls in the opening scene of *The Emperor Jones*, the playwright uses color as an indicator of theme. In “Thirst,” O’Neill is clearly using color to show how closely the three are linked in their situation, in their humanity, and ultimately, in their fate. For example, each character is provided with a splash of red: the red of the lettering on the Sailor’s sweater, the Gentleman’s bald spot “burned crimson by the sun” (20), and the smeared

rouge on the Dancer's face. Before the characters even speak, they reveal their common humanity, their mutual bond of eventual doom marked by the colors they wear, with black predominant. In this case, black represents not stigma but inclusion. The Gentleman states as much early in the play, claiming the Sailor as a "companion in misfortune" and states how the three are "all in the same pitiful plight" (25). Clearly, the gentleman is acting as a mouthpiece for O'Neill's own fatalistic views that people cling to life sustained only by a pipe dream that some sort of salvation is possible and that only a knowledge of a shared bond makes life bearable. Esther Jackson claims that O'Neill indeed was, throughout his life, engaged in just such a search for a way to verify the existence of a common, universal and eternal principle in human experience (252). O'Neill's rejection of religion at the time of writing "Thirst" mirrored his anguish at his own inability to confirm or deny the existence of God. In "Thirst," he found the "eternal principle" in the human bond symbolized by the characters' shared predicament and the black makeup and splashes of red marking each character. The blackness then functions as a literal and figurative mask, initially indicating distinction among the three doomed souls but yet functioning ultimately as a common and unifying characteristic. It is a mask which must be seen for its own falsity, and it is seen clearly in relief against the background of the white raft that covered much of the stage of the tiny Wharf Theatre in the play's first production.

The falsity is a startling realization that would later become embodied perhaps most memorably in *Strange Interlude* with Nina Leeds' wail that life itself is a lie: "Say 'lie,'" Nina commands another character. "L-i-i-e! Now say life. L-i-i-i-f-e! You see! Life is just a long drawn out lie with a sniffing sigh at the end" (40). In "Thirst," the

Dancer anticipates both Nina Leeds and the existential despair of Harry Hope's universe: "My God, this is horrible to wait and wait for something that never comes" (26). But she cannot escape the curse that hovers over O'Neill's imaginary world: suffering as a secular equivalent to the idea of Original Sin, the inevitable outcome of the human condition (Raleigh 236).

The inner strength of the Sailor is initially played out in his reticence and calm, "monotonous Negro song," while the Gentleman and the Dancer torture each other with talk of heat and blood. The sailor continues his crooning and shark-watching, while the Dancer cries, "Oh, this silence! I cannot bear this silence. Talk to me about anything you please but, for God's sake, talk to me! I must not think! I must not think!" (21-22). The Dancer's shrieks are telling, for in them she is calling upon the power of language to block out the reality that is slowly driving her mad. In a sense, she demands a sort of rhetorical masking of her hopelessness, begging for a life-lie that exists only in the articulation of it.

Nor does the Gentleman stomach the silence. Early in the play, he "sulkily" claims, at the request of the Dancer to avoid discussing the blood-red color of the sea, "Very well. I will not speak." But he is unable to keep his vow. Before either of the other characters has the opportunity to act, he cries, "God! God! How my eyes ache! How my throat burns!" (21). He is, of the three, the most garrulous and in fact serves to bind the three widely disparate characters together. He frequently intercedes on the Dancer's behalf, acting as a sort of negotiator among them, at least until the Dancer ultimately succumbs to insanity and is finally able to address the Sailor without fear. The Gentleman is also the character who most frequently relies on the label that sets the

Sailor off rhetorically from the others, referring to him as “a poor Negro sailor” (25), “this nigger” (32), “pig” (36), and finally, “the black dog” (41), the epithets growing more dehumanizing and desperate as the action progresses, in stark contrast to Brutus Jones’ rhetorical shift away from rhetorical negativity as his own tragedy deepens. Clearly, O’Neill’s use of the increasingly derogatory terms is a specific rhetorical choice, wedded to an awareness of how such language functions dramatically and culturally. In his stage directions, O’Neill initially refers to the Sailor as “West Indian mulatto” (19), though his subsequent references are “Negro.” Perhaps such a reliance on the latter is more indicative of O’Neill’s time than his intention, as “Negro” was the accepted term, in white and black cultures, for people of African descent in American society, until the shift to “colored” some decades later. More pointedly, the Dancer refers to the Sailor as a “black animal” and “dirty slave” after her feigned seduction fails (44). This final derogatory reference is perhaps the one that reduces the Sailor, at least in her eyes, to the lowest level of existence. Even a dog may be considered superior to some animals in her world, and she is futilely trying to stave off the realization that in death all humans are equal, a realization that O’Neill obviously and progressively embraces throughout his career. He uses the words with great awareness of how they serve to denigrate their intended receivers. The Sailor’s ritualistic chanting to the sharks serves the same purpose as the use of language does to the others. He uses his song as a brace against the very real presence of impending death, couching his understanding of the situation in a reliance on his own cultural and spiritual mythology. While the Gentleman and Dancer ramble, often insanely, the Sailor maintains his song and his poise. As a person whose life is closely connected to the primal power of the sea, he is used to its dangers and has

accepted them as part of his life. It is likely that he sees his predicament as only one more burden, an occupational hazard. Though the Gentleman and Dancer may be considered both socially and culturally less primitive than the Sailor, his close ties to nature suggest that he, more than the other two, possesses the means to survive, at least in his present environment. In fact, the two white characters even wonder if the black character may possess an advanced skill at survival. When they are unsure, they turn to him for answers. "Maybe he can clear away our doubts," the Gentleman hopes in response to the Dancer's question regarding the events prior to the crash (33). Neither white character was apparently aware enough of the situation during the crisis. The Dancer cannot recall who rescued her, and in an ironic twist, the Gentleman tells how he grabbed a menu rather than the wallet he returned for before the sinking. Earlier, they turn to the Sailor to stand and survey the horizon. "You are stronger than we are and can see farther," he says to the Sailor. "Stand up and tell me if there is any ship in sight" (26). Continuing the visual evocation of ties between and among characters, the sharks are also black, as the Gentleman observes: "Those pointed black things you see moving through the water are their fins" (23). Here is another obvious link among the three survivors delineated in black. Finally, the initial "black stain" that appears on the water after the Dancer's death, the appearance of the Sailors' "black head" after he is pulled overboard, and the subsequent widening of the stain once all three have fallen overboard indicate not separation, nor even a negative connotation. Rather, they link the three victims not only in a common doom, but more importantly in O'Neill's universe, a common humanity.

These examples may support a claim made by Virginia Floyd in her assessment of O'Neill's plays. She says that in "Thirst," O'Neill first uses a strategy that he will use in

later works: “ representatives of a particular ethnic group, usually a deprived, exploited social class, are superior, physically, morally, or both, to the possessors of wealth, position, and power” (34). Indeed, we see the Sailor possessing closer ties to nature and no desire for material goods, other than the life-giving water. Of the three survivors, he is the only one without a visible representation of material wealth. The Dancer has her necklace, and the Gentleman has his menu from the United States Club of Buenos Aires. Both characters seek and hold these fragments of their privileged societies despite their current and common predicament, though the Gentleman throws away his menu at the dancer’s request. She considers it a mockery of their misfortune, and it becomes a “black spot” on the water (29). The Sailor’s close connection to the natural world, rather than the acquisitive and materialistic civilization of his compatriots in misery, delineates him as more closely in tune with humanity’s basic existence. Such a conclusion also links O’Neill to American writers such as Emerson, Hawthorne, Whitman, and Twain. Their consistent criticism of the old world in favor of the new American world, the natural over the synthetic, depicts Americans as those who are less corrupted by societal and cultural strictures, those who are more in tune with a natural existence. Emerson’s nature, Hawthorne’s Pyncheons, Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and Twain’s *Huck Finn* all exemplify the same vein that O’Neill was mining in his efforts at creating a serious American theatre. A connection to nature is a common American literary index of viability, one with which O’Neill is familiar.

In their desperation, both the Gentleman and the Dancer cry out to a God who, if he exists, apparently has turned a deaf ear to their predicament, while the Sailor has found in his natural surroundings a source of strength and belonging denied him by his

compatriots on the raft as he sings his charms to the sharks. In fact, the Dancer's first words are "My God! My God! The silence is driving me mad!" (20). She continues to cry out and invoke her Christian God's name throughout her ordeal, doing so six more times before insanity and dehydration claim her. The Gentleman is likewise connected to his deity, calling out God's name twelve times while he deteriorates beneath what O'Neill calls in his opening and closing stage directions, "a great angry eye of God" (19, 48). Apparently, O'Neill's God is not uninterested. It is the universe that is indifferent, while God remains a force that is very much alive, although apparently very displeased with his creation. For the Sailor, the sharks, representative of his own mythology, are ever-present and able to be appeased through his song: "It is a charm. I have been told it is very strong. If I sing long enough, they will not eat us" (23). His belief is not merely ignorant superstition, which would reflect a negative stereotype of African ethnicity. For the Sailor, the invocation is his equivalent to a Christian prayer or psalm—words intended to invoke protection and comfort--though both "charm" and Christian appeal would fail to provide salvation. The Gentleman retorts shortly thereafter, seeing the Dancer frightened by the Sailor's words, "At least tell her the truth about the sharks. That is all a children's tale about them eating people. . . . You know they never eat anyone" (24). Here, the Gentleman attempts, in the face of accepted knowledge, to "undo" the truth by lying about it, by disclaiming it, by disempowering it rhetorically. Later, when the situation becomes even more desperate and rhetoric is no longer enough to fend off impending disaster, the Gentleman himself recounts his own fear to the Dancer: "A woman near me with a life belt around her gave a cry of agony and disappeared—then I realized—sharks!" (30). His rhetorical failure to continue the lie

indicates his inability to maintain the presence of mind needed to survive his plight, just as the Gentleman and Dancer fail to understand the nature of their relationship to the Sailor. Only the audience is privileged to see how the character of the black sailor is not defined so much by O'Neill's stage directions or description as much as it is by the other characters' reactions to him.

For example, their initial assumption is that he cannot speak English well, and they are puzzled as to why he has not spoken after they learn of his linguistic ability. He is an "animal" and a "dog" not because of his behavior, but because the other characters must resort to name-calling when their own efforts to survive fall short. It is not his failing, but rather theirs, which causes them to denigrate their mysterious companion. If the Sailor is suspect, O'Neill never spells out clearly whether he stole the only fresh water.

Ironically, all characters are locked within their "white prisons": the white raft upon which they are trapped, the white majority that the Sailor must tolerate despite his greater ability to manage his predicament, and the self-centered perceptions of the white characters that blind them to the truth and their own weaknesses. Self, not skin color, is their own worst enemy, much as it is in "The Dreamy Kid." Lack of perception dooms the travelers, for O'Neill's message in this play is evident: when people turn on each other, thereby shattering the link that binds them into a common humanity, they hasten their own eventual destruction, inevitable though it may be.

Most of the play's dialogue is uttered by the Gentleman and Dancer, and as the situation aboard the white raft grows more desperate, so does their speech become more theatrical, taking the form of alternating monologues as they recount the events that led

up to and followed the disaster. However, the monologues and the white characters' subsequent mad attempts to seize the non-existent flask of water from the Sailor function even more as theatrical language when we realize that the characters had already stated a clear understanding of their position, one in opposition to the desperate clinging to hope that they eventually embrace. "My God, this is horrible," the Dancer despairs early in the play. "To wait and wait for something that never comes" (26). Foreshadowing the interminable waiting for such theatrical no-shows as Godot and Lefty (and O'Neill's own "Iceman," who, as personified by Hickey, arrives inevitably but late and then disappears, seemingly forever), the survivors are doomed to disappointment, and the Gentleman knows it as well: "The blind sky will not answer your appeals or mine" (34). If, according to the Gentleman, anything is better than dead silence, then surely their desperate rantings presage their coming deaths.

The spoken word is perhaps more significant in the reticent Sailor's speech, for it signals the beginning of O'Neill's transformative ability to give black characters a voice in his new American drama. As previously discussed, critics continue to debate whether those characters are fully or truly realized as embodying their ethnic heritage. At the time, O'Neill's efforts won approval from such black voices as W.E.B. DuBois, who praised the play as a "splendid tragedy" (Locke 56), as did Langston Hughes and Alain Locke. Jessie Redmond Fauset praised O'Neill for enabling black actors to appear in other than blackface and minstrel shows, stating her hope that such characters as O'Neill's would show the full range of humanity—"wells of feeling"—possessed by black people ("Gift" 167). As O'Neill's Gentleman in "Thirst" points out, "anything is better than silence" (24), and it seems to hold true for a black population that was

beginning to find a louder voice during the Harlem Renaissance that was gaining momentum even as O'Neill's characters were being realized. Locke declared, "The day of 'aunties' and 'uncles' and 'mammies' is equally gone" (5). While "Mammy Saunders" would find her way into O'Neill's "The Dreamy Kid," discussion of how she is distinct from the "mammy" caricature will follow later in this chapter. The important development is that a voice had been found for a population whose voice had been, except for a few notable exceptions, ignored.

In "Thirst," we learn that the taciturn Sailor is able to speak English on a par with his fellow doomed passengers. When the Gentleman says, "Yet he speaks good English. It cannot be that he does not understand us," the Dancer replies, "When he does speak, it is as if he had some impediment in his throat" (25). O'Neill does allude to the impediment earlier in his stage directions: "When [the Sailor] speaks, it is in drawling sing-song tones as if he were troubled by some strange impediment of speech" (19). O'Neill's choice of words in this quotation suggests that the impediment is not really an impediment at all, with the "as if" casting doubt as to the cause of his difficulty. We must question how "sing-song" tones would constitute an impediment, since such tones would seem to indicate no inherently negative connotation. Rather, if we take O'Neill's words to indicate mere *difference* we may find that it is the vocalization of language that acts as a barrier between the Sailor and his cohorts. Joel Pfister suggests that the "impediment" is imposed by the only people left with whom the Sailor may converse (259); that is, the impediment is nothing more than the Sailor speaking in his own cultural mode. Indeed, an examination of the Sailor's words illustrates no forced dialect for which so many critics take O'Neill to task. Lorraine Hansberry says that these

“translations ‘to the Negro’ have generally meant (aside from adding saxophones and red dresses) haphazardly assaulting the English language beyond recognition, as if the Negro people had not produced an idiom that has a real and specific character” (166). She says, however, “I believe that it is within the cultural descendants of Twain and Whitman and Melville and O’Neill to listen and absorb [appropriate language], along with the totality of the American landscape, and give back their findings....” (167), leading us to conclude that O’Neill’s failings—if they are failings—are failings of form, not of content. Unlike the heavy dialect of blacks and whites pervading “The Dreamy Kid,” “The Emperor Jones,” “Rope,” *Desire Under the Elms* or any of his later plays involving lower class or ethnic characters, “Thirst” does not resort to categorizing the Sailor through heavy dialect, or translating “to the Negro.” In fact, the lack of strong dialect seems further evidence of O’Neill’s effort at creating a picture of a common human community. In this play, there is no difference in dialect to delineate difference in class. The use of the voice itself serves to indicate the bond, even as it serves to provide empowerment to those silenced within a majority population.

Perhaps the ultimate evidence of that bond, as indicated by the common voice, is the death that all three share. If it is true, according to Long in *The Hairy Ape*, that “all men is born free and ekal” (39), then according to “Thirst,” they are also “ekal” in death, an idea that permeates O’Neill’s canon.

Bringing it Home: “The Dreamy Kid”

To move the discourse beyond labeling, to discover the extent to which O’Neill’s black characters either further or obscure his tragic vision of life in which there is no

tomorrow: this is the task inherent in examining how O'Neill's moral imagination does not seem to allow his protagonists to survive as mere victims, as well as how they participate actively in the evolution of their own fates, much as the Gentleman and Dancer choose to challenge the Sailor, which leads to their immediate, rather than eventual, doom. One such example can be found in "The Dreamy Kid" (1919), a one-act play that seems to exemplify Hansberry's "to the Negro" dialect but actually uses that dialect with perhaps greater narrative significance than may appear at first glance.

Inspired by a tale told to O'Neill by his friend from the Hell Hole, Joe Smith (himself the inspiration for Joe Mott in *The Iceman Cometh*), "The Dreamy Kid" follows the destructive progression of Dreamy, a black gang leader who is being hunted down by the white police who trail him to the home of his dying grandmother, Mammy. According to Joel Pfister, the militancy that audiences in 1919 saw in Dreamy's drive was the same that 1916 audiences saw in the Sailor in "Thirst": a fear of the return of black soldiers from action in World War I (124). Apparently, not all members of the human community were going to be blended easily into the American "melting pot," and O'Neill seemed aware that an understanding of the prejudice against the transplanted Irish—those who shared his own ethnic heritage—would illuminate his understanding of the prejudice against the black immigrants from the South who were migrating north to fill lower-class job openings.

O'Neill's fight against such prejudice may have resulted from an awareness of similar cultural stereotypes shared by the Irish and black Americans:

Nineteenth-century blackface minstrel shows often lampooned the Irish as shiftless, ignorant drinkers and featured actors in blackface dancing Irish

jigs. The term “Irish nigger” originated in the antebellum South, where the Irish were employed as cheap, expendable laborers on jobs too dangerous to be undertaken by black “property.” (Pfister 123-24)

Though James Robinson affirmatively responds to the question of whether or not O’Neill traded in stereotypes in the case of “The Dreamy Kid,” he adds that the play also treats them “sympathetically as human beings, victims of society, with emotions and family ties” (61). More importantly, in “The Dreamy Kid,” black characters are raised to tragic (in O’Neill’s conception) levels, as O’Neill’s Tyrones and Melodys are, because of deterministic forces, subject to the same life-lies that give life to everyone else—at least, until the life-lie is exposed and doom follows. While some critics have lamented that naturalism precludes tragedy, middle-class tragedy, such as the type that emerged in Henrik Ibsen’s plays (one of O’Neill’s admitted literary influences) in the late nineteenth century, often depicted characters as victims of their society and environment. As in O’Neill’s other plays, the tragedy follows from what Travis Bogard calls “defeated hope” (105), with Dreamy choosing to sacrifice his freedom once he realizes that any hope for freedom is gone. In fact, Bogard also states in reference to O’Neill’s plays and Paul Green’s 1926 play, *In Abraham’s Bosom*, that they proved a black figure and an “ordinary American could. . . rise to the height of a tragic figure” (134). According to Edward Shaughnessy, “If the characters bear little responsibility for the givens of their condition (fate), as partners in relationship they fulfill the other requirements of tragedy (complicity). . . . A burden of guilt is thereby incurred, the partial cost of sin” (*Down the Nights* 153). “The Dreamy Kid” and its characters are subject to the same forces as all other O’Neill’s characters; they are “ekal,” and the rhetorical methods evidenced in stage

descriptions or “to the Negro” dialect must be subordinated to the final effect and action of the play as performed. While O’Neill may have been, as Deborah Wood Holton claims, “a victim of the narrow vision imposed by our society’s racism, sexism and segregation policies” (41), he took a step with “The Dreamy Kid” toward illuminating how such forces function in a universe that ultimately is shared by all in their eventual doom. We can see his accomplishment by studying the characters and language of the play in which nobility is masked only by dialect, though not by language.

It is important to remember that like the Sailor in “Thirst,” some of O’Neill’s early Irish characters—those who would eventually share many similar behaviors and situations with his black characters—were not recognizably Irish. Just as there is no Negro dialect in “Thirst,” there is no ostensible Irish brogue or stereotypical Irish characteristic affecting the dramatic action of “The Straw” or *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*. O’Neill thus seems to have begun his exploration of black characters by using the Sailor as a thematic device, rather than by trying to reinscribe the character’s culture with the author’s own understanding and interpretation of black people’s behavior and characteristics, particularly their language. The character’s ethnicity is not acted, but acted *upon*. In “The Dreamy Kid,” O’Neill apparently insisted upon some degree of verisimilitude that his dialect alone would be unable to convey, demanding that only black actors be hired to play the black characters, one of the first times that blacks had been cast in serious roles in the work of a major American dramatist and producing company.

In *The Plays of Eugene O’Neill*, Virginia Floyd claims that as a result of the playwright’s friendship with Joe Smith at the Hell Hole and other black friends from his

days in Greenwich Village, O'Neill was aware of stereotypical black characteristics—appearance, dialect, etc.—as well as the real inner qualities and conflicts of black people (138). In fact, Smith, who married a white woman, appears to have been partly the model for Jim Harris in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, as well as for the title character in “Honest Honey Boy,” an unfinished play (Floyd xviii). Floyd also suggests that there are two primary forces at work on Dreamy: his heritage, symbolized by his grandmother who, true to an oral African American tradition, is the guardian of the culture and heritage; and his hostile environment, symbolized by the encroaching white police force which attempts to assault the very storehouse of the dying representative of the culture. Lying underneath a red and yellow quilt—perhaps a physical embodiment of the continuation of the culture, and interestingly pre-dating the visual and similarly significant orange quilt square in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*--the dying Mammy fights a noble battle against the overwhelming force of death.

In his dramatic conflict, O'Neill appears to be very aware of DuBois' concept of double-consciousness. In speaking of the black American man, DuBois states:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. (16-17)

Dreamy seems to be the very embodiment of the idea. He has returned to the communal past represented by his grandmother and all that she represents culturally, literally looking over his shoulder to his personal and racial histories simultaneously. As he bears his “unreconciled strivings” to honor a past even while he tries to ensure a future for himself, Dreamy is caught between warring ideals represented by his conflicts with

the white world (beyond the symbolically white curtains) and the needs of his own identity in the darkened room. “I won’t leave dis room, I swar ter you!” he tells Mammy (619). And while he is still cowed by Mammy’s curse, he continues to plan for a future beyond Mammy’s sickroom: “You run roun’ and tell de gang what’s up,” he tells Irene. “Maybe dey git me outa dis, you hear?” (621)

The play opens in Mammy Saunders’ bedroom in New York City, with “ragged white curtains” and pillows against which “her black face stands out in sharp contrast” (605), suggesting that they too may be white. O’Neill is giving us clues in his description of the setting as to the cultural and physical environment of the play, a tableau reflecting O’Neill’s understanding of “double-consciousness.” Like the setting in “Thirst,” the high contrast between light and dark, black and white, functions expressionistically, making the audience aware of the theatricality, rather than the reality, of both the artistic and aural language of the play to follow. While the stylistic falsity of the play may not completely succeed at disempowering the sense of stereotype that we see in Mammy, the characters of Ceely, Dreamy and Irene are portrayed sympathetically, as victims of circumstance and society, humanized by their sincere family ties and O’Neill’s recreation of their emotional depth.

The first character on stage is Mammy, calling weakly for her granddaughter, Ceely. Embedded in the heritage of slavery in the United States, the “mammy” stereotype masks the importance of the subject’s traditional role as nurturer and domestic (White 29). What may at first seem like cultural blindness on the part of O’Neill, whose access to the marginalized culture may not have provided him a full view of its more intricate workings, may thus be understood as an awareness of how such a stereotype

may exist ironically. Mammy is an honored elder in the African and African American cultures, and she is a staple of the Plantation Tradition in literature¹. Mammy Saunders was born in slavery, as we learn from the text, and her migration to the North symbolizes an attempt to achieve higher social status, her belief that the American Dream is within her grasp. Dreamy, whose real name is the symbolically ripe Abe, becomes Mammy's means of achieving that dream, and despite his desperate circumstances, he sacrifices an opportunity for escape in order to honor his grandmother's wishes.

However, the dream is not simply an ideal, but, according to Pfister, "an idol with feet of clay" (130) that must be guarded from potential attack. The conflict between Dreamy's loyalty to the gang that hopes to protect him and his reverence for and desire to protect the dying culture-keeper serves as the psychological center of the play. However, as with O'Neill's later creation Eben Cabot (among others), Dreamy gives up dreams of existence beyond his impoverished life and accedes to the swiftly encroaching fate that awaits him when the curtain falls.

We have already seen how O'Neill used superstition as similar in function to Christianity in "Thirst" and that superstition affects white characters in his canon as well as it does black ones, in such plays as "Rope," "Where the Cross is Made," and *Desire Under the Elms*. It is a device of inclusion, a sense of supernatural or metaphysical faith shared by blacks and whites, even if that faith or spirituality may differ vastly in nature. The fact remains that no matter the source or form of spirituality, both representative ethnic groups subscribe to it. Dreamy's eventual accession to capture is no less affecting simply because he is black, just as Abbie Cabot's infanticide is no less affecting because she is white. Their wishes to protect their loved ones lead both to their respective

captures. Any claim that the portrayal of Dreamy is negative because he is black and a criminal is false, just as any such comment made of one of O'Neill's murderous white characters would be dismissed as too simple—and inaccurate—a generalization. Would Abbie be accused of being a criminal because she is white? I suggest that part of the effectiveness of and shock resulting from Abbie's infanticide derive from the fact that she is clearly not a representative of the "cult of true womanhood," a cultural categorization developed in the nineteenth century (the period in which her actions take place) that served to privilege white women over black women.

However, it is a greater challenge to find the common bonds between O'Neill's black and white characters when the black ones are masked by a pronounced dialect that seems to indicate their inferiority, since they do not employ standard white American English. In fact, critics' assumptions of O'Neill's patronizing attitudes may only mask the critics' own inability to read reality into the language of the plays¹. While the dialect may be heavy-handed and based in stereotype and minstrelsy, its use may reflect O'Neill's self-acknowledged difficulty in developing an appropriate linguistic style throughout his career:

In fact, it sometimes seems as if there are two O'Neills: the literary O'Neill, a perpetual embarrassment to literary critics who must explain how such an allegedly clumsy wordsmith could nonetheless be a world-class author; and the theatrical O'Neill, acclaimed by fellow professionals as the creator of the American theatre—a seminal influence on others and in his great plays a genius of the stage. (Moorton xviii)

Even a quick scan of O'Neill's plays indicates that it is not only black characters who suffer from his lack of skill in developing a consistently believable dialectic language. Yank, the title character in *The Hairy Ape*, is often reduced to a sometimes painful linguistic caricature: "Wanter know what I t'ink? Yuh ain't no good for no one. Yuh're de bunk. Yuh aint' got no noive, get me?" (41). In *Desire Under the Elms*, Abbie accosts Eben, saying, "If cussin' me does ye good, cuss all ye've a mind t'. I'm all prepared t' have ye agin me—at fust. I don't blame ye nuther" (150). As Joe says in "The Long Voyage Home," "Blimey if bizness ain't 'arf slow tonight. I donnow wot's 'appened" (493). Even the title of "Ile" refers not to an island, as may be suspected in the early sea play, but the pronunciation of "oil" by the Irish captain Keeney. The dialect—a standard device for heightening realism--serves as a linguistic mask, limiting itself to the indication of a character's social and geographic origin, not some qualitative difference. Since drama exists ideally in its performance rather than its written text, it's possible to qualify a response to the written words by claiming that the language is not as clumsy when spoken as it appears to be on the page. Similarly, if our study of the performative and theatrical sense of community in "Thirst" indicates that O'Neill's written script is secondary to its existence in performance, then the initially negative reaction to the heavy dialect is offset by its performance. If we can agree that dialect issues pervades O'Neill's portrayal of ethnic and class-bound characters, we can glean extra support for a theory of O'Neill's rhetoric of inclusion, rather than subordination, for his black characters.

In "The Dreamy Kid," we immediately see the kindness and the wisdom of Ceely and Mammy, even through the mask of their dialectic speech, with each trying to comfort

the other throughout the illness and impending death of the latter. Ceely, described as “*a stout woman of fifty or so with gray hair and a round, fat face*” (606), seems to fit the traditional picture of a “mammy” or “Jemima,” yet she exists in the play as a transitional figure between the historically enslaved black woman and the modern woman who respects the past (as represented by Mammy and the traditional cultural values she represents). She comforts Mammy, claiming that the doctor has told her she’ll be “up and walkin’ agin fo’ de week’s out.” Mammy, fully acting the part of the wise cultural elder, responds, “Hit ain’t no use’n you tellin’ me nothin’ but de trufe” (606). In this brief exchange, we get a sense of O’Neill’s respect for these characters as they are realized performatively, rather than as described in stage direction or through dialect. Their actions speak more loudly than their uncomfortably stereotypical dialect. Soon thereafter, Mammy expresses her desire to see Dreamy before she dies, re-energizing her own pipe dream that Dreamy will forego his disastrous lifestyle and return to her as the embodiment of the American dream his name implies. Both characters are braced by the lies to which they cling, placing them squarely in the canon of pipe-dreamers that peopled O’Neill’s all-inclusive world.

Shortly thereafter, Irene, the prostitute with a heart of gold, enters, “*a good-looking Negress, highly rouged and powdered, dressed in gaudy, cheap finery*”(607). The largely derogatory description, despite the initial “*good-looking,*” may easily be attributed to Irene’s profession, rather than her ethnicity, just as the earlier description of Mammy’s face as “*weazened*” indicates her age and social status rather than her skin color. Here, O’Neill is using the same type of descriptions employed by such black authors as Langston Hughes and Claude McKay. As McKay writes in his 1928 novel,

Home to Harlem, “She was brown, but she had tinted her leaf-like face to a ravishing chestnut” (11). Even the “but” seems to echo the rhetorical “yet” that, as we will see, causes such distress in O’Neill’s initial description of the title character in *The Emperor Jones*. In spite of the dialect and descriptions, which can be uncomfortable to the contemporary reader, O’Neill has shown in his first few pages how clearly these characters exist just as successfully—or unsuccessfully, in terms of their fates—in his universe beyond the “black” confines of this theatrically realized world, as his white characters. Even Deborah Wood Holton, who frequently takes O’Neill to task for some of his ethnic portrayals, asserts that Irene could be of any nationality—read as ethnicity—because O’Neill ascribes to her no distinguishing cultural characteristics except for the masking dialect (3). Irene is the outsider in this family and thus acts as connector to the outside world and possibly the only hope of Dreamy’s ultimate physical survival after his return. Her belief that Dreamy will follow her to safety is her pipe dream, her hope that his love for her is stronger than his affinity for the emblem of his cultural heritage. However, Dreamy ultimately chooses connection to his past rather than safety in the white world.

In the play O’Neill relies on the use of the word “nigger” because he is aware of its rhetorical power¹. In fact, only Ceely and Irene use the word, and they both use it similarly: to disempower the people they refer to in their name-calling, primarily each other. Irene uses it first, when Ceely approaches her threateningly to throw her out of the apartment. Its negative connotation, even at that time, was clearly understood by O’Neill. Even in his tirade against black actor Charles Gilpin (to be discussed in the following chapter), he avoided using the word in correspondence. However he allowed

his characters to use it when they needed its ability to disempower their adversaries. “Stop dat talkin’ to me, nigger, or I’ll split yo’ fool head!” Irene cries, as Ceely approaches threateningly (607-08). After being rebuffed, she resorts to using it again, countering Ceely’s claims that Mammy’s prayers may have affected Dreamy’s safekeeping: “You hopes so, you fool nigger” (609). Ceely’s use of the word results from her “lamenting” of Dreamy’s situation and adherents: “I knowed with all his carryin’-s-on wid dat passel er tough young niggers....” (609). By referring to them as “niggers,” she places herself in a socially and culturally superior position. In this sense, it is a term that designates a social, rather than an ethnic, population, as the ethnic reference is assumed rather than specified. Of course, there is no denying that the word would be used by whites to refer only to blacks at that time, but O’Neill clearly sees a function for the word and its use within that culture as connotatively powerful. In fact, it is his characters’ use of the word that renders it realistic, as reflected even in contemporary black American culture.

When Dreamy arrives, he is described as “*a well-built, good-looking young Negro, light in color*” (610). While Dreamy’s “light” color may be stretched to suggest that O’Neill may have designated only “whiter” black people as good-looking¹—a cultural issue raised within Wallace Thurman’s satirical treatment of black-on-black color preference in *The Blacker the Berry* (1929)—it is also important to remember that with his lighter color, Dreamy functions more thematically as a connection between the Africanic origins of Mammy and the corrupting influence of white America. Written in 1919, the play and character can easily be seen as precursors to *Native Son* (1940) and its similarly entrapped Bigger Thomas, although Dreamy no longer has the ability to pass safely, if

stealthily, through the outside urban jungle. Both Dreamy and Bigger are trapped by the outside white world, as represented in the white—and Irish—police of Dreamy’s New York, or the white snowscape of Bigger’s Chicago. The strong thematic material in Wright’s masterful novel is similar to powerful themes in O’Neill’s earlier, if lesser, work. Both protagonists flee for similar reasons: Bigger accidentally smothers the drunken Mary Dalton as a result of panic brought on by the threat of the white world. Dreamy also claims to have been responding to, rather than instigating, a dangerous situation with a white person. “Twarn’t my doin’ nohow,” he tells Ceely. “ He was de one lookin’ for trouble. I wasn’t seekin’ for no mess id him dat I could help. But he told folks he was gwine ter git me for a fac’, and dat fo’ced my hand. I had ter git him ter pertect my own life” (611). Interestingly, we can never be sure of just what happened between Dreamy and the white man. He may be more innocent or more guilty than he claims. However, his part in the crime is masked by his evasive language and incomplete story. Just as he returns home to protect Mammy (and what she represents thematically), he kills as a means of his own self-preservation. In fact, Dreamy (like Bigger) symbolizes the tragic waste of young black American urban men who live and die in a world where the values that Mammy represents no longer maintain the power they once had. The men suffer the indignities of a world in which financial gain supercedes morality. Such an overlay of thematic development strongly supports O’Neill’s significant success in representing DuBois’ double-consciousness. Dreamy is torn between duty to his past and efforts to survive in the present, exemplifying DuBois’ “two warring ideals in one dark body” even as he tries to reconcile both into a “better and truer self.”

Contrary to Peter J. Gillette's claim that "The Dreamy Kid" contains "nothing about race and superstition" (117), I argue that O'Neill includes many references to both. His use of superstition is particularly interesting in this play, as it develops earlier ideas from "Thirst," such as the link between the Sailor's chants to the sharks and the white characters' appeals to a Christian God. According to Virginia Floyd, "For O'Neill the quest for the meaning of life, of existence, proves to be religious in nature" (*A New Assessment* 6). Indeed, O'Neill himself has claimed, in oft-quoted words, "I am interested only in the relation between man and God" (*Down the Nights* 6). Therefore, it is necessary to see how faith informs "The Dreamy Kid" to see if it, too, functions as it does throughout O'Neill's other plays.

Mammy's Christian faith clearly remains strong throughout her decline and death. In the course of the twenty pages of the play, Mammy invokes, in some variation, the name of God or Jesus almost twenty times. Clearly, O'Neill's rhetorical inclusion of God as an inherent part of Mammy's life and desires is made very obvious, while a comparatively small number of references to God by Dreamy himself—only five, and mostly used as expletives rather than as requests for divine intervention—indicates the split between him and his grandmother. In fact, his perfunctory invocation of God is merely through cursing until he apparently loses all his reason. Only then does he call upon the Lord. However, the sincerity of his belief must be questioned, since O'Neill shows Dreamy using such invocations as mere expletive throughout most of the play. Christianity—at least Dreamy's conception of it—is undermined by the ambivalence in his reliance upon it. "Dey don't git de Dreamy! Not while he's 'live! Lawd Jesus, no suh!" he cries at the end, refusing to accept the impending reality of his certain capture.

While his grandmother's presence will remain with him through her infirmity, so will her embodiment of Christian faith. Accepting his reality would lead to a death sentence, of course, which is what the audience must assume inevitably occurs. He is living in fantasy, as all O'Neill's pipe-dreamers must. In fact, he does not even believe Mammy's claim that she is dying, ironically countering the very source of wisdom that he has come home to in order to find safety. While he rejects the faith that could provide him some comfort, he chooses instead to believe in the one that promises certain doom. "Yo don' never git no bit er luck in dis worril ary agin, yo' leaves her now. Der perlice gon' kotch yo' shua," Ceely claims (612), and is immediately echoed by Dreamy's own superstitious thoughts: "Dreamy, you gotter make good wid old Mammy no matter what come—or you don' never git a bit of luck in yo' life no mo" (613). With Ceely already established as a transitional figure between the past and present generations, Dreamy's repetition of her thoughts links his belief system directly to hers, providing a sort of spiritual parity that functions as a life-lie to sustain them both. Later, when Mammy tells Dreamy, "If yo' leave me now, yo' ain't gwine git no bit er luck s'long's you' lives, I tells yo' dat!" (619), the family circle—or trinity—is complete. Christianity and superstition are inextricably linked in Mammy's Christian faith, her reliance on superstition in cursing Dreamy, and Dreamy's ambivalence in his own faith.

While some critics may denigrate the superstition that marks the lives of O'Neill's black characters—Shaughnessy calls it "naïve superstition" ("Portraiture" 88)—it is clear that both Christianity and superstition are equally useless in fending off the eventual doom all people must suffer in O'Neill's universe beneath "the angry eye of God." In later research, Shaughnessy even seems to contradict his earlier claims that superstition is

somehow inferior to traditional Judeo-Christian faith: “Perhaps O’Neill’s commitment to a particular theological explanation—Calvinist, Catholic, whatever—is not the point” (*Down the Nights* 91). Shaughnessy appears to be questioning how it was possible for the playwright to speak of sin and redemption after the explicit denial of his own faith (in *The Iceman Cometh*) (2). Esther Jackson claims that O’Neill was always engaged in an effort to verify the existence of an eternal principal in human experience, though the primary motive of his playwriting career may have been theological in nature (252-53). If God or gods will not intervene on humanity’s behalf, humanity will succumb. It is this sort of irreligiosity that allows O’Neill’s fate or “Force behind” to exist separately and objectively from humanity. This objectivity allows for the connection between Christianity and superstition, each equally non-functional. They are both *objective* realities and therefore “ekal.” In O’Neill’s own words:

And just here is where I am a most confirmed mystic, too, for I’m always, always trying to interpret Life in terms of lives, never 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)—and of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. (Bogard and Bryer 195)

By placing superstition alongside Christianity as an equally legitimate basis for his characters’ worldviews, O’Neill succeeds in rhetorically linking the characters in

“The Dreamy Kid” to such later—and white—incarnations as the Catholic Tyrones, the Calvinist Mannons and Cabots, and even the faithless denizens of Harry Hope’s.

However, O’Neill’s language of inclusion is not limited to religious references. Other uses of language link Mammy’s lost brood to O’Neill’s other lost souls. Ironically, it is a promise—the spoken word—that leads Dreamy to his own capture. When Mammy asks him to promise that he’ll stay by her side until she dies, he responds with the words that seal his fate: “ ‘Deed I will, Mammy, ‘deed I will” (614). That he speaks them “uneasily” indicates that Dreamy is aware of the damning power of the words themselves, while it is those words that bring comfort to his grandmother, who subsequently “*closes her eyes with a sigh of relief—calmly,*” whereupon she “*settles herself comfortably in the bed as if preparing for sleep*” (614).

The power of O’Neill’s oft-criticized use of language should not be underestimated, for we have seen how, for example, speaking itself provided comfort to the raft’s occupants in “Thirst.” In “The Dreamy Kid,” Mammy seems to echo the words of the two white survivors: “I gotter talk, chile....w’en I talks wid yo’ I ain’t skeered a bit” (615). It is the power of language itself that aids in her comfort. To Mammy, language is reassuring, but later, we again see the opposite side, as Dreamy chides her to “Stop dat racket....You bring all o’ dem down on my head” (619).

Language and the Life-Lie

In its ambivalent portrayal as both threatening and comforting, language is neither inherently good nor bad, O’Neill seems to be saying. While he had great difficulty in molding language into a satisfying dramatic tool throughout his life, it served as the basis

of his existence and success as playwright. His portrayal of language as inherently ambivalent also may function as a caution to critics who chastise him for his failure to develop a believable language (at least early in his career): don't pay attention to the words themselves, but pay attention to what they both mask and reveal. In "The Dreamy Kid" in particular, the Negro dialect may at first appear to signify a writer insensitive to the reality of the ethnic population whose lives he hoped to bring to the attention of a greater audience. But in going "behind language"—behind the signifiers to the signified—as Nina Leeds describes in *Strange Interlude*, O'Neill succeeds in creating some of the first sensitively realized black characters in American drama. As Abbie Cabot urges Eben to flee his fate as a result of her crime, Dreamy urges Irene to leave the apartment before she shares his fate. As Mary Tyrone wanders deliriously in her wedding gown, Mammy wanders dreamily in her past. Both cling to their life-lies, the reality of the respective pasts they have molded into the falseness of the present. If the characters in these and other plays bear little of the onus for succumbing to their fates, they all fail each other, as they must in a world in which everyone is eventually doomed, where, according to Horst Frenz, they attempt to break free of the past through an action in which love and death merge (48).

If the plays involving black characters (and for O'Neill, at least, black actors) have bred a variety of controversial, and even contradictory, claims about O'Neill's success or failure in trying to overcome a subconscious, socialized or institutionalized racism, the dreams the characters vocalize constitute a saving grace, a means by which they may escape to find their proper place in the world they inhabit. They may be victimized by their dreams or life-lies, but it is important to remember the words of

Shakespeare's Julius Caesar that James Tyrone quotes in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*: "The fault dear Brutus is not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underlings." As we have seen in our examination of "Thirst" and "The Dreamy Kid," O'Neill's black characters are condemned to live out a prophecy of doom brought on by their own actions and a combination of forces that are, according to them, beyond their control. If we concede that determinism is a given in this universe, then O'Neill has succeeded in enhancing the image of his black characters by allowing them to experience the same doom at the hands of those deterministic forces as do his white characters. By peeling away the mask of language and seeing the dialect as indicator rather than determinant, we can see that his black characters must grapple less with matters of "race"—and in their own voices rather than in the voice of minstrelsy—than with the more pervasive O'Neillian question of how to survive. O'Neill recognized that there was a black voice that cried out to be heard, and that the voice was different only in its form, not in its content, from that of other victims in his dramatic universe. As we will see, *The Emperor Jones*, one of O'Neill's most significant achievements, achieves its power not just as a result of his efforts to recreate a black dialect, but to delineate common human experience.

Note

¹ The Plantation Tradition was a sentimental treatment of Southern plantation life that exerted a pervasive influence on popular literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of the typical characteristics of literature in this tradition include: a setting in a large white Southern Mansion; the old planter, who is often also a colonel or general; the virginal daughter of the planter; the black butler, who serves as a link between house and quarters and is loyal to master; and the old mammy, who may

also be the cook and who is warmer than the butler but also expressing a complete devotion to the well-being of the planter and his family. (Revell 32).

² According to Henry Louis Gates, the dialect (or black vernacular) are “coded dictionaries of black tropes” (63) that demanded “realism” to refute the stereotyped black speech often created by white writers (176).

³ In *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, Randall Kennedy states that condemning white people who use “the N-word” without regard to context is simply to make a fetish of the word “nigger.” He adds that O’Neill and other white writers “have unveiled *nigger*-as-insult in order to dramatize and condemn racism’s baleful presence” (52).

⁴ While hardly monolithic, there is a continuing sense in many black communities that light-skinned black people have somehow “improved” their station. According to the writers of *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans*, one hypothesis is that black people still perceive white people as superior and marry (and have children with) them “to elevate their own status or as proof of their success,” though another theory holds that “powerful people are simply attracted to each other and that high-profile Blacks have few opportunities to marry other high-status Blacks” (117).

Chapter Three

“Keep yo’ hands whar dey b’long, white man.”

Brutus Jones, *The Emperor Jones*

According to Virginia Floyd, Eugene O’Neill’s working notebooks refute charges that O’Neill failed to address the pressing social problems of his day: “Ever mindful of the prejudiced attitude of wealthy Yankee New Londoners toward his own Irish family, he planned to write a number of plays depicting discrimination, particularly against non-whites” (*O’Neill at Work* xviii). His first play with a black protagonist—“The Dreamy Kid”—deals in part with the black man’s victimization by a specifically white America. His second play with such a protagonist, *The Emperor Jones*, paints a picture of the American heritage of racism with a broader brush. It places Jones at the mercy of his own personal psychology, the collective unconscious of his own ethnic heritage, and the quantitatively larger scope of the pervasive American capitalist spirit that energizes his efforts to succeed in his unstable island kingdom. Unfortunately for Brutus Jones, the opportunity to view his own plight in a theoretical context is denied. He is too concerned with the immediate need to escape the threat to his physical existence. However, he cannot escape the deterministic force of ethnic prejudice, either outwardly or inwardly

applied, that will clash with the American dream of financial success and lead him down the garden path and into his deadly, inescapable jungle.

Eugene O’Neill was familiar with the profound effects of ethnic prejudice. Unable to disregard the bigotry among the New London Yankees toward his own Irish family roots, O’Neill understood the degradation and marginalization often pressed upon ostracized cultural groups. O’Neill’s friendship with Joe Smith, the gambler with whom he often shared lodgings at the Hell Hole in 1915, illustrates the playwright’s keen awareness of the insidious nature of bigotry and the close relationships he established with the black community during his days in Greenwich Village. Smith would serve as a partial basis for several future O’Neill characters, including the complex Joe Mott in *The Iceman Cometh*. Almost uncannily foreshadowing the attitudes of Hickey in that play, O’Neill tried to afford Smith the moral support to work his way out of his despair: “Buck up, Joe!” he told Smith. “You’re not going to confess the game has licked you, are you? That isn’t like you! Get a new grip on yourself and you can knock it dead yet!” (*O’Neill at Work* 176). Clearly, O’Neill felt a personal connection to his down-and-out comrade.

Smith was also the basis for “the Negro gambler” who was the subject of O’Neill’s never-completed play, “Honest Honey Boy,” begun in 1921. The playwright’s italicized notes for another play further indicate his knowledge of the insidious nature of prejudice against black people. In his first recorded notes for *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* in 1922, O’Neill reveals that the germ of the play originated in his own knowledge of black life: “Play of Johnny T.—base play on his experience *as I have seen it intimately*” (*O’Neill at Work* 176). As we will see in the next chapter, the black protagonist is undone by bigotry, his intelligence and self-esteem are ravaged, and he is

reduced to accepting his own incompetence by the machinations of his white wife and by the dominant white culture that ultimately overwhelms him.

Further evidence of the playwright's sensitivity toward and experience with marginalized ethnic groups lies in the unproduced play, "Bantu Boy." Between 1927 and 1934, O'Neill worked sporadically on the play, in which a noble African chief is stolen from his homeland, brought to the United States as a slave and eventually proves the superior of his white oppressors. To O'Neill, the play would encapsulate black peoples' "whole experience in modern times—especially in regard to America" (*A New Assessment* 181). That the chief/slave in the play proves to exceed the nobility and humanity exhibited by his white captors is significant, especially in regard to many critics' responses to *The Emperor Jones* and O'Neill's allegedly pejorative atavism of black peoples. One might criticize the troubling diminution of characters in their titular nomenclature—"Honest Honey Boy," "The Dreamy Kid," "Bantu Boy"—but while there is little support to the supposition that the play about the chief may have been written to appease such critics, it is possible to see that even a cursory glance at the scope of the aforementioned plays indicates that O'Neill was familiar with and concerned with the plight of black people in America beyond their perceived diminished manhood. The plays provide the basis for the characters' manhood that the titles avoid. However, even his "intimate" familiarity with their experience was necessarily and unavoidably limited.

African and Irish Americans

The effects of ethnic prejudice led to the common doom that pervades the canon of O'Neill's plays, whether applied to people and characters of African descent or those of his own Irish background, or any other, for that matter. According to Edward L. Shaughnessy, O'Neill's *African and Irish Americans* are faithfully realistic in portrayal, though representing as they do the effects of determinism, with fidelity to nuance revealing the characters' deeper natures. O'Neill was therefore willing to incur doubts about his own sympathies, especially in his powerful depictions of Brutus Jones and Jim Harris ("faithful realism" 161). Without necessarily contradicting Shaughnessy, I suggest that while O'Neill is keenly aware of the isolated effects of such deterministic forces as ethnic intolerance, economics and religion, his characters—whether black or white—are perhaps more notably victims of a larger fatalistic force. Regardless of the structural reliance on chance—or fate—his plays centered on ethnic "others" focus less on their ethnicity per se than on the more pressing challenge of determining what it means to be part of the human race. With this deeper human commonality revealed, O'Neill was able to afford his ethnic characters greater equality, at least in their ultimate shared doom. In providing this equality, O'Neill simultaneously enhanced the image and deepened the complexity of all of his marginalized characters in the face of their inevitable naturalistic despair.

As Shaughnessy also claims, not even Shakespeare was exempt from resorting to stereotype in every instance: "[O'Neill], in his early depictions of Irish Americans, worked too often from a paint-by-the-numbers kit" ("faithful realism" 154). Indeed, it is just such a supposition that I hope to use in an effort to illustrate that O'Neill was no

more pointedly damning his black characters to sociocultural inferiority than he was his own Irish people. And just as O'Neill progressed from those early, potentially pejorative representations of the Irish, so did he progress in developing ever deeper characterizations for his significant black characters, with *The Emperor Jones* as perhaps the single most significant of the steps along the way. Without completely dismissing the claims of critics who challenge O'Neill's racial sympathies, I hope to illustrate how a close examination of his plays that depend on significant black characters supports a valid critical claim of the success of his achievement even as it supports his claims of a common humanity in which "there are no good people or bad people, just people" (Gelb 487).

To understand O'Neill's literary treatment of his Celtic kin is to understand how he developed a sympathy for other ethnic minorities in the United States, and indeed for the whole "misbegotten lot" of humanity. O'Neill admired the wit and storytelling gifts that were acceded to the Irish at the time. O'Neill's own father, James, combined both the positive and negative influences of his Hibernian heritage, and the simultaneously sympathetic and savage portrayal of the elder O'Neill in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (and the less obviously biographical treatment of Cornelius Melody in *A Touch of the Poet*) testifies to the playwright's insight. Similarly, he was familiar with the dark nature of those who were driven from their Irish homeland by hunger or oppression, just as he understood their predilection to seek solace from their despair in alcohol. On the subject of his Elizabethan-age ancestor Hugh O'Neill, the playwright wrote that Hugh (as depicted in *The Great O'Neill* by Sean O'Faolain) is "fascinatingly complicated" and that Shakespeare himself "might have written a play about him" (Bogard and Bryer 545).

The subsequent irony in the latter-day O'Neill's work is that the playwright, especially in drafting his early Irish characters, refused to tone down the portrayal of some of their stereotyped behaviors: their pride, their melancholy, their humor and their reliance on liquor. According to Shaughnessy, O'Neill's portrayals often earned him resentment from his Irish contemporaries, especially in his early plays. Apparently, O'Neill's refusal to reject ethnic stereotypes does not imply a subsequent avoidance of such perceived types, as some stereotypes are indeed based, however tentatively, in reality. It might be assumed that some of those who criticized O'Neill for being anti-Irish were unable to recognize that his fidelity to the actual and often negative portrayals of his own people was more a form of tribute than of shame, that for O'Neill it was "the highest act of love" (Shannon 264) and represented at least general tendencies within the community of his own people.

If it is true that "Irishness" is one of O'Neill's primary theatrical subjects, then such portrayals, though sometimes perceived as stereotypes, add a sense of authority to all of his characterizations, since O'Neill spoke with "considerable authority" about the Irish ("African and Irish-Americans" 154). Joel Pfister quotes one reviewer of *A Moon for the Misbegotten* in 1947, highlighting O'Neill's reliance on the melodramatic Irishman of legend: "[His] characters . . . are actually dark, eerie, Celtic symbol-folk. . . who beat their breasts at the agony of living, battle titanically and drink like Nordic gods, but are finally seen to wear the garb of sainthood and die for love" (17).

As these Irish characters can be understood as figureheads, so too can Brutus Jones be understood—and appreciated—not only as a character, but also as a symbol. One clear point supporting such a claim can be found in examining Brutus Jones as a

symbol not of black manhood, but as the doomed agent of capitalism, for example, that played a significant role in his incarceration and eventual desperate grasp for power.

While Jones' faux-royal garb may seem ostentatious, it serves a purpose that Jones himself boasts of to Smithers: "Sho'! De fuss and glory part of it, dat's only to turn de heads o'de low-flung bush niggers dat's here. Dey wants de big circus show for deir money. I gives it to 'em an' gits de money" (7). In fact, his embracing of a capitalist ethic is impressive. "From stowaway to Emperor in two years," he boasts to Smithers. "Dat's goin' some!" (7). He continues, bragging about how to work the system: "And when I gits a chance to use it I wind up as Emperor in two years" (8).

Similarly, Con Melody in *A Touch of the Poet* appears to be on the make, though his initial success is decidedly less spectacular than Jones'. Adorned in his own military uniform (which will also be worse for the wear by the end of the play, as is Jones'), preening before a mirror, Melody is, at base, the son of an Irishman who "got rich by moneylendin' and squeezin' tenants and every manner of trick" (185). As Jones was spurned by white society in the states, Melody is spurned by the New England Yankees, much as O'Neill himself was. As Jones differentiates between himself and "a common nigger" (15), Melody describes the Irish population around his home with their "damned peasant's brogue" (201) and later refers to his Irish comrades as "scum" (237). The connections between Jones as early black manifestation and Melody as late Irish manifestation of the pretender to the American capitalist ethic suggest that if O'Neill's Irish characters can isolate themselves from their stereotypes, then so can their African counterparts.

It is important to note that O'Neill, as discussed above, refused to sentimentalize Irish Americans, rendering portrayals of Celtic immigrants at least as derogatory as many of those by anti-Irish writers ("faithful realism" 154). One of the most extreme examples takes place early in *The Hairy Ape*, when the stokers ask Paddy to sing "that whisky song." As O'Neill's stage directions indicate, "*They all turn to an old, wizened Irishman who is dozing, very drunk, on the benches forward. His face is extremely monkey-like with all the sad, patient pathos of that animal in his small eyes*" (37). Perhaps not so coincidentally, Jones' pursuer, Lem is likewise described as being "*ape-faced*" (30). In this parallel description, O'Neill seems to level his field of play, sparing his own people none of the potentially negative connotations he imposes on others. Mat Burke in *Anna Christie* is a particularly clear example of O'Neill's reliance on preconceived images of the Irish: he is a braggart, a heavy drinker, a brawler, and in the words of Margaret Loftus Ranald, "a virgin-idolator" ("From trial" 156). In thus fashioning Burke, O'Neill sets up his rhetorical recreation of equality for everyone under a fatalistic determinism. While some of the uncomfortable language in *The Emperor Jones* may paint O'Neill to today's reader as insensitive, the portrait he developed in that play was a vital step in his quest to embrace all humanity and spare no one the consequent benefits or penalties. A comparison of Brutus Jones and Cornelius Melody illustrates the parity of O'Neill's aesthetic.

To begin, each of the protagonists inhabits a contrived social class. For Jones, it is his self-embodied sense of royalty, derived from his ability to bamboozle the islanders; for Melody, it is his status as a gentleman descended from landed Irish aristocracy and his ability to separate himself from the local Irish immigrants. Both Jones and Melody have

a vested interest in keeping their exclusive and privileged social positions. Both men's privileges come at the expense of their own ethnic groups: Jones subjugates the local black population, and Melody imposes domestic and servile chores on his wife and daughter even as he derides his countrymen. It is just such a protected position that must be criticized, for it is ossifying and hinders the existential choices of the characters involved (Dubost 87): Nora's responsibility for Con's unchecked bravado; Sara's sneering intolerance of her father's behaviors; and Con's own responsibility for his failure with the inn and his life. O'Neill's theatrical recreation of their stories provides a critique of their behaviors. Both are essentially tricked and returned to their earlier ethnic selves by the very people whom they choose to scorn. While such a return marks the physical death of Brutus Jones, it leads to psychic death for Con Melody. "Dead as a 'erring!" Smith crows in recognition of Jones' demise. "Where's yer 'igh an' mighty airs now, yer bloomin' Majesty?" (32). Similarly, Con's daughter Sara derides her father, exclaiming, "May the hero of Talavera rest in peace!" when Melody sheds his pretense, claiming of himself, "But he's dead now, and his last bit av lyin' pride is murdered and stinkin'" (273). With the undermining of each character's hubris, they both succumb. They come face-to-face with their existential selves at their respective crisis points and both fail to overcome the crises. While this admittedly limited comparison may be inadequate to establish any sense of absolute equality—there is also admittedly a qualitative difference between the two forms of death—it does illuminate the commonality of the process itself. Masked by variant characterizations, the looming destruction pervades both characters' psychic journeys and allows them to inhabit a context in which they have forsaken their established and illusory roles.

For example, Melody repeatedly finds himself drawn to his own reflection in the tavern mirror: “*as in the two preceding acts, the mirror attracts him, and as he moves from the bar door to stand before it he assumes his arrogant, Byronic pose again. He repeats in each detail his pantomime before the mirror. He speaks proudly*” (244). As for Jones, he is “*shrewd, suspicious, evasive. He wears a light blue uniform coat, sprayed with brass buttons, heavy gold chevrons on his shoulders, gold braid on the collar, cuffs, etc. . . .yet there is something not altogether ridiculous about his grandeur. He has a way of carrying it off*” (5). Each man in his regalia, either that of His Majesty’s Seventh Dragoons or of the self-styled Emperor of a Caribbean isle, evinces the same type of mask that will be similarly stripped away to reveal the atavistic descent and eventual destruction of each man.

Such a descent can be as clearly seen in O’Neill’s other atavistic Irish clan, the Hogans of *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. The burly, non-nonsense Josie and her swaggering, disenfranchised father Phil hew close to the rocky, difficult soil, masking the poverty of their meager, subsistence-level existence with bravado and wit. If it is true that the Melodys and the Hogans are both products of the dehumanizing capitalistic ideal that victimized the Irish (and others) in America, then the same can be said of Brutus Jones and other black characters such as Dreamy, Jim Harris and Joe Mott, who illustrate the results of the African diaspora. They are all victims of a promise unfulfilled, a dream deferred. “I stood/Among thim, but not av thim,” Melody quotes Lord Byron (277), almost eerily recalling Jones’ own self-perception. Is either man, in his ruined regalia and ultimately disempowering illusion, more or less tragic? “What I was den is one thing,” Jones brags to Smithers. “What I is now’s another” (6).

In addition, O'Neill's notes for the unproduced "Bantu Boy" indicate a similar idea played out in theory before its realization in *A Touch of the Poet*. His original plan shows that the warrior king in the unfinished play has an ambitious daughter who is ashamed of her father. This schema foreshadows the antipathy between Con Melody and his daughter Sara. Here is yet another parallel between the experiences of white and black characters and their possibly interchangeable dramatic motivations. It is also important to remember that O'Neill included black people in his vision of this country's history. "Bantu Boy," for example, takes place from the 1840s to the Civil War postbellum period. By actively (and retroactively) including the participants of the African diaspora as part of American history and by describing the results of displacement and attempts at empowerment, O'Neill appeared to be trying to debunk ethnic prejudice as one of the "life-lies" of the United States.

O'Neill and the Culture of Capitalism

Another significant link between *The Emperor Jones* and other plays of O'Neill's canon is the playwright's critique of the American capitalist ethic that spurred the slave trade, eventually justifying it by creating negative stereotypes of black bestiality and inferiority. These stereotypes would continue to influence the country's polarized beliefs beyond the final shot of the Civil War. As Frederick Douglass claimed in his self-reflexive narrative, "I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder" (60). For O'Neill, the sentiment may be summed up in the words of the protagonist in "Bantu Boy": "Freedom is God's white man" (*O'Neill at Work* xviii). In fact, O'Neill's echoing of Douglass may further support claims for

O'Neill's achievement in developing and understanding the black characters that he was portraying on stage. That Brutus Jones shared in the capitalist dream with dozens of O'Neill's other pipe-dreamers further limns the line of equality drawn by the playwright. An understanding of O'Neill's own experience and perception of American capitalism will help to foreground our understanding of how he equalizes his characters as hapless in the face of the system and fate. Like the characters in his larger, naturalistic universe, Americans of every stripe are victimized by deterministic forces. According to Henry Schwarz, "the goal of success in America is to 'become American,' negating one's particular personal history in the drive to approximate...[the] 'typical American'" (9). Such is the goal of Brutus Jones, for whom one of those deterministic forces may be just such a negation of his own history.

The exploitation of the individual worker and the unequal distribution of wealth in the late nineteenth century were, for O'Neill, the unavoidable products of unchecked capitalism. During the early years of O'Neill's career as dramatist, from the early 1910s and into the 1920s, he saw the utopian goals of anarchism as a possible answer to the dangerous consequences of unchecked capitalism. Among his many friends at the Hell Hole were Terry Carlin and Hippolyte Havel, both of whom were widely recognized for their anarchist sympathies. Another friend, Saxe Commins, was a nephew of the noted anarchist Emma Goldman. In addition, O'Neill established close ties to anarchists who were connected to Goldman, such as Terry Carlin, who spent much time with the playwright in Provincetown and later in Greenwich Village. In fact it was Carlin who was the model for Larry Slade, the disillusioned anarchist in *The Iceman Cometh*. O'Neill's artistic recreations of his boyhood showed him espousing anarchist sentiments

critical of America. In *Ah, Wilderness!* the autobiographical character of Richard Miller challenges his father:

The land of the free and the home of the brave! Home of the slave is what they ought to call it—the wage slave ground under the heel of the capitalist class, starving, crying for bread for his children, and all he gets is a stone. . . .No, you can celebrate your Fourth of July. I'll celebrate the day the people bring out the guillotine again and I see Pierpont Morgan being driven in by a tumbri! (13)

The young Miller's comically exaggerated but still effectively barbed comments illuminate the playwright's early politics. Another autobiographical character—Edmund Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*—espouses a similar philosophy. “It's all a frame-up,” he tells his brother. “We're all fall guys and suckers and we can't beat the game” (758). Later, he confides that it is Tyrone's capitalist obsession with making money that led to the family's problems, calling his father a “stinking old miser” (806). Simultaneously with his initial popular success, O'Neill no longer publicly acknowledged such a radical political view, but in a 1939 letter to Bennett Cerf, he reiterated his early philosophy: “anyone who expects anything of governments these days except colossal suicidal stupidity seems to me a moron of optimism. Tell Saxe I am rapidly becoming reconverted to a sterling Anarchism!” (*O'Neill at Work* xix) And according to Virginia Floyd, O'Neill referred to himself as a “philosophical anarchist” as late as 1946, at his last press conference during rehearsals for *The Iceman Cometh* (xx). Such a clear anti-capitalist philosophy may lead to a logical conclusion that, for O'Neill, any capitalist symbol—James Tyrone, Con Melody, Simon Harford, Brutus Jones, among others—could easily become fair game for criticism, not as a result of the character's ethnic

background, but rather for his adherence to the dehumanizing effects of the national economic identity. If Jones is often seen as a vainglorious despot concerned only with his own survival, it is likely that his behavior is not a comment on his ethnicity but on his social and political inheritance. He is a product of the imperialism that O'Neill abhorred.

Further examples of O'Neill's social conscience can be found in his notes for another never-completed play, "Blind Alley Guy." Begun in December of 1940, its main character is a gangster named, symbolically and ironically enough, Walter White. While the character is white, he is also the namesake of O'Neill's acquaintance Walter White, then head of the NAACP (who was light-skinned and blue-eyed). Unlike the sympathetic gang member Dreamy, White is deliberately drawn to embody characteristics of the threatening Adolf Hitler: anti-Semitism and an "inability to feel—hatred for Christ" (*O'Neill at Work* xx). In this instance, "White" is symbolic of the ultimate evil—Hitler—and the most dangerous threat to human freedom in modern times. Clearly, in making White the ultimate villain, O'Neill seemed to be suggesting that he was as able to perceive evil in people of all ethnicities, as he was able to perceive the equality of all peoples.

O'Neill criticizes the thirst for individual, material gain and power throughout his career. *Marco Millions* is a clear example of the destruction resulting from a selfish pursuit of power. O'Neill's attempt to expose the truth about Marco Polo illuminates the danger inherent in materialism. O'Neill attempted to demonstrate the same ideas in an earlier play about Juan Ponce de Leon, entitled "The Fountain," in which Ponce de Leon traces his route to his psychological and cultural origins, as represented by the fountain of

youth. Like Jones' island jungle, Ponce de Leon's source of power lies in a natural, primordial setting. Brutus Jones also travels back to discover his own life-giving origins in the form of his ethnic heritage. However, when he chooses to deny that heritage in his final invoking of the Christian "Lawd Jesus," he is denying the primacy of that source. In denying the truth—succumbing to the capitalist, white, Christian American pipe dream—he seals his own fate. It is important also to note that the title character of "Bantu Boy" does not make the same mistake made by Jones. In the play, he cannot accept an all-white Christ, so he rebels against Christianity. Eventually, he dies in the wilds, but he experiences a vision in which he sees the spirit of Africa and its black God telling him that the continent belongs to him and his people, that white peoples' efforts to colonize it are illusory, and that white people will meet their own ruin in trying to co-opt the original inhabitants and lead them into industrial slavery. In this uncompleted play, O'Neill not only echoes escaped slave Frederick Douglass in his claim that he hates the "corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land" (120), as well as similar views of many people at the time, but he also seems to recognize Marcus Garvey's call for a return to Africa in the title character's own claiming of his motherland. It is perhaps not coincidental that Garvey was also a recognized influence in the development of the character of Brutus Jones (a matter I will discuss later).

O'Neill also criticizes the pre-capitalism that justified slavery and lent to the feudalism of the slave South. It is no wonder, then, that a character such as Brutus Jones, an archetypal capitalist on the make, fails in his quest, regardless of his ethnicity. It seems as if critics have largely ignored the importance of the ethnic character's historical

and political experience, choosing to emphasize cultural stereotyping rather than the equally valid economic and politically historic influences which enable the characters to be seen as individuals, rather than strictly as members of a certain ethnic group.

The two history plays (though such a term obviates the dramatic license taken with the subject matter) about Polo and Ponce de Leon also mirror *The Emperor Jones* in their structural and thematic concerns. Each is a picaresque tale centering on the journey of a European hero into exotic, alien locales and analogizes the spiritual quest of the protagonists in physical terms. The same can be said, though in less specific terms, of other O'Neill plays, such as *The Hairy Ape* and *Lazarus Laughed*, with each protagonist searching for his place in alien, or at least threatening, environments. Even in construction, O'Neill validates the journey of Brutus Jones by fashioning it as an extended dramatic picaresque narrative similar to his stories about significant white figures, historical or otherwise.

In writing about *The Hairy Ape*, for example, O'Neill noted that the play was not about labor conditions or politics, but rather "about Man, the state we are all in of frustrated bewilderment" (Bogard and Bryer 522). The state of "frustrated bewilderment" is perhaps the exact state that Brutus Jones is in, and it's a state that O'Neill is saying we are trapped within. Here his comment is a perfect example that illustrates, despite the playwright's trouble with language and the inescapable cultural discourse of black primitivism that many blacks as well as whites subscribed to during the decade of the 1920, his dedication to universal inclusion.

It is possible that two of O'Neill's favorite authors may have helped contribute to the development of Jones' status as a universal avatar, beyond the general concept of

reversion that was popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Travis Bogard, the recollection of Jack London's "Buck" in *The Call of the Wild* may have suggested the racial atavism that plagues Jones at the end of his life (Bogard 135). Furthermore, he suggests that another influence may have been Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in its depiction of man's victimization by the primeval darkness of the African jungle. As the British represented a depraved sense of capitalistic exploitation, so too is their representative, Kurtz, reduced as a result of his own greed to a state of primitivism. The direct comparison illuminates the parity in Kurtz's and Jones' respective struggles in that neither the white nor the black man is able to escape the psychological depths that he is plunged into as a result of his hubris. The jungle atmosphere also contributes to the parallel nature of their experiences. The metaphoric setting extends its power over humanity, functioning with a naturalistic apathy for humanity's fate, regardless of the victims' cultural backgrounds. If Jones is criticized for being a caricature of ethnic atavism, then Kurtz deserves to be criticized similarly for his own, for their journeys are remarkably alike. The primitivism is not just inherent within Jones, but it is symbolic and thematic on a grander scale, as we can see in this comparison to Kurtz, in that they both wear, either literally or figuratively, the corrupting garb of capitalism.

The Emperor Jones in Context

While Jones may be seen, too easily, as an unacceptable stereotype of black masculinity in his role as a murderous, gambling opportunist, the play does create a sympathetic portrayal of the man, refusing to qualify his character in any terms other than his status as a victim of circumstance and society and pride. He does appear to be only a

few steps removed from the rank of primitive (much like London's dog-cum-wolf), but if such is the case, so is Yank in *The Hairy Ape* a savage at base, reduced at the end of his own journey to existence in the monkey house before his brutal death. His marked similarity to Jones—including their final rejections by animals that symbolize their atavism—indicates that savagery. However it is Yank who seems to regress further, finally embodying an animalistic atavism that Jones stops shy of. Bogard claims, however, that while O'Neill has "evidently read Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, [he] makes no generalization that there is a savagery in the hearts of all men" (Bogard 139). I question Bogard's conclusion by interrogating the status of the capitalist persona throughout O'Neill's canon. Why is he so degraded, even before he takes any sort of journey into his own heart of darkness?

In *The Emperor Jones*, the white trader, Smithers, is painted much less flatteringly than Jones. Smithers' "little, wash-blue eyes are red-rimmed and dart about him like a ferret's," and he is "stoop-shouldered" and has a "pasty face with its small, sharp features. . . ." (3-4). Shortly after securing some information from the servant, Smithers spies Jones entering the throne room. As opposed to the withered Smithers, Jones is "a tall, powerfully-built, full-blooded negro of middle age." O'Neill continues, and the critics begin the frenzy: "His features are typically negroid, yet there is something decidedly distinctive about his face—an underlying strength of will, a hardy, self-reliant confidence in himself that inspires respect. His eyes are alive with a keen, cunning intelligence" (5). While an initial reading might indicate the positive physical description, the use of the term "yet" has introduced a linguistic land mine. It may indeed be read to suggest that "Negroid" does not generally imply distinctiveness or the

other, subsequent positive connotations (though it does suggest the biological determinant in societal perception of “race” at the time). Clearly, O’Neill is emphasizing Jones’ greater grandeur and vitality. Is Smithers, like Conrad’s Marlowe, to be corrupted by the jungle if he never embraces it? Or is the trader Smithers more like the trader Kurtz? O’Neill certainly seems to suggest that the comparatively weaker Smithers, described in pejorative physical terms quoted above, would be even more easily victimized in the jungle’s clutches, though of course he will not enter the jungle. If Jones and Smithers represent their respective races in the play’s blatantly expressionistic terms, I suggest that O’Neill’s so-called generalization about what Bogard calls the “savagery in the hearts of all men” is indeed present and universal.

In fact, it is that very schism between physical appearance and inner character that leads to Jones’ downfall. Like the salesman Hickey, the innkeeper Con Melody or the businessman Simon Harford, Brutus Jones manifests the contrast between inner and outer, further linking him to the greater body of humanity in O’Neill’s corpus. For Jones, that schism is also reflected in the division of past and present. Keya Ganguly states that the process of enacting one’s essential self introduces the split “between the traditionalist culturalist demand for a model, a tradition, a community, a stable system of reference, and the necessary negation of the certitude in the articulation of new cultural demands, meanings, strategies in the political present....as a practice of domination, or resistance” (114). According to Bhabha, the performance of cultural difference problematizes such binary divisions of past and present “at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address” (“Commitment” 19). Brutus Jones, then, is fighting to reconcile

both inner and outer, past and present into an authoritative whole that continues to resist incorporation.

Another figure parallel in character and experience to Jones can be found in Captain Bartlett, a subject of both *Gold* and “Where the Cross is Made.” At the end of *Gold*, Bartlett admits before he dies that the treasure he has sought is worthless, overwhelmed as he is by guilt and retribution, especially after the death of his wife. His admission of the sustaining lie of the treasure echoes that of Jones’ own final act, in which he decries, in succumbing to his atavistic self, his self-definition in terms of white, capitalist society. Bartlett, too, allows his treasure hunt, his greed, to overwhelm his grasp of reality. Like Captain Keeney in “Ile”—another Irishman driven by a primarily economic goal--Bartlett gives up his life-lie in exchange for his life, but too late. Just as Bartlett is driven by his lust for his golden treasure and Keeney by his own lust for the “ile” [oil] that will make his journey financially successful, Jones is driven by his need for power and money until he has been both united with and destroyed by a projection of himself as the wielder of absolute power. The masks are stripped from these characters in classic O’Neillian fashion; they slowly realize the man behind the mask, “the hollow evil in which his true self has been lost” (Falk 65). This is the same “exercise in unmasking” that informs O’Neill’s aesthetic.

If this is the dramatic strategy that informs so many of his plays, then *The Emperor Jones* and its protagonist are not only operating clearly within O’Neill’s aesthetic, but also may be the most distinct example of them. Jones is treated with the same respect by O’Neill and disinterest by the universe as are O’Neill’s other protagonists. The link among the plays is the sustaining lie of the pipe dream they share,

which connects Jones to the larger white world and illustrates how O'Neill engages his characters in similar dramatic situations and subjects them to similar deterministic forces regardless of ethnicity. If Jones does lose his way, literally or figuratively, in his own psychological jungle, O'Neill also seems to be aware of the character's nature as a victim of the political and historical forces of American capitalism and its related deterministic force, racism.

However, within his attempt at universality in his plays, the playwright focused primarily, in both style and content, on a nationalistic American perspective. With the exception of the legendary Lazarus and Marco Polo as perhaps his only two major characters without a direct link to an American experience, the vast majority of his characters inhabit a distinctive capitalist culture, one that subscribes to the Protestant ethic demanding hard work and moral rectitude. This sustained effort to amass wealth while maintaining a moral persona is what seems to motivate the dramatist's characters even as it disrupts and even polarizes the national character. Such a tension is especially evident in *The Great God Brown*, in which the "*capable, college-bred American businessman*" William Brown slowly and subtly co-opts the ethics and behavior of the dissolute Dion Anthony. As Dion tells Brown early in the play, which depends heavily on the use of masks, "When Pan was forbidden the light and warmth of the sun he grew sensitive and self-conscious and proud and revengeful—and became Prince of Darkness" (329). So too does Dion's despair overrun Brown's, until Brown himself is literally and figuratively switching masks—and personae--to account for and justify his behavior, to the point where his lover/muse charges, "You are Dion Brown!" (352). This same distortion and fragmentation of the American national character informs Brutus Jones'

psychological journey. Slowly but surely, his civilized mask is stripped away, replaced by the primal face he had tried to deny all along. While the mask is not literal in *The Emperor Jones*, the stripping off of the regalia serves the same purpose: it reveals the person underneath. Since O'Neill did not conceive of *The Emperor Jones* as a masked drama (his mask period would come later and culminate with the "mask-like" faces of the Mannon family in *Mourning Becomes Electra*), he was left with only Jones' removal of clothing as the physical representation of the psychological transformation. Yank, the hairy ape himself, would shortly strip away his humanity to the same effect,¹ leaving him alone with his primal self.

Such a concentration on the psychological basis for the effect also contributes to the pronounced naturalism of O'Neill's universe. Except for the deterministic forces—genetics, psychology, economics, nature and so on—that play out in the lives of all his characters, the universe is basically an indifferent element throughout O'Neill's career and his characters' existence. Part of this indifference can be supported by noting the isolation endemic to many of his primary settings: the desolation of the rock-bound Cabot farm; the darkness of the forecastle on Yank's transatlantic steamer; the fog-bound Tyrone cottage; the blank marble steps and face of the Mannon manse; the despair-laden bareness of Harry Hope's saloon; the expressionistically divided street corner where Jim Harris and Ella Downey meet; even the sun-bleached raft of "Thirst," where the angry eye of God peers down but, like F. Scott Fitzgerald's "eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg" in *The Great Gatsby*, can only watch. According to the Gelbs, other forces—jealousy, anger, revenge, and despair, among others—occasionally do act upon human beings in O'Neill's plays, but only when the characters must bridge the gap between the two aspects of

themselves or between themselves and someone else, such as in the case of William Brown and Dion Anthony. O'Neill's universe, then, is primarily a mirror reflecting the contents of the human psyche, "and if negative forces come into action, they mainly reflect those emanating from within the characters" (216). Perhaps the idea can be summed up in James Tyrone's recitation—aping Shakespeare—in *Long Day's Journey into Night*: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underlings" (810-11).

This mantra seems to reflect, according to the Gelbs, the idea of the individual as part of a collective unconscious, a "suggestion that excited O'Neill" (66), based as it was on a general collective unconscious. This idea supports the hypothesis that cohesion within an individual results from a character's understanding of his or her role in the greater scheme of humanity. At the moment when the character recognizes that unity, other characters begin to disrupt the harmony and isolate themselves from the group to which they belong, resulting in a despair that the character tries to overcome in order to recapture that sense of harmony. For O'Neill, then, achieving of the awareness of unity implies a simultaneous (and seemingly contradictory) isolation. Since this is the search in which all of his protagonists engage, the search for unity becomes one of the functioning principles for what the Gelbs term "Homo O'Neillius" (229). It is, despite our awareness of the hopelessness of the characters' causes, a hopeful and positive characteristic of the playwright himself. For Brutus Jones, the search for inclusion and coherence is as vital as it is for other European-American characters.

This qualified optimism marks itself in a letter to Sophus Winther, in which O'Neill writes, "I am sorry if I have said something to affront your faith in an upward

spiral of mankind” (Bogard and Bryer 539). O’Neill seems to be echoing the words of Nathaniel Hawthorne, who also shared O’Neill’s interest in the psychological origins of human action, especially its darker aspects. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, for example, Clifford Pyncheon declaims to a fellow train passenger, “You are aware, my dear sir—you must have observed it in your own experience—that all human progress is in a circle; or to use a more accurate and beautiful figure, in an ascending spiral curve” (199). At this point in the story, Clifford is echoing what Hawthorne himself claims in the preface to the romance. The “ascending spiral” indicates the contradictions inherent in progress—no matter where we go, we will return to the same place, but only a little further along in history—and also the contradictions that O’Neill’s characters face. In recognizing their harmony with humanity, the characters must face the realization that the unification brings a simultaneous fragmentation.

What makes the Hawthorne quotation even more pointed in terms of this study is that Hawthorne, while not a Transcendentalist, was familiar with Transcendentalism’s tenets. His close ties to Thoreau, Emerson, and his wife Sophie—Transcendentalists all—suggest that he was able to examine its precepts insightfully. One of the primary operating ideas of the philosophy was the unity of all things in the universe, a literary *E pluribus unum* that dictated the individual as indicator of the collective, as well as the equal divinity of both and the acceptance of both natural forces and divine presence.

When Jones, like so many of O’Neill’s major dramatic creations, denies his responsibility to the collective and those who subscribe to it, he is drawn to his death by denying his individual, innate consciousness. But all such characters condemn themselves in the act of denial:

In this they join the ranks of many like them in O'Neill's works who, regardless of their race, are like runners trying to get away from their shadows. Their struggle is futile and, if they do manage to make the shadows disappear, it means that they themselves have ceased to exist. This credo, which advocates a high level of integration into the community, may seem surprising, for, in general, the characters tend to claim their individuality, and to reject the masses. (Dubost 113)

Therefore, in asking whether his characters' salvation lies in the social contract, we must recognize O'Neill's respect for the individual as a single aspect of the greater society even as he or she seems to reject that society. O'Neill seems to concern himself with the fate of those who have chosen their own respective exiles—Mary Tyrone's conscious decision to revive her reliance on morphine, or Robert Mayo's choice to work the family farm rather than sail beyond the horizon, for example. Notable too is Brutus Jones, who chooses to rely on his non-native white Christian capitalist views of what it means to succeed. Like Yank, the hairy ape, Jones abandons his own heritage but finds where he does belong only after his choices have left him no escape.

If Jones can be seen by critics to be an unfair avatar of black primitivism, Yank may be similarly criticized for his embodiment of its white counterpart, a stereotypical lower class working slob. However, Jones appears to retreat into an ethnic consciousness, while Yank embraces a less specific and even more primitive state. Is O'Neill saying that white primitivism is primary, with black primitivism as a kind of subset? I question such an assumption, for the opening scene in *The Hairy Ape* indicates a wide variety of men in similar positions, universalizing the claim to an equally primitive state:

The men themselves should resemble those pictures in which the appearance of Neanderthal Man is guessed at. All are hairy-chested, with long arms of tremendous power, all low, receding brows above their small, fierce, resentful eyes. All the civilized white races are represented, but except for the slight differentiation in color of hair, skin, eyes, all these men are alike. (35)

There are two specific rhetorical choices here that invite examination for our purpose. First, the fact that all of the men are built and appear the same. There is no significant differentiation among the different aspects of humanity in this common hell. The second is O'Neill's specific description of "*all the civilized white races,*" which can be interpreted in at least two significant ways.

The initial response might be O'Neill's specifying that only white "races" are civilized. However, as this study has clearly illustrated, O'Neill's respect for the individual and his concern with the equality of all men would disqualify such a simplistic interpretation. It should more appropriately be read as a claim that there are also *uncivilized* "white races," thereby opening the scope of his vision of humanity and minimizing claims that his characters are intentionally treated differently on the basis of race. The ironic opening description in *The Hairy Ape* should be ample proof that O'Neill consciously developed and submitted his ethnic characters to the same forces and fates suffered by white characters. His description of the animalistic and potentially negative view of the stokers is reminiscent of some of the language used to describe characters in *The Emperor Jones*, but it is also more straightforward. His use of the conjunction—"yet"—in his description of Jones may be *interpreted* as implying inherent

inferiority, but the overtly animalistic “Neanderthal” stokers are more clearly presented as beasts in their white steel cage. The ship’s hold is a kind of menagerie, a zoo in which the stokers are dehumanized to a greater degree than Jones ever is. Even as Jones reels to his death, his humanity remains. It is his blindness that dooms him.

In fact, the final stage direction in *The Hairy Ape* provides finality to the white protagonist’s situation—his location in the vast universe—that Jones never achieves. In the final scene, the hopeless and hapless Yank retreats to the zoo and communes with the apes in the monkey house. Upon freeing one ape, he is squeezed to his death and thrown into the cage: “*The monkeys set up a chattering, whimpering wail. And, perhaps, the Hairy Ape at last belongs*” (81). No such embracing of a natural (nor any less basic) atavism occurs in Jones’ tragedy. The audience is left to assume the fallen emperor’s final failure or regression, as well as to guess what the expressionistic pantomime signifies. Both Jones and Yank find less and less to link them to their present circumstances within their respective societies, yet the latter is reduced to a dictated primitivism, while the former is led to a re-emergence of his collective—and not necessarily ethnic—unconscious. If, as O’Neill wrote to Beatrice Ashe in 1914, “Life....is a bitter concoction at best but our cup seems to be unnecessarily dosed with wormwood” (Bogard and Bryer 30), then that cup was shared by all of his characters.¹

In fact, O’Neill justifies his subject matter and entire career in a letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn:

But where I feel myself most neglected is where I set most store by myself—as a bit of a poet who has labored with the spoken word to evolve original rhythms of beauty where beauty apparently isn’t—*Jones, Ape,*

Chillun, Desire, etc.—and to see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy, in as near the Greek sense as one can grasp it, in seemingly the most ignoble, debased lives....I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind—(Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it—Mystery, certainly)—and of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. (Bogard and Bryer 195)

Here, O'Neill is indicating his belief in the common plight of all people to attain their nobility in the face of the inevitable. He also indicates an awareness that audiences—primarily the white Broadway audiences who supported his work at the time—might not see beauty “where beauty apparently isn't.” His use of the qualifier indicates not a blindness to beauty within the black American culture of the time, but rather cognition that it might not be recognized easily by those who were not aware of its presence, in spite of the growing achievements of the Harlem Renaissance.

More importantly, rather than singling out black people by signifying a primitivism, O'Neill opened up the issue to a more inclusive premise. Rather than saying that a psychological primitivism informed the current condition of African Americans, O'Neill implied, in his universalization of the idea, that psychological primitivism informed the current condition of *all* Americans. This co-opting seemed to be O'Neill's answer to the concerns of the black intellectuals of the day who, according to Joel Pfister, “hoped that the new psychology's concepts of repression could be deployed to resignify the primitivism long associated with black as an emotional depth that *all* [italics mine]

humans need to acknowledge as a creative energy that could enliven and reinvent the arts” (131). Thus the discourse of ethnic primitivism that represented blacks as possessing a unique psychology had to be overcome.

O’Neill’s solution was not to eliminate the primitive base, but to expand its reach to include all people. Louis Sheaffer suggests that O’Neill was not trying to illustrate how black Americans were only a short step from their African ancestors, if one can even accept such a claim without clarification as to what might constitute such a “step.” Rather he was saying “something more universal—that an apprehensive primitive being lurks just below the surface of us all” (*Son and Playwright* 30), as can be seen with particular resonance in *The Hairy Ape*.

There may be a claim that Jones’ characterization echoes the stereotypical portrayal of black Americans’ lack of standard white verbal skills, perceived tendencies (or at least perceived potential) toward violence and greater emotionality, and adherence to superstitious beliefs, in addition to the admittedly problematic dialect, much as what happened with Mark Twain’s runaway slave, Jim, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Some black literary voices of the day claimed that the black people whom O’Neill considered himself to be ennobling were still commercial stereotypes, and such claims cannot be ignored. While renowned white critic Alexander Wollcott was lauding the play as “an extraordinarily striking and dramatic study of panic fear” (qtd. in Bowen 132), Langston Hughes described an “unfortunate” Harlem production of the play: “And when the Emperor started running naked through the forest, hearing the Little Frightened [sic] Fears, naturally they howled with laughter” (*The Big Sea* 258), though the laughter may be easily understood as the response of an audience unfamiliar with the techniques of

expressionism or without a grasp of the larger literary universe O'Neill was developing. On the other hand, *The Negro World's* Caswell Crews declaimed, "To be sure it is pronounced a great play by the critics, but they are white, and will pronounce anything good that has white supremacy as its theme" (Krasner 486). And while W.E.B. DuBois initially called the play "a splendid tragedy" (ibid 487), he later revised his stance, saying that the blacks in the play were "still handicapped and put forth with much hesitation. . . ." (ibid).

Either way, the white preoccupation with the black culture was building up to its Jazz Age consummation in the Harlem Renaissance, wherein black artists and critics made a serious effort to recreate the black experience from their own point-of-view, expressing "a growing objection to 'counterfeit' portraits of black life."¹ According to black commentator George C. Morse, the co-opting of black life by white authors was detrimental: "They are legion who believe that if a native band from the jungles of Africa should parade the streets beating their tom-toms, all the black inhabitants of our city would lose their acquired dignity and dance to its rhythm by virtue of inheritance alone" (678-79). But as even a cursory study of *The Hairy Ape* indicates, not only blacks would be losing "their acquired dignity." Rather, there is in O'Neill's universe a common primitivism that all humans subscribe to. In fact, Edwin Engle in *The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill* claims that it is *The Hairy Ape*, more than *The Emperor Jones*, that is the playwright's most successful delineation of primitivism and atavism (54). And as Nathan Irvin Huggins states in *Harlem Renaissance*, "O'Neill used Negro characters in *The Emperor Jones*. . . .to make general statements about humanity through them" (297).

However, in an effort to prevent this study from focusing on whether or not Eugene O'Neill was at least in part subject to prevalent ethnic bigotry of the time—an argument which assumes that he could somehow overcome his own socialization—I hope to posit a new epistemology for *The Emperor Jones*. In examining the text of the play, as well as its development and reception, I hope to indicate how much further O'Neill reaches in this play to create a figure of mythic proportions that subscribes more pointedly to his dramatic aesthetic than to a subconscious capitulation to contemporary and largely unavoidable social views. As John R. Cooley questions in regard to Brutus Jones, "If a man is plagued and tormented by his own past and his unconscious, how can he expect to cope with his conscious mind and external reality?" ("In Pursuit" 57) Is this question any less pertinent when focused on *The Iceman Cometh* or *Long Day's Journey Into Night*? Whatever resolution Jones seeks will come only at the expense of his sense of self and its accompanying literal and figurative masks, an attempt to belong, and a simultaneous failure at the attempt that Travis Bogard calls "the same action that O'Neill had traced in *Beyond the Horizon*. . . ." (142). What I hope to indicate in examining the play is that O'Neill is less successful—indeed, less concerned—in showing the power of any sort of "racial" unconscious than in illustrating how the power of the greater collective unconscious of a larger humanity can be applied to an often undervalued cultural population. After all, *The Emperor Jones* is O'Neill's single take on black ethnic atavism, and while it may be argued that *All God's Chillun Got Wings* also invokes similar forces through its reliance on the jungle mask, it is important to remember that it is the white Ella who is most directly and overwhelmingly affected by the mask's presence. O'Neill will later regret not making greater use of masks: "All the figures in

Jones's flight through the forest should be masked. Masks would dramatically stress their phantasmal quality, as contrasted with the unmasked Jones, intensify the supernatural menace of the tom-tom" (*Son and Artist* 81). In linking the idea to his greater body of work, he added that *The Hairy Ape* would also benefit from a more extensive use of masks, that they would be "of the greatest value in emphasizing the theme of the play" (ibid). Clearly, the expressionistic use of masks would further heighten the theatricality, undermine the naturalistic reality, and focus on the symbolic, rather than literal, nature of the play, simultaneously suggesting that his use of jungle motifs was merely allegorically, not ethnically, charged.

Unmasking the Origins of Brutus Jones

The Emperor Jones has its genesis in O'Neill's own experiences, as well as events of the day. Perhaps the earliest source was the playwright's own excursion to Honduras in 1909 in search of gold. After being told that early Spanish colonists removed most of the gold from the land, O'Neill and his party entered the jungle in search of ore deposits. O'Neill hated the jungle, complaining that he had never been free from flea, gnat and mosquito bites since arriving. He suffered a recurring fever and "rotten...vilely cooked food" that caused digestive problems. His summation of his experience indicates a strong visceral response: "I give it as my candid opinion and fixed belief that God got his inspiration for Hell after creating Honduras. . . Until some just Fate grows weary of watching the gropings in the dark of these human maggots and exterminates them, until the Universe shakes these human lice from its sides, Honduras has no future" (Bogard and Bryer 19-20). His profound misery stemmed from his loathing of everything the

country offered, however, not just from its people, whom he initially seemed to feel fondness for. In fact, he wrote: “Taking it all in all, I like the country and the people and think there is every chance in the world for making good” (ibid 18). At one point, he and his companions were led through some wild country on a promise of gold that went unfulfilled. According to Stephen Black, O’Neill was taken by himself to a place where the jungle was impenetrable and where he felt lost and panic-stricken: “His first reaction was the rage expressed in the letter toward the natives who had toyed with him. Much later he gave his panic to the Emperor Jones, whom he caused to become lost in a similar jungle” (104). Logically then, Jones’ fear is an extension of the playwright’s and did not originate in a caricatured, minstrel-like fear of the dark, despite allegations that O’Neill was guilty of such minstrelsy.

In addition, O’Neill basically recapitulates the jungle voyage narrated in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, telling a very similar tale of an outsider’s terrifying destruction in the primordial jungle. “The effect of the tropical forest on the human imagination was honestly come by,” O’Neill writes; “it was the result of my own experience while prospecting for gold in Spanish Honduras” (Gelb 438-39). Similarly, the method Jones employed to free himself from the chain gang was a matter of personal knowledge: among O’Neill’s circle of mates was a former member of a chain gang (438). O’Neill was not creating his version of a life, but rather blending real-world experiences with thematic concerns, countering the idea that Jones’ behavior was merely the result of O’Neill’s reliance on stereotype, though we cannot assume that all audiences of the day grasped the playwright’s intent and methods.

The idea of the steady drumbeat that accompanied the action of the play also derives from O'Neill's Honduran excursion, though its actual source remains a question. Bogard and the Gelbs indicate that O'Neill hit upon the idea of the intensifying drumbeat from the pulse of blood in his eardrums during his bout with malaria (Bogard 135). Alternatively, Sheaffer quotes one of O'Neill's own letters: "One day I was reading of the religious feasts in the Congo and the uses to which the drum is put there; how it starts at a normal pulse-beat and is slowly intensified until the heart-beat of every one present corresponds to the frenzied beat of the drum" (*Son and Artist* 27). Either way, it is clear that O'Neill picked the device from the real world, and claims that the drum was some kind of white writer's reliance on a concept of the primitive are left on shaky ground.

The idea for Jones himself came from an acquaintance of O'Neill who told him of Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, a former president of Haiti, who had boasted that he would never allow his enemies to kill him, "that if he were overthrown he would kill himself, but not with an ordinary lead bullet; only a silver one was worthy of that honor" (*Son and Artist* 27). It is hardly surprising that Sam, who ruled ruthlessly, was murdered by a "voo-doo maddened mob" (Gelb 439). Again, O'Neill is using historical events, not relying on stereotype, though it is important to understand that audiences may not be able to separate artistic intention from its realization on stage.

Brutus Jones also had another, earlier historical precedent: Henri Christophe, a slave who declared himself king of one portion of Haiti in 1811. He ruled dictatorially, as Sam would later do, and eventually shot himself in the head when he became ill.

Jones seems to be an amalgam of both Haitian despots, as well as a literary take on a more recognizable contemporary figure, Marcus Garvey. A proponent of the new

awakening or ethnic consciousness among black Americans in the early 20th century and founder of the “back to Africa” movement, Garvey, who was often photographed in military regalia and plumed hat similar to Jones’, was a Jamaican-born social activist whose ideas continue to influence African American social and political issues. Garvey’s ideology—called “Garveyism”—suggested that social mobility for blacks into the white world leads to self-hate and ethnic ambivalence. In 1920, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, an organization of his own creation, appointed him president of their hoped-for future homeland, the Empire of Africa.¹ At odds with black intellectual of the day W.E.B. DuBois, Garvey did bombastically galvanize a sense of black solidarity or nationalism. However, James Weldon Johnson, in comparing Garvey to Jones, stated that even O’Neill’s creation never played the imperial role nor assumed the imperiousness that Garvey did in real life (254). Again, Jones is in a sense vindicated by his basis in reality. O’Neill did not create the character nor his experience nor even the physical setting out of whole cloth, but rather as a reflection of a very specific set of real-world incidents. In doing so, he also contributed his own psychological discourse, unifying the elements and bringing them into line with his philosophy.

One aspect of the character of Brutus Jones that continues to incite strong reactions is the burlesque nature of his name. Joel Pfister discusses how slaveowners sometimes “mocked the abject condition” (129) of the slaves by naming them after famous political leaders, particularly of the Roman empire, such as Caesar, Pompey, Cato or Brutus. However, as this study has so far indicated, there is nothing to support a claim that O’Neill would mock black people. A concept of the playwright as immune to cultural attitudes of the day is difficult to imagine, equally as difficult as imagining

O'Neill intentionally mocking black people in the sense that Pfister describes. Rather, a focus on the rhetorical purpose of the nomenclature would more strongly hint at the irony in O'Neill's use of such a name, the same dramatic irony inherent in other O'Neillian protagonists like Con Melody, Nina Leeds, Robert "Yank" Smith, Abe "Dreamy" Saunders, among others. In fact, the irony in Jones' given name stems from his inability to overcome his master. In Jones' case, he remains tragically subject to the white forces that control him, whereas the historical Brutus succeeds in killing Caesar. Considering O'Neill's familiarity with classical theatre, the playwright would be well aware of the significance of such irony. Brutus Jones prides himself on taking the tools of the oppressor and using them to his own benefit, as his ability to speak white and black is empowering but also forces him to assume the antithetical cultures of both languages (Mendelssohn 21). The cultural conflict is too powerful for Jones, however, and he cannot complete the final step to secure success in either population.

Egil Tornqvist claims that when a dramatist "baptizes" his fictitious characters, "he can do for them what he cannot do for his own offspring: give them fitting names" (362). In *The Emperor Jones*, the given—or, significantly—Christian name and the common surname reveal the dichotomy between what Jones wants to be and what he is. Whereas the name "Brutus" may be seen as a demeaning reflection of minstrelsy, connoting that which is "stupid" or "irrational," and while his irrationality becomes his dominant trait the deeper he sinks into his psychological jungle, he is also, like Caesar, an emperor, worshipped by his minions. Lionel Trilling suggests how the ironic use of the combined names indicates much more than the pejorative origins of the name might suggest, how this combined Brutus/Caesar "contains within himself his own assassin

whose gradual ascendancy makes the story of the play” (xi). O’Neill was simply reflecting nomenclature of the time, not creating it arbitrarily, and simultaneously using it to provide greater depth of meaning to the character. Contrast Jones’ naming with that of “Mister” Smithers, the physically weaker character. Because both “Smith” and “Jones” can be seen as equally common surnames, their respective titles carry the load in suggesting the basic difference between the two. It is apparent that O’Neill has taken great care to give suggestive names to his characters, expressing the characters’ inner natures as expressively as their outward appearances, rather than simply aping cultural stereotypes of the day. The possibilities are far richer than limited interpretation may suggest.

As with his other protagonists, the irony of Jones’ name reflects a vital component of his character and is indicative of his fatal flaw. The underlying causes of the tragedies on the raft in “Thirst” or James Tyrone’s love for money that leads to his family’s downfall or the source of the oppression in *The Hairy Ape* all suggest how *The Emperor Jones* fits seamlessly into the thematic arc of O’Neill’s career. If Jones fails, it’s not because of his ethnicity, but because everyone is a victim of the deterministic social forces—in Jones’ case, significantly economic-- of O’Neill’s world. His failure is an individual failure, not a failure of ethnicity.

Exploring The Emperor Jones

As Richard Long claims of white writers who wrote about “black folk” in the twenties, whether the black characters were central or simply ancillary to the plot, the writers were writing mainly for a white audience. The social position which supported

the social dynamic would tend to inhibit such writers from leaving “the well established terrain on which the black played his simple and simpleminded destiny, an endless cycle of dancing and laughing, of joy and sorrow, of frenzied loving, of shooting and knifing, and occasionally, of spectacular, back-breaking toil” (71). Clearly, O’Neill was not treading the same well-worn path. A closer study of the text itself will indicate O’Neill’s success at avoiding any intentional diminution of Jones’ ethnicity even as he validated its existence. While some critics maintain that O’Neill was suggesting that the possibility of an atavistic return is greater for people of black African descent “because of the black man’s more recent jungle past” (“Jones and the Harlem Renaissance” 80), some often also suggest that Jones is his own greatest enemy. According to Gabriel Poole, Jones’ pride is the hubris of a tragic hero who views his superiority as indisputable (24). Yes, Jones may indeed be his own greatest enemy. That is the fate of tragic heroes. They succumb not to other people’s fatal flaws, but their own. I suggest that Jones’ *hamartia* is not ethnic primitivism, but rather his underestimation of his own people and overestimation of himself. His flight is not from the natives but from his own creation as an exploiting colonial to a fundamental self, that is, a less theatrical and more performative being. His death results from his final loss of his true and performative self, the revelation of the self-created image as false.

Perhaps not so curiously, it is a dramatic unmasking central to other O’Neill plays, most particularly *The Iceman Cometh*, which is much more inclusive in its multicultural brotherhood, as represented by the inhabitants of Harry Hope’s saloon. Seen this way, *The Emperor Jones* is O’Neill’s significant first step in universalizing human experience and lays even more valid claim to his message of ethnic equality. In

his personal quest for self-identity, Jones reflects a central trope of the classic antebellum slave narrative: the search for manhood through the achievement of freedom. O'Neill shows here great awareness of such a significant characteristic of African American indigenous literature.

In describing the general location of the play's setting, O'Neill describes "*an island in the West Indies as yet not self-determined by White Marines*" (2). Clearly, from the very first line of his description, O'Neill is slyly suggesting that the white Marines' presence is unnatural, an ironic self-determination that disregards the presence of the native population and their ability to take care of themselves. As the play reveals, there is great power in what may, at the time, have been considered a relatively underdeveloped culture, since it is their beliefs and practices that root Jones out of the jungle and out of his fascist rule. The only visible white human presence in the play (not part of Jones' atavistic fantasy) is Smithers, who also doubts the effectiveness of the natives' efforts. Indeed, Smithers forms a large part of the very negative portrayal of white people in this play.

O'Neill's physical description of Smithers, the trader, is even more explicitly pejorative than that of Jones, whose description engenders so much resistance. Smithers is "*a tall, stoop-shouldered man about forty. His bald head, perched on a long neck with an enormous Adam's apple, looks like an egg.*" In addition, he has a "*naturally pasty face*" of a "*sickly yellow*" with "*small, sharp features.*" To Smithers' previously mentioned "*pointed nose*" that is "*a startling red*" and his "*little, washy-blue eyes,*" O'Neill adds that Smithers' "*expression is one of scrupulous meanness, cowardly and dangerous*" (3-4). Clearly, O'Neill is painting Smithers as somehow less suited to

success than Jones— intellectually, psychologically, morally, perhaps-- and if representative of a particular group—a common strategy in Expressionism—he represents the less suited white culture, at least in this context. Furthermore, while Jones had been Smithers’ employee before his self-declared royalty, he tells the trader, “I done de dirty work fo’ you—and most o’ de brain work, too, fo’ dat matter—and I was wuth money to you....” (6), emphasizing his role as a capitalist functionary as well as his intellectual superiority. Additionally, Smithers’ speaks in a heavy Cockney dialect—one based on class rather than ethnicity— that is at least as pejorative as that of Jones’: “Gawd blimey, you was glad enough for me ter take yer in on it when you landed here first. You didn’ ‘ave no ‘igh and mighty airs in them days!” (6)

Even before Jones enters the first scene in act one, O’Neill continues to develop the dramatic context that will support his tragic view of humanity as exemplified by Brutus Jones. In speaking to a native servant, Smithers charges with “*mean satisfaction*” and “*extreme vindictiveness*,” “Serve ‘im right! Puttin’ on airs, the stinkin’ nigger!” (7) Using the word “nigger” may be dramatically correct for Smithers, but critics and actors in the play alike have censured O’Neill. The original Brutus Jones, Charles Gilpin, balked at what he felt was an inappropriate use of the term “nigger,” preferring such terms as “black-baby,” “Negro” or “colored man” (Krasner 484). Indeed, the word “nigger” remains a charged linguistic lightning rod and has since attracted much criticism to the play and its author. Even with O’Neill’s best intentions, the term is criticized as reflective of the outdated view of black people, as opposed to the “New Negro” of Alain Locke, Arna Bontemps, and W.E.B. DuBois. However, Jones’ use of the term—never

found in O'Neill's authorial voice— supports the self-loathing that dooms him, as we will see shortly.

One example of the playwright's attitudes is reflected in the apocryphal story of O'Neill's anger against his original Brutus Jones, Charles Gilpin. While Gilpin was hailed by critics and the playwright for his towering portrayal, O'Neill's patience with him began to wear thin when the actor began altering the lines, especially the use of "nigger," to suit his own tastes. Recapitulations of O'Neill's response vary. According to the Gelbs, O'Neill is charged with saying, "If I ever catch you rewriting my lines again, you black bastard, I'm going to beat you up" (449). However, Louis Sheaffer's biography, considered more authoritative by such O'Neill scholars as David Krasner (484), omits the "black bastard" epithet: "If you change the lines again, I'll beat the hell out of you!" (35). Later O'Neill would lend support to the latter versions: "He's just a regular actor-brain, that's all. Most white actors, under the same circumstances, would have gone the same route" (*Son and Artist* 36). O'Neill is aware of the negativity inherent in the word, which is why he uses it. For Jones, it depicts the denial of his link to his own ethnic group and his larger, shared humanity, the link that could prove his salvation at the end of the play until he disclaims it. For Smithers, using the loaded term indicates his own, rather than authorial, prejudice.

The symbolic nature of Expressionism itself precludes a naturalistic sense of reality and instead relies on physical appearance to deliver meaning, often in broad or obvious strokes. That Expressionism is evident at the rise of the curtain in *The Emperor Jones*. Perhaps even more stylized than the settings of either "Thirst" or "The Dreamy Kid," the play's setting is a "*spacious, high-ceilinged room with bare, white-washed*

walls” and a floor of white tiles, a portico supported by white pillars (3). Even Smithers is wearing a dirty white drill outfit. However, the touches of color are obviously a result of Jones’ presence. The throne is “*a dazzling, eye-smiting scarlet. There is a brilliant orange cushion on the seat,*” as well as strips of matting that are dyed scarlet (3). Such a setting serves a multitude of purposes.

First, it sets up the Expressionistic nature of the play. The sharp visual contrasts immediately destabilize a naturalistic presentational style (not to be confused with the deterministic literary naturalism that pervades the context of the play and the playwright’s aesthetic). In addition, it echoes the same white frame of the black characters’ world in the two short plays already discussed. The whiteness can also be understood to represent the falseness of the trappings, focusing on the real presence of the play, the central figure of Brutus Jones. Finally, the war of colors within the throne room suggests the war within Jones himself, one in which he must embrace his own fortifying heritage or that of the white, colonial oppressor. It should be noted that the native woman who slyly enters the room is also resplendent with color: a multicolor calico dress, a red bandana, and a bundle bound in colored cloth tie her and her people visually to Jones.

To those critics who take O’Neill to task for a negative description of Jones, how is the description of Smithers to be understood? As a comment on the ethnic atavism of the Cockney trader? Consider similar negative delineations of other, non-ethnically charged characters. Of Marsden in *Strange Interlude*, O’Neill writes, “*His face is too long for its width, his nose is high and narrow, his forehead broad, his mild blue eyes those of a dreamy self-analyst, his thin lips ironical and a bit sad. . . He has long fragile hands, and the stoop to his shoulders of a man weak muscularly. . . .*” (461-62). O’Neill’s

canon is full of negative physical descriptions of characters, yet these cannot be assumed to signify racism, especially when they contribute to a strong sense of Expressionism, as they do in *The Emperor Jones*. Rather, they are reflections of the play's ideas more so than of O'Neill's attitudes toward black people.

Adding to the tentativeness of claims against O'Neill's alleged racism is the story of the playwright's response to the Ku Klux Klan's letter censuring portrayal of interracial marriage in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*. In "atypically large handwriting" (Pfister 123), O'Neill wrote back, "Go fuck yourself!" and mailed it back to Georgia. Such a response is not surprising from the playwright whose character of Joe Mott in *The Iceman Cometh* responds to two of his hopeless comrades, "I don't stand for 'nigger' from nobody. Never did" (589). If O'Neill's drama is studied in the context of his life experience, charges of racism lose their validity.

As O'Neill is aware of the negative power of the epithet, he is also aware that ethnic superiority is unquantifiable. O'Neill's use of the word "yet" in his initial description of Jones has stirred controversy and requires investigation. Qualities of strength of will or self-reliant confidence are being contrasted to Jones' "*typically negroid*" characteristics, but it is at least equally possible, in understanding O'Neill's personal opinions, that the "yet" implies something more pertinent to his understanding of the protagonist: that Jones is *not* typical. After all, Jones' portrayal does suggest a man of above-average intelligence, cunning, shrewdness, and wit. In short, he is not "*typically negroid*" but rather a typical tragic hero who is—at least until the coming of Willy Loman—perceived as anything but typical. The description indicates that Jones is more than a typical human. Again, in positioning Jones as tragic hero (or victim) first

and black man second, O’Neill is indicating the greater importance of a common humanity. In fact, the description continues and later implies that it would take such an atypical man to carry off the position of emperor: “*Patent leather laced boots with brass spurs, and a belt with a long-barreled, pearl-handled revolver in a holster complete his make up. Yet there is something not altogether ridiculous about his grandeur. He has a way of carrying it off*” (5). Again, a typical man—black or white—would look “ridiculous” but Jones, the tragic, larger-than-life protagonist, can succeed. Marcus Garvey himself was frequently photographed, by famed Harlem photographer James Van Der Zee, in such outlandish gear and similarly looks simultaneously foolish and grand. Van Der Zee, his official photographer, did not wish to ridicule his employer, though he may have been aware of his subject’s ambivalent image. Jones suffers from the same ambivalence. Only by isolating the individual signifier “yet” can critics find room for criticism. Taken in the context of the entire description, the play itself, O’Neill’s canon and his personal life, the physical description suggests nothing more than Jones’ innate—self-inspired—superiority. It is common to history’s and literature’s greatest tragic figures from Hamlet to Caesar to Brutus Jones.

Gilpin himself argued that the play was not specifically a reflection of black people’s experience: “No offense should be taken because of the fact that Brutus Jones, the Negro, is a villain. This is not a racial play; it is universal in its application” (Krasner 489). Gilpin was obviously trying to defuse the controversy, perhaps in trying to avoid any evidence of ethnic “betrayal,” but for him the play was not about ethnicity—though he may have felt racism in the use of the ethnic epithet. Therefore, he felt it unworthy of its lambasting from black political figures of the day. Gilpin’s attempts to remove the

word “nigger” may have been a result of his belief that he was more suited to interpret the nuances—not the central conflict or universal truths—of Brutus Jones than the playwright (Krasner 492). On the other hand, Jones does not seem to realize how his sense of superiority over his native underlings is represented in his own demeaning use of the word, a failure that leads to his downfall—and one that eerily presages the downfall of Gilpin’s own career and his eventual falling out with O’Neill.

In 1946, O’Neill listed Gilpin, as a result of the actor’s portrayal of Brutus Jones, as one of only three actors who had completely realized one of his characters, despite O’Neill’s earlier criticism of the actor, which largely resulted from the actor’s drinking and habitual changing of lines. In contrast to his later admiration of Gilpin, O’Neill wrote to Arthur Hobson Quinn in 1922, after seeing productions outside of New York with actors other than Gilpin: “ ‘Brutus Jones’ is what is called ‘actor-proof’ . . . any negro with any acting sense can do it as well, or almost as well, as Gilpin” (Bogard and Bryer 170). The original London production was cast with a young Paul Robeson,¹ who played Jones in an early New York revival and who would later go on to create the symbolic role of Yank for a London production of *The Hairy Ape* in a ground-breaking example of non-traditional casting that suggests the universality of O’Neill’s primitivistic characters. Gilpin’s own take on the subject of his importance to the play indicates his proprietary interest: “I created the role of the Emperor. That role belongs to me. That Irishman, he just wrote the play” (Gelb 450). Indeed, Gilpin would go on to perform the role about 1,500 times before his death at age thirty, his stamina in the role a testament to O’Neill’s eventual admiration of the actor’s interpretation of Jones.

Despite Gilpin's success in the role, however, the practice of casting white actors in black roles (and blackface) continued, though the practice saw a marked decrease. Nevertheless, O'Neill's (and the Provincetown Players') willingness to hire black actors led Gilpin to be the first black actor ever hired to play a serious major role in a white American production (Ira Aldrich and other black American actors in earlier times had to find their successes in Europe), and the first actor to receive a substantial salary from the Players: fifty dollars a week (Black 265). Gilpin himself stated of O'Neill's efforts at battering at the walls of discrimination, "Mr. O made a breach in those walls by writing a play that had in it a serious role for a Negro" (Gelbs 448), though Jessie Redmond Fauset, African American author of *Plum Bun*, responded to charges of lingering racism in the play: "Many theatregoers....could not distinguish between the artistic interpretation of a type and the deliberate travesty of a race, and so their appreciation was clouded" (Martin 117). The presence of Gilpin's authentic black voice in a serious lead role, while atypical and even controversial (a subject discussed in greater depth in the chapter on *All God's Chillun Got Wings*), added to the groundbreaking nature of O'Neill's achievement.

To further underscore Jones' atypicality as a black man, O'Neill has him respond to Smithers' rage: "Talk polite, white man! Talk, polite, you heah me? I'm boss heah now, is you fergettin'?" (6) That a black man would wield such power over a white man was not typical in the 1920s, but neither is Jones theatrically typical, though it may be argued he is historically typical in his victimization. One of the many reasons black men in the United States were cut off from a source of empowerment was that they were cut off from the economic basis that provided it. Jones is aware enough to know that power is money but does not seem to recognize the trap. "De long green, dat's me every time!"

he says, telling Smithers how he plans to secure his future (7). A couple of decades later, Lorraine Hansberry's Walter Lee Younger, in *A Raisin in the Sun*, would also fail to see his doom as a victim of capitalism. O'Neill anticipates Hansberry and presages Younger's rush into his own psychological jungle.

Once the primary plot is set up—Jones' need to seek safety from the rebellious natives—O'Neill goes on to address other issues consistent with the lives of black characters in his previous plays. One such issue is the contrast between superstition and Christianity. Despite Jones' reliance on his silver bullet to deter any attempts on his life by the natives, he denigrates the native superstitions—a form of their spiritual beliefs—with as much alacrity as he dismisses his own Christianity. “And dere all dem fool bush niggers was kneelin' down and bumpin' deir heads on de ground like I was a miracle out o' de Bible,” he laughs. Unknowingly, he has equated their superstition with his own religious beliefs. One is based in Christianity, one on superstition, but both are linked in their similarity of purpose. O'Neill accomplished much the same idea thematically in “Thirst.” There is no inherent spiritual superiority in the naturalistic universe any more than there is any ethnic superiority. Jones' attitude and reliance on any spirituality is tentative at best. Continuing to boast to Smithers, he says that when it comes to altruism, “I lays my Jesus on de shelf for de time bein'” (15),¹ suggesting that his materialistic needs supersede his religious ones and that everything is secondary to the profit motive. At the same time he professes his membership “in good standin'” of the Baptist Church, he adds that while the church protects him, his ultimate protection is the “little silver bullet o' my own” (14). In the face of Smithers' predictions of the natives' “pet devils and ghosts” in the “pitch black” forest, Jones counters with his own higher beliefs:

economic gain and Christianity. However, what Jones can't predict is that his beliefs—both representative of his non-native American homeland—will be the ones that fail him, permitting the native beliefs to effect his undoing. After all, as Fife says in *Dynamo*, “This is a free country and you're free to believe any God-forsaken lie you like—even the book of Genesis!” (839). White Christianity and capitalistic materialism learned from white men on the Pullman car are two lies that Jones embraces and lead to his doom, not because of any inherent inferiority, but because they are foreign concepts to his atavistic self. He attempts to usurp white American society's constructs in some misguided belief that by putting on a white man's mantel, as he puts on his pretentious regalia, he will *become* part of that privileged society.

Jones' belief that his acting white will lead to his being accepted on that level is one of his most damaging life-lies. Jones asks Smithers, “Does you think I'd slink out de back door like a common nigger?” (15), suggesting two things: first, as O'Neill has already implied, that Jones is not common; second, that he is separated from his own ethnic culture, wherein lies another of his problems. When he could have found salvation in embracing his heritage and community—one that is neither superior nor inferior to his adopted one—he chooses instead to reject it. Ironically, shortly after his boasting to Smithers, he begins his trek into the heart of darkness, saying, “So long, white man” (16). He can leave the white world behind physically, but he still chooses to embrace white society's sociocultural institutions rather than those of his own people. He cannot leave his programming behind.

However, Jones does show repeated signs of a possible reconnection with his blackness as he journeys further into the richly symbolic darkness. O'Neill describes the

“deeper blackness” (16) of the jungle night, and in doing so he is suggesting that blackness can be deep, certainly deeper than skin color. In fact, it is not the ambient blackness that leads to Jones’ first illusion, or delusion, but his reliance on white landmarks. “White stone, white stone, where is you?” he asks, searching for these markers of where he has hidden food (17). This should be his first sign that he has been deceived by both his reason and by whiteness, even as he is being embraced by blackness, but he ignores both signs in favor of his reliance on white guidance. As he continues his flight, he begins to refer to himself more and more frequently as “nigger,” the white man’s pejorative term, suggesting that perhaps he is identifying more and more with the disempowered of his own background.

He continues onward, leaving behind the black “little formless fears,” clearly a reference to what he is afraid of--blackness. His journey is into blackness, but it is hardly unique, for even the Irish Tyrones journey into the blackness of night. The blackness can be a mark of primitivism, but it can also represent his origins of which he is afraid. While some may continue to argue that O’Neill’s portraits of black people are negative because they connect the blackness with primitivism, we see in Jones’ first jungle vision that O’Neill clearly refrains from imposing any suggestion of reductiveness on any of the other black characters that inhabit Jones’ psyche.

Jeff, the Pullman porter whom Jones has killed in the murder that led to his incarceration, is described as “middle-aged, thin, brown in color” and “dressed in a Pullman porter’s uniform and cap” (19). Unlike the more obviously subjective descriptions of Jones, and Smithers for that matter, Jeff and the other black characters in Jones’ flashback are clearly not negatives slanted by O’Neill’s prose, further evidence

that the playwright was aware of the effects of his earlier descriptions of Jones.

However, Jeff's arrival and Jones' subsequent buying into the mythical power of the natives leads to another description of Jones that O'Neill has been criticized for.

Jones begins talking to Jeff, clearly buying into the superstitious myth that the natives have been trying to establish. But when Jones realizes that Jeff is a vision, he stops "*bewilderedly*," and his eyes "*begin to roll wildly*" (20). Such a description seems to suggest a burlesque, a return to a minstrel portrayal of black people.

Since such a description does not appear elsewhere in O'Neill's canon, there may be grounds for the belief that even the liberal-minded playwright was subject, even subconsciously, to some of the pervasive stereotypes of his time. However, characters in other plays are described in ways that might also draw fire if their characteristics were applied to O'Neill's black characters. Clearly, Yank's Hairy Ape is one character whose identifying characteristics would likely invoke outrage from critics for its anthropomorphism if applied to black characters. Similarly, Benny in *Diff'rent* mutters to himself "*with savage satisfaction*" (38). Yet perhaps simply because the characters are white, such references do not draw fire for being inappropriately reductive. Any critic must be aware that such a double standard is itself an insidious form of racism. Certainly, Jones' rolling eyes do call attention to themselves, but in the context of the attributes of O'Neill's other characters, the description seems little more than an unfortunate authorial lexicon. Jones is, after all, in a preternatural state of terror, and physical behaviors in such situations are often beyond one's control.

The scene that follows continues to show Jones shedding his assumed disguise as capitalist American entrepreneur (read "white"). Not only is he stripping his clothes off

and reverting to a less Americanized—though not exclusively African—self, but he is also notably shedding his coat, with its brass buttons and epaulets and indicators of his economic and political power, his connection to the white world and his life-lie.

The next group of black characters we see is the chain gang from which Jones has escaped before fleeing to the island. Jones begins, once he calms himself, by decrying the visions as “Ha’nts!” and trying to tell himself that the church denies their existence. His white Christianity is being submerged under his increasing belief in the native mythological power, again mixing God with superstition, going so far as to ask one of the “ha’nts” to hand him a shovel. His psychic confusion is intensifying in the conflict between his natural black self and his assumed white self. In fact, he very soon calls the imagined prison guard a “white debil,” (23), signifying perhaps his growing dislocation from his oppressors/heroes. While O’Neill could not have foreseen the civil rights upheaval of the 1960s at the time of the play’s creation, it is interesting to note how he presaged the black pride movement of the sixties as practiced by such figures as Malcolm X, who also saw the threat of the “white devil” through his Islamic perspective.

Unfortunately, scene four also includes another instance of O’Neill’s using problematic descriptive words. Upon seeing the chain gang, Jones’ eyes “*pop out*” (22). Again, such a description can easily be claimed to be a remnant of stereotypes, but this exaggerated physical distortion is often found in other O’Neill plays about white characters.

For example, Mildred in *The Hairy Ape* looks at Yank’s “*gorilla face*” upon descending into the stoke hole. From that point, her physical responses are described in the melodramatic manner that O’Neill would be very familiar with—indeed, that still

pervaded American theatre at the time—also reflecting a histrionic acting style so successfully engaged in by his own father, James. Mildred “*utters a low, choking cry and shrinks away from him, putting both hands up before her eyes to shut out the sight of his face,*” after which she, not so surprisingly, faints. With these examples taken from the same period as O’Neill’s work on *The Emperor Jones*, it can be argued that O’Neill was only following standard procedures, that his women’s physical responses were similarly exaggerated, and that his black people were like his white men and women in being subject to O’Neill’s melodramatic tendencies. It must be remembered that while O’Neill is widely recognized as bringing realism (presentational, rather than literary) to American drama, his plays were still full of the last-minute resolutions, melodramatic confessions, dramatic murders and insidious lies that similarly energized the popular drama of the time. For instance, Captain Adam Brant in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is perhaps the most innocent of dupes in the play, even while he is cuckolding Ezra Mannon. However, O’Neill describes him as being “*dressed with an almost foppish extravagance, with touches of studied carelessness, as if a romantic Byronic appearance were the ideal in his mind*” (676). Because the play calls for a fool, O’Neill delivers, right down to his physical description. Similarly it is because O’Neill is employing stock melodramatic descriptions, not intentionally engaging in stereotyping. Certainly, O’Neill must be held responsible for being insensitive to occasional resemblances to minstrels in his descriptions, but some of the descriptions owe less to racism than to melodramatic traditions that also affected his depiction of white characters. That he relies on stock characteristics in an Expressionistic play, one that relies less on objective realism, shows that O’Neill was more interested in effect than any direct reflection of reality.

Darkness deepens as the play moves into scene five, perhaps suggesting that Jones is delving more deeply into his natural identity and away from the imitation of corrupt white life, white capitalist influences that he may no longer rely on to protect him from the natives' efforts to capture him. Jones' next vision finds him and a handful of slaves on an auction block. Here again, there is nothing negative about the physical descriptions of the slaves, merely references to their ages and genders. However, the white planters who are coming to bid upon them are "*stiff, rigid, unreal, marionettish*," and the "*dandies*" point while the "*belles*" titter (25). It is not the black characters who are being portrayed unsympathetically. Indeed, a black woman is even nursing a baby. Rather, the white characters are portrayed as almost inhuman.

Jones is drawn into his own vision of himself as one of the slaves up for bid. When he realizes his imagined position, he lashes out. "What you all doin', white folks?" he asks. "What's all dis?" (26). Glaring at the white buyers, he charges them, with O'Neill's italics suggesting even deeper meaning: "And *you* sells me? And *you* buys me?" In the italicized references to the auctioneer and bidders, O'Neill suggests that Jones is amazed that these white capitalists—the literal and figurative market transaction of the slave auction marking their primary functions—fail to recognize him as one of their own, one of the true believers in the system they are building and a fellow human being. In addition, O'Neill may be suggesting that Jones is challenging them, intimidating them away from taking his humanity, aware of and infuriated by the injustice of their slave trade. In this scene in particular, Jones' remaining nobility asserts itself, though it is short-lived.

Firing his revolver, Jones is left alone and “*only blackness remains*” (26). This is a key statement, for it suggests not only that Jones is severing his connections to the white Christian businessmen whose system he embraced despite its previous degradations of him and his people, but also that his only essential truth—the only reality when his illusion is shattered—is blackness. However, as he casts off his white guise and edges closer to blackness, his fear increases. He is not ready to accept the basic connection to his own people, whom he is literally and figuratively running from.

Scene six is brief, yet it holds one of the most important signifiers of Jones’ psychological journey back to his heritage. Until this scene, his use of the word “nigger” was usually preceded by some modifying adjective: “bush niggers” (8), “no-count nigger” (12), “trash niggers” (13), “po’ niggers” (14), “common nigger” (15), and so on. But scene six marks Jones’ final use of the term, and, tellingly, he has eliminated the adjective that further qualifies the term negatively; now the natives are only “niggers” (27), and it will be the last time Jones uses the word. O’Neill suggests that Jones is identifying more and more with his ethnicity, limiting the doubly negative references, then eliminating them altogether. Such a realization also suggests that O’Neill is aware of the negativity of the term and that he was using it for a specific dramatic purpose, aware of its dangers but risking them for the purposes of the play.

O’Neill is calling attention to the thoroughness with which Jones has internalized the language of oppression, forging him into “a man who is oxymoronic” (Mendelssohn 27). This unmasking, this revelation of the self, is the movement of the play: psychological and physical efforts to strip away the self-made masks. Jones is not simply a primitivistic avatar for his own “race,” but rather a psychologically complex figure

whose own perspective has been distorted by the colonial ideology of American racism. To call him a stereotype is to extend his internalization into uncomfortable areas. His position as victim of his own tainted subjectivity is not as unusual as it may at first appear. After all, conked hair, skin bleaching and the aftereffects of African American entrepreneur Madame C. J. Walker's assimilationist aesthetic were readily seen in the world outside of the theatre doors. Jones' embodiment and revelation of that subjectivity form the crux of the play's action because Jones shares the same goals, the same ends, the same vicissitudes that all of O'Neill's characters indicate. As Travis Bogard claims, "Jones' acts of will, his pride, his conscious individuality as Emperor are the false masks of a white savage" (141). By divesting himself of the negativity associated with the self-demeaning word, Jones is also stripping away his own assumed white entrepreneurial pipe dream.

At the beginning of scene seven, Jones' psyche is finally approaching the submission to his visions that he has been fighting against. No more eyes popping or rolling wildly. Instead, he stares "*with awed fascination*" (29) at the apparition of the Congo witch doctor. He is "*half-kneeling, half-squatting*" (28), suggesting that he is finally succumbing to the authority of his visions. In fact, he soon joins in the figure's incantations: "*The whole spirit and meaning of the dance has entered into him, has become his spirit. Finally the theme of the pantomime halts on a howl of despair, and is taken up again in a note of savage hope. There is a salvation*" (29). O'Neill is being very clear about the hope to be found in embracing the truth: the inviolability of one's very identity, and the need to strip away masks or, in Jones' case, his theatrical costume and psychological reliance on the white Christianity that has been his jailer. In this sense,

Jones' journey through the jungle is not really away from the natives. After all, there is no proof that the nighttime jungle population is anything more than the product of Jones' own mind. It is a flight from self, energized by his own egotism. Like either of the Bartletts in *Gold* and *Where the Cross is Made*, like Hickey, like Jamie Tyrone, like Yank, like so many others in the O'Neillian mold, Jones' story is the revelation of the man behind the mask. Jones, the site of warring psychological forces, is indeed his own worst enemy.

Virginia Floyd states that Jones' long night's journey into the past is a religious quest as well as a personal search for identity. The dual nature of his journey can be clearly seen in scene seven (*New Assessment* 209). Having rejected his black identity in his journey from porter to Emperor, the royal garb is the embodiment of Jones' theatrical self. In re-living the degradation of his people in the United States, he is reduced to rags. Now back in Africa, kneeling to a shaman, he is in a position to make amends for his denials. But like Dion Anthony in *The Great God Brown*, Jones has forsaken his identity and values along with his beliefs. "Blah! Fixation on old Mama Christianity! You infant blubbering in the dark, you!" (303), cries Dion Anthony, but these words may as well be those of Brutus Jones. Jones may be skeptical of spiritual forces Christian or otherwise, but he turns to them as he nears his own denouement.

The Failure of Reconciliation

In scene seven, humbled by his position, by his failure, by his finally succumbing to the native power of his own heritage, Jones shows his own fixation on "Mama Christianity." Just as he is about to give himself completely over to the witch doctor and

what he represents, Jones calls out, “Oh, Lawd! Mercy on dis po’ sinner! . . . Mercy, Lawd! Mercy!” (29). Casting himself upon the Christian God is for him, however, the final desperate act of a man still in denial, the absolute necessity for an elevated man to succumb to his tragic flaw. Since the playwright’s emphasis on the human relationship with God was a central factor in all of his work, Jones’ final acts play directly into O’Neill’s concerns. Such a response can be seen again in *A Touch of the Poet*, where Con Melody proudly proclaims atheistic views but seemingly repents upon his deathbed. Similarly, Phil Hogan has decried God in *a Moon for the Misbegotten*, but his curses near the end of the play belie his sincerity. The Dreamy Kid also flees and is trapped as he succumbs to the supernatural, or at least superstitious, forces he has belittled. The idea may be extended to other characters, such as Lavinia in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, whose belief in the Mannon curse leads her to self-destruction when she shuts herself up in the family manse. As Thierry Dubost cautions, we must see how the characters draw nearer to divine reality despite their disclaiming of divinity (189). Thus, we must probe below the surface before attempting to define, with certainty, the attitudes of O’Neill’s protagonists. We must go beyond appearances and listen to the language.

Immediately before Jones’ pleas, O’Neill describes how “*the forces of evil demand a sacrifice*” (29). Jones provides it, but there is a question about what those forces of evil are. It cannot be assumed that these forces are those associated with the witch doctor, for the stage directions are written here as a third-person omniscient observation, not as if they were filtered through Jones’ consciousness. The sacrifice, then, is made to the forces that Jones cannot overcome: the white profit-based Christianity that has always considered him less than a man. For it is immediately, “*in*

answer to his prayer,” that he realizes he can take his own life with his own silver bullet, a symbol of both materialism and superstition. His prayer, however, is to the Christian God, and in relying on white people’s God, especially as recognized in the white figure of Christ, finally, in his last act, he dooms himself. In terms of the dramatic action, he is firing at the crocodile, but as representative of his natural self, he is shooting at himself. The evil of the crocodile is blindness to self. In his final act, Jones has chosen to embrace a white God and kill his true nature. It is no wonder that he must die, in that his final choice is to embrace the life-lie. According to O’Neill’s stage directions, “*Jones lies with his face to the ground his arms outstretched*” (30). Prone, with arms outstretched, his physical position recalls particularly that of the crucified Christ. His position suggests that he has tried to atone for his sins and seek redemption, one more troubling concession to his life-lie but one that situates the character within O’Neill’s tradition. He must cast himself upon God, but his mistake is in choosing which god. As Garbiele Poole explains, Jones’ final prayers clearly show repentance, “but one must keep in mind that his prayers are in a sense addressed to the wrong god, since the Christian God partakes in the discourse of white civilization, and is directly opposed to the religious beliefs of the natives” (29). The God he prays to is a divisive one that apparently has allowed the segregation of the black populace, preventing Jones’ connection with it. In doing so, he ensures his doom, not his salvation. What if he had embraced his own native God instead of the white people’s God? Such a choice is the one that the title character in the uncompleted “Bantu Boy” is left with, although unlike the brainwashed Jones, he chooses not to accept the white culture’s answer. According to O’Neill’s notes, the play would have ended with a lion’s roar, a prophetic claiming by the title character of the

homeland's spirit. O'Neill clearly respected that spirit more than did his fictitious emperor.

While his own bullet did not provide the killing stroke—it functions more symbolically as his last chance, according to Jones' earlier comment that it is supposed to be the only thing that can kill him even though its existence is the only thing that protects him—the native Lem declaims to Smithers that he himself has cooked up silver bullets to kill Jones. In a phrase suggesting poetic justice, Lem says simply, “We cotch him” (31). We learn that Jones has run in a big circle and has returned to the first clearing, ideally illustrating O'Neill's concept of the ascending spiral and relating the play and its characters ideologically to others such as *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Great God Brown*, and *Strange Interlude*, which employ the same symbolic movement. Indeed, Jones comes back to the beginning to die, Smithers is on hand, and it is the native cunning that has outwitted Jones' foreign—and white—appropriated knowledge. Though we may consider the deterministic forces of the universe to be the real culprits in Jones' demise, the natives—as blind in their own way as Jones is in his—credit their own efforts.

Smithers himself continues to show how he is still no match for the cleverness and intelligence of those whose world he is invading. In the face of Lem's confident claim of success, Smithers scorns him: “I'll bet yer it ain't 'im they shot at all, yer bleedin' looney!” (31). But indeed it is, and Jones' lifeless body is carried out of the jungle, to be studied “*with great satisfaction*” by Lem and “*frightened awe*” by Smithers, who provides a final tribute to the fallen Emperor: “Silver bullets! Gawd blimey, but yer died in the 'eighth o' style, any'ow!” (32) Here, in this final moment of Jones's saga, the

blind Smithers still sees the silver bullet, symbolic of the killing power of money, as being the height of style. Clearly, Jones is not the only man in the play who is blinded by the lie. Smithers, too, will continue his own pathetic existence trapped by his own blindness, making him at least in this similar to Jones and providing a final image of the common humanity shared by all people in O'Neill's universe.

Jones' death resounds throughout the playwright's later achievements. In casting himself upon God to return home, Jones ensures his own doom as do so many of O'Neill's other characters. Travis Bogard states, "In the end, whatever its indebtedness, *The Emperor Jones* is authentically O'Neill's in form and statement, an outgrowth of many of the experiments he had undertaken in the years before" (137) and a foreshadowing of many of his later accomplishments. The long monologue, the dialect which becomes a sort of language (though not always a welcome one), the use of ghosts and different sorts of masks to catch an audience up into the madness, or at least the psychic trauma, of the protagonists— all resurface in later plays. Most importantly all of these characteristics are shared by black and white characters alike.

If a chief concern of an O'Neill critic is to interrogate the relationship between the final creation of the play and the author's intention for its underlying ideas, one must consider not only the relationship between play and theme but between play and technique. O'Neill is interested primarily in psychological, not anthropological forces. If he brings these last into play in order to lend shadings to the characters' actions, they are only of interest in how they represent the inner psychological drives. All of his characters exist to serve but not only to exploit rhetorical and thematic purposes. Whether early in his career-- with "Thirst," "The Dreamy Kid" or *The Emperor Jones*--

or later--with such plays as *The Iceman Cometh*, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, *A Touch of the Poet*, or *Long Day's Journey Into Night*--the primary struggle for O'Neill's protagonists is that of the unconscious drive against the conscious intellect, as reflected in the search for self-identity among the myriad masks that frustrate resolution (Falk 157). O'Neill's heroes struggle against ghosts in the dark jungles of their souls. The vanquishing of these ghosts is both their triumph and downfall, but it is also the common indicator of their humanity. O'Neill's major black characters are no different in this sense, and they fit snugly into what the playwright saw as the process of human life. The jungle scenes develop the thought processes of the character, in a game of hide-and-ego-seek that all of O'Neill's characters must play to discover who they really are and that establishes a vision of their relation to the greater world.

A study of *The Emperor Jones* and its process of unmasking the self is an early example of O'Neill's foray into the jungle of ethnic relations in the United States, but it is one entirely consistent with his major plays and characters. In a letter to Kenneth McGowan in 1926, O'Neill wrote,

I have many new ideas—for a play similar in technique & length to *Emperor Jones* with Mob as the hero—or villain rather! done with masks entirely—showing the formation of a lynching mob from less harmless, human units—(a white man is victim of this lynching)—its gradual development as Mob & disintegration as Man until the end is a crowd of men with the masks of brutes dancing about the captive they are hanging who has reverted (a Jones but *white*) to a gibbering beast through fear. That is, it is the same lust and fear that made

him commit his crime that takes possession of them and makes them kill him in the same spirit—of enjoyment, of gratified desire. (Bogard and Bryer 204)

This letter is just one of many examples indicating how Jones' regression was not to a particularly ethnocentric consciousness, but a collective one that embraced all humanity by examining the common links that bind us all and that bind O'Neill's plays together.

Perhaps it is best to end discussion of this significant and controversial play with a quote from Charles Gilpin: "It does not make any difference to me if they don't like me, Charley Gilpin, personally....I want them to look at my work; if it is art, I want them to applaud it, if it is not, then let them condemn it" (Krasner 494). While *The Emperor Jones* may never completely struggle out from under the shadow of the racism it struggled against, it nonetheless is secure in its achievement as an early incarnation of O'Neill's penetrating gaze into the heart of darkness and the darkness of the human heart.

Notes

¹ Years later, O'Neill's view of life itself appeared to have changed: "I love life....I always have" (Gelbs 487).

² Later, in his "Dogma for the New Masked Drama," O'Neill would suggest that several of his earlier plays could have benefited from a reliance on physical masks, among them *The Hairy Ape*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, and perhaps not surprisingly, *The Emperor Jones* (Contour 265).

³ According to John Cooley, the new Harlem consciousness perceived not only how old stereotypes persisted in white literature, but also that new ones were created ("In Pursuit" 63).

⁴ A photo on page 148 of *The Essential Black Literature Guide* shows the physically imposing Garvey in full Jones-like regalia, with gold braid, medals and a plumed hat. It is not unlikely that O'Neill would be aware of this image and use it in his visual creation of Jones.

⁵ Robeson often spoke warmly of O'Neill. Long after the playwright's death, Robeson wrote of O'Neill's belief in the "Oneness of Mankind" (*Speaks* 483).

⁶ Of the personal acquaintances from whom he drew to create Brutus Jones, O'Neill drew directly from Adam Scott, a New London church elder who also worked as a bartender. "I'm a religious man on Sunday," Scott claimed, "but the rest of the week I puts my Jesus on the shelf" (*Son and Artist* 29).

Chapter Four

“Yes! Yes! We’ll go abroad where a man is a man—where it don’t make that difference—where people are kind and wise to see the soul under skins.”

--Jim Harris, *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*

In 1922, Eugene O’Neill wrote in his journal: “Play of Johnny T.—Negro who married a white woman—base play on his experience as I have seen it intimately—but no reproduction, see it only as man’s” (*O’Neill at Work* 53). Critics have often suggested that O’Neill did indeed base his play-in-progress upon his intimate experience with Joe Smith, a gambler friend from his days in Greenwich Village who was married to a white woman. But since the play ultimately became recognized as an early attempt by O’Neill to portray the effects of racism on stage, it is important to recognize that experiences other than O’Neill’s friendship with Smith contributed to the play’s evolution. In fact, study of the play indicates that the playwright was less concerned with investigating racism in the play than he was about interpersonal and marital relations. According to Ronald Wainscott in his discussion of notable stage productions of O’Neill’s plays, although *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* was harshly received by some critics at the time of the play’s premiere in May, 1924, those critics subsequently claimed that even had the

production itself been effective, “the play no longer spoke to the social problems it was intended to address” (104).

Such a statement begs the question, of course: “What problems was it intended to address?” From the comments made by critics at the time of its premiere, the play’s assumed thematic focus was considered to be racism. However, O’Neill’s own comments indicate otherwise: “The real tragedy...is that the woman could not see their ‘togetherness’—the Oneness of Mankind....But the Negro question, which, it must be remembered is not an issue in the play, isn’t the only one which can arouse prejudice” (Gelbs 535). O’Neill seemed to be referring to prejudice that develops for any reason, prejudice that in varied forms rumbles beneath the dramatic action of his canon. In fact, O’Neill claimed that Jim Harris, the black protagonist of the play, could just as well have been a Japanese man in San Francisco, a Jew, or some other ethnic type. The Gelbs even suggest that O’Neill stopped short of including “shanty Irish actor” in his list of which ethnic types the play could portray, a clear reference to O’Neill’s father, James, in his list of Jim Harris’ ethnically defined alternatives (535).

So why does critical focus on the play’s issues of ethnicity overwhelm what O’Neill clearly indicated were more universal concerns? According to the playwright, “The play itself, as anyone who has read it with intelligence knows, is never a ‘race problem’ play. Its intention is confined to portraying the special lives of individual human beings” (Gelbs 550). Even apart from its portrayal of a man and woman ensnared by their shared love and despair, the play’s focus on the marriage between a black man and a white woman was remarkably risky for its time. However easy it may be to understand how the volatile, threatening nature of a contemporaneous race issue like

miscegenation could supplant the play's intended focus on individual lives, at a time when the KKK was at its most active and Jim Crow laws flourished in the South—and slightly more covertly in the rest of the country—the fact remains that O'Neill's rhetoric of ethnicity in the play masks its more central issues. True, matters of ethnicity and intercultural marriage continue to affect critical and audience response to the play, but perhaps a discussion of O'Neill's intent will help to clarify the playwright's concerns at the time. The narrative of miscegenation concealed O'Neill's greater dramatic intentions: to portray the necessity of understanding the "Oneness of Mankind." As he had done in earlier plays with ethnic protagonists, O'Neill set about to include ethnically marginalized characters within the grand scheme of the American nightmare. And as he did in the majority of his plays, he illustrated in *All God's Chillun* how personal success in the form of interpersonal relationships can only exist in pipe dreams.

Early Challenges

The scandal surrounding the premier production of the play was intense and probably figured significantly in critics' initial focus on the play's ethnic component. It opened at the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village in mid-May, 1924, amidst much furor because of its portrayal of a marriage between a black man and white woman. Along with threatening letters from private citizens and the KKK, a mayoral interdict heightened tensions over the play's content. Prior to the play's opening, the New York City mayor's office refused to grant a permit, required in the employment of child actors, for children to play the opening scene, in which the protagonists are children before the roles are assumed by adults for the characters' later lives. While the permit was generally

intended to protect children from being overworked, in this case, it was enforced to appease the racists. On opening night, the director read the children's lines. O'Neill even referred to the mayor as "chief botherer" (Bogard and Bryer 187). Jimmy Light, a friend of the playwright, once recalled how O'Neill wrote, "Go fuck yourself" on the bottom of a threat to kill him and his family, then sent it back to the sender (Black 301). According to Kenneth Macgowan, O'Neill's longtime colleague, "It is no risk at all to say that *All God's Chillun Got Wings* received more publicity before production than any play in the history of the theatre, possibly of the world" (Gelbs 551).

For O'Neill, the play was even misunderstood after its opening, and by minds perhaps more qualified than the mayor's to evaluate its narrative elements. For example, Heywood Hale Broun, writing in *The New York World*, called it "tiresome," describing how it "gives to a first rate Negro a third rate white woman" (Manheim 64), a response O'Neill may have been considering when writing to a friend in the Provincetown Players ten years later, recollecting the experience of *All God's Chillun* and its reception: "all the pseudo-liberal moderns" gave "their narrow guts away in a gush of hysterical, bigoted bilge, thinly concealed as objective criticism" (Bogard and Bryer 429).

For O'Neill, the public's view of the play as a study of black-white relations was narrow-minded and misinformed, for the playwright was interested in social and cultural forces as they functioned within the characters, as outer manifestations of inner psychological drives. Indeed, there is a battle of black and white in the play, as evidenced by the expressionistic set that illustrated the divergence of two urban thoroughfares, one populated by black and one by white, as well as the contrasting music emanating from the homes on each street. The expressionistic nature of the set itself

indicates the inner conditions that O'Neill was trying to present, psychic drives that expressionism as an artistic or dramatic technique typically represents. It is no wonder that O'Neill criticized the critics who could not even understand the clear signals sent by the expressionistic design in the opening and subsequent scenes. For the battle of black and white is not merely between the ethnic identities of the characters, but within their psyches as well. True, the lethal forces of racism have victimized both Jim and Ella. But as the characters themselves subsume their natures to the institutionalized racism that labels white as good and black as bad, so does their victimization at its hands illustrate the psychological dysfunction that underscores so many of O'Neill's plays: the inability of the characters to grasp the nature of their tragic flaws, their failure to recognize what O'Neill termed the "Oneness," the common bond that ties humanity together in its common doom. Critic Clifford Leech is aware of what O'Neill was striving to dramatize:

O'Neill may imply that a black-white association in marriage brings into greater prominence the tensions, the resentments, and the reciprocal destruction that are a danger in any marriage. This is probably his intention, for we have seen in relation to *The Hairy Ape* that for him the immediate social problem was a symbol of a deeper sickness in modern life. (43)

Family Ties

O'Neill, of course, understood that "reciprocal destruction" from personal experience. Astonishingly, it was almost forty years after the initial production of the play before critics alluded to that personal connection, that experience he knew "intimately." In their work on O'Neill, the Gelbs pointed out that the husband and wife

in *All God's Chillun* bore the same first names as O'Neill's parents, Jim and Ella. The scandal over the play's ethnic issues and origins had obscured the play's more personal origins in O'Neill's own family. Without awareness of the play's sources, the criticism naturally centered on black-white relations rather than on its wellspring of psychological underpinnings from the playwright's personal history.

According to the Gelbs, O'Neill did not bother to disguise the names of his parents for several reasons. First, they were recently deceased. Second, O'Neill's willingness to confront openly his familial demons was still more than a decade in the future, and his focus on miscegenation would keep his critics and audiences from peering too clearly into his own psychological recesses (10). The fact that Jim is black and Ella is white then appears to be a centrally symbolic rhetorical strategy to symbolize the incompatibility between the O'Neills, one in which Jim is the ethnic other and Ella the white "standard." Such a realization ties the play even more closely to arguably the greatest of O'Neill's works, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, where the line between biography and dramatic fiction blurs even more.

In *All God's Chillun* and *Long Day's Journey*, the tortured female lead is a prisoner in a marriage that had initially seemed a salvation. Both Ella Downey and Mary Tyrone are uncomfortable around their husband's acquaintances and feel a disconnection from their own families and friends. Similarly, Ella often speaks a kind of childish prattle, recreating her happier childhood (and childlike) conversations with Jim, while Mary longs for her protected youth and frequently speaks as if lost in her own innocent past. Even more significant than the similar manners of speech is the predicament they share that drives each to her own form of irrationality. For both alternate between a

desperate devotion to and an equally strained disgust for their husbands. Caught between these polar responses (among other attendant forces and events), the two regress, pulling their despairing spouses with them toward the abyss of complete dysfunction.

The similarities between the two characters extend to the husbands as well, for as Jim sacrifices his profound desire to become a lawyer to satisfy his wife's needs, so does James sacrifice his own dream of artistic success to support the material needs of his wife and family. The question remains: if the dramatic action in *All God's Chillun* is so clearly a reflection of the events and ideas in *Long Day's Journey* and O'Neill's own life, how can charges of racism in the former be understood except as unintentional remnants of a cultural bias so prevalent at the time? The dramatic action is uncannily similar, yet the former is criticized as being about black-white relations while the latter is not. Further, do such remnants supersede O'Neill's accomplishment in creating black characters who were not stereotypes but rather human beings, and in doing so, including them, via narrative and rhetorical strategy, among the characters who also try and must fail to achieve their dreams?

The answer may begin with an appreciation of where *All God's Chillun Got Wings* fits into O'Neill's larger body of work, the inclusive nature of the title itself being indicative of the "Oneness" of mankind that O'Neill fervently created and recreated throughout his career.

A search for unity informs the body of his work and echoes from play to play. According to Thierry Dubost, the protagonist's quest in an O'Neill play is generally an effort at forming a whole within oneself or with another character in order to achieve harmony, characterized as an impression of oneness (216). The problem, Dubost

claims, is that the quest for unity is hopeless within the confines of a modernist universe in which the characters recognize their ineradicable isolation from other characters. This distancing causes moral suffering that the characters try to remedy at any cost in their search for supreme harmony (229). Whether the character is Yank in *The Hairy Ape*, Lavinia in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Robert Mayo in *Beyond the Horizon*, or even the title character in *Hughie*, that search is the same as the search by Jim Harris (and Ella Downey) in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*. These characters and the real people whose lives they dramatize are ensnared by their cosmic isolation and thus ultimately represent not any ethnic or even class consciousness but rather a split between individual human beings. "The racial factor is incidental," says O'Neill. "The play is a character study of two human beings" (*Son and Artist* 135). It is this exploration of the universality of human experience that allows the play and its black protagonist to escape from charges of pejoratively ethnic delineation. We know the dialect, the stereotypes of black and white characters, and the expressionistically simplistic black-white dichotomy may have created, in our time, a sense of datedness in the play, but if we understand how the dialect is applied with equal skill (or lack of) to characters on both sides of the color line, if the Irish pugilist Mickey is no less a collection of cultural stereotypes than the Mammy-like Mrs. Harris, it should be clear that the play must exist on some other level. Stereotyping is not reserved for one particular cultural group, but is subject to appropriation by all. For O'Neill, that level is the personal and psychological.

This level is the same platform upon which his other plays operate, and in being so, reaffirms the play and its characters as full participants in O'Neill's dark universe. Jim is not a slave to white society any more than he is a slave to society in general.

Rather, he is in thrall to his own psychology, as are so many other O'Neill protagonists who are not so easily defined by their ethnicity but are equally driven by their need for an illusory mask. The conflict in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* is that of O'Neill's work in general: the conflict between self-induced, ego-driven illusion and the recognition that a surrender of that illusion will lead to defeat. According to Arthur Hobson Quinn in "Eugene O'Neill," the playwright is not concerned about whether a play's ending is happy or sad, at least in the usual sense: "he is determined, however, that it be logical" (5). For O'Neill, that logic rested in the characters' psyches, ethnicity notwithstanding. As Lavinia says in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, "There's no one left to punish me. I've got to punish myself" (1053). In this sense, Jim Harris is in no way psychologically different from Lavinia, or Brutus Jones, or Hickey, or O'Neill himself in the tortured writing of his heavily autobiographical *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. John Nickel writes of *The Hairy Ape* that the play's message remains clear: "all human beings, regardless of race, can be made by society to believe and act as if they are less than human" (37). Jim's acquiescence to societal beliefs is simply "logical" for a man of his time—or ours.

Exploring the Play

O'Neill's plays of the early 1920s reveal the playwright's awareness that the problems of alienation and isolation were universal, no less for blacks as victims than whites as victimizers. "Spiritually speaking, there is no superiority between races," O'Neill once said. "We're just a little ahead mentally as a race, though not as individuals" (Gelbs 552). Such a statement may confirm charges of O'Neill's racism,

though it is an incomplete idea, for he goes on to say, “To me every human being is a special case, with his or her own special set of values” (553). Thus it must be left up to his plays to reveal the truth or illusion of his claim that the essential human dilemma exists irrespective of ethnicity. His dramatic action seems to paint a more consistent picture of his intent than his problematic statements, which are often contradictory.

The opening image of the play is of great significance visually and aurally, for it is within this initial exposure that O’Neill’s theme is quickly and forcefully expressed:

Four-story tenements stretch away down the skyline of the two streets. The fire escapes are crowded with people. In the street leading left, the faces are all white; in the street leading right, all black. It is hot Spring. On the sidewalk are eight children, four boys and four girls. Two of each sex are white, two black.

(85)

In this expressionistically contrasting set, an important clue to O’Neill’s vision presents itself: equality. The set is divided in half, the characters are equally divided in number and ethnicity, and the children are engaged in a common game of marbles. Beyond this physical delineation of some type of cosmic equilibrium, there is the sound of laughter from each street. On the black side, the people are “*frankly participants in the spirit of Spring,*” while on the opposite side, the whites are “*laughing constrainedly, awkward in natural expression*” (85). If there is any social categorization in effect here, then O’Neill’s relaxed, natural African American bystanders appear to have gotten the greater share of admiration. If, as O’Neill’s stage directions detail, the laughter “*expresses the difference in race*” (85), the presence of mutual laughter also demonstrates the common

bond shared by the two groups: both laugh. Thus, there exist both similarity and difference in this opening scene.

Singing from each street further reinforces the initial sense of similarity and difference. From the whites' street comes a "*high-pitched nasal tenor*" singing "Only a Bird in a Gilded Cage," while the black population sings a chorus of "I Guess I'll Have to Telegraph my Baby" (85). Again, both populations are singing, but the whites' choice of song and its implications of entrapment, together with the pejoratively described singer, indicate a more negative portrayal, or at least an early indication of impending tensions that the white population seems to be more affected by. The groups are different, but in spite of their surface appearance or sound, they are still engaged in common activities. While O'Neill may occasionally have used language unfavorably discriminating between ethnic groups, the description and action introducing his play belies any sense of favoritism to the white. And although the two populations retain their behavioral differences, they remain, in their common actions, similarly engaged in laughter, song and child's play.

Further, both groups display behaviors that will eventually torment both Jim and Ella as adults. In the first scene, one of the black boys refers to Jim as "Jim Crow," and shortly thereafter, the white girls refer to Ella as "Painty Face." Obviously, O'Neill is aware of and portraying the dangers of bigoted behavior even within one's own ethnic group—with neither side being absolved of guilt in. Much has been made of Jim's ethnic self-hatred, but these early indications of ethnic self-stereotyping suggest that the white characters are equally troubled by the lingering effects of inherited American racism.

Furthermore, while Jim denies his ethnic heritage, Ella's own ethnic self-hatred is often overlooked. One of Ella's earliest lines demonstrates O'Neill's balancing act in *All God's Children Got Wings*. When Jim "protectingly" tries to comfort her and subsequently calls her "Painty Face," she pleads with him to stop calling her by that name. In response to Jim's apparent appreciation of her "red 'n' white" face, she cries, "I hate it!" (87). When Jim immediately protests, calling her color "purty," she replies, "I hate it. I wish I was black like you" (87). Ella's stated ethnic self-loathing foreshadows Jim's later, parallel experience.

Scene Two takes place nine years later, the night of Jim's high school graduation, which Jim confesses is his "second try. I didn't pass last year" (91). The words, while few, are significant, for it is the first indication that even without Ella's eventual psychologically motivated efforts to impede his success in law school, Jim is susceptible to his own psychological stumbling blocks. If Ella's efforts at tearing down Jim are tortuously realized later in the play, here Jim's own self-imposed limits are at least as significant in his eventual capitulation to his wife. Significantly, there is no indication whatsoever that Jim has failed because he has subsumed his own needs to those of white people. Indeed, there may be a lingering sense of self-doubt here, but where Jim will be condemned by critics for failing at the hands of his white wife and her attacks on his competence, here we see that even without Ella's efforts he is subject to failure. He is a slave to white transgression, but he is equally in thrall to his own demons.

Joe, a neighborhood tough from the black side of the block, shares Jim's self-loathing but is vociferous in its expression, unlike Jim, who at least tries to suppress it. Out of jealousy for Jim's educational success, Joe brags to his white friend Shorty, "I gits

dat Jim alone, you wait!” (92). When he does corner Jim, he threatens him with violence: “Tell me befo’ I wrecks yo’ face in! Is you a nigger or isn’t you? . . . Is you a nigger, Nigger? Nigger, is you a nigger?” Though Jim has avoided giving in to Joe’s name-calling, even calling him “friend” in the face of threats, Jim finally concedes. “We’re both niggers,” he says, at which point the hand-organ man begins to play “Bon-Bon Buddie the Chocolate Drop,” suggesting Jim’s acquiescence to racist thought, despite his earlier defiance. It is the acceptance of the hated epithet, rather than the utterance of the epithet itself, that leads to Jim’s eventual doom. His admission that the word describes him is what marks the beginning of his descent, ironically on the night of his greatest success to date. However, it is important to see behind the mask of language. Whereas Ella, shortly before Jim’s admission to Joe, stumbles through a painfully inadequate denial of her own racism that simultaneously indicates its falsity—hers is a patently transparent denial--Jim too hides behind the mask of language in order to protect himself from threats like Joe’s. Again, the black and white characters rely on the same strategy to overcome their immediate difficulties, just as they do in so many of O’Neill’s other plays.

Another similarity between Jim and other O’Neill characters is his materialistic drive, which spells doom no less for him than for victims in other plays. In Scene Two, Joe accosts Jim, accusing him of “tryin’ to buy yerself white” (93) because Jim’s father had found financial success in owning his own business. In response to Joe’s challenge, Jim can only retort, “Some day—I’ll show you—” (93), the halting speech a clear indication that Jim has great difficulty in denying Joe’s claim that through financial gain, Jim wishes to establish himself in wealthy white society. Jim’s desires demonstrate he

has capitulated to the capitalistic American dream of a kind of personal salvation through material success. In his pervasive rhetorical attack on the power and dangers of capitalist acquisitiveness, O'Neill often conflates his characters' desire for personal accomplishment with their wish for financial success. For Jim, being a lawyer is never even suggested as a route to ensure social justice for his people. This reinforces the suggestion that Jim is indeed trying to "buy white," a claim that he cannot deny. Thus, his materialistic drive dominates his psychological need for security, stability, and respect, leading in part to his defeat.

Travis Bogard confirms such an idea in his discussion of the African mask that overshadows the dramatic action after Jim and Ella's return from Europe. He says, "In contrast to the cheap, gaudy furnishing of the room, the mask by virtue of its workmanship and its religious spirit achieves a power that is revengeful, even diabolical. The diabolism arises, however, from Jim's attempt to 'buy white'" (197). Jim's conflict with the play's main symbol of ethnic power illustrates the psychological conflict between the aggressive American materialism that led to and furthered the growth of racism in this country and the still potent though increasingly vestigial old gods for whom no replacement satisfactory to O'Neill had yet emerged.

When Worlds Collide

An examination of the conflict between new and old gods supports the notion that *All God's Chillun Got Wings* is not so much about black-white relations or miscegenation *per se* as it is an extension of O'Neill's aesthetic wherein Jim Harris is subject to the same forces as his white counterparts and is therefore an equal participant in O'Neill's

universe. Jim, like so many others, expresses the playwright's sympathy for the oppressed individual caught between forces that threaten to destroy him. And even if, according to Arthur Hobson Quinn, the character's struggle ends in failure (as it must), "that effort has been worth while, and the hero or heroine secures our sympathy" (7).

Since early in O'Neill's career, the social organism—the locals in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the stokers in the *Glencairn* plays, the natives in *The Emperor Jones*--has functioned centrally in his plays. As *The Hairy Ape* clearly shows, O'Neill's main focus was on the individual and his or her relationship, individual or collective, to the universe. If racism is but an outgrowth of the social and cultural organism—societal response to perceived biological or cultural difference--then in plays such as *The Hairy Ape*, O'Neill illustrates the effects of society on characters such as Yank by having a white man become, in essence, "black"—in the white majority's biological view of "race"—in the face of cultural exclusion. The playwright seems to indicate that degeneration is not biological as much as it is cultural, and as seen in *All God's Chillun*, the idea manifests itself in Jim's acquiescence to Joe's categorization of him as a "nigger." While Joe sees biological distinction in Jim's "race," Jim must actually *perform*, according to some cultural understanding, what blackness "is."

Furthermore, much like Yank in *The Hairy Ape*, Jim becomes aware of his difference and is subsequently intimidated by the judgmental white gaze. "I swear I know more'n any member of my class," Jim claims, though he may not be aware of the double meaning inherent in that last word. At the end of the play, married to a domineering white woman in an attempt to move beyond that "class," his effort at entering that society is disastrous because that culture is as oppressive to him, though in a

different way, as the one from which he had tried to escape. Like Yank, like Dreamy and like Brutus Jones, Jim Harris tries to become what he never can become: “the whitest of the white” (118). Jim’s being black is not a problem for O’Neill. But Jim’s rejecting his black heritage is a problem. Much like Brutus Jones’ ultimate repudiation of his own ethnic history—and not the pejorative white perception of that history--Jim’s early willingness to accept his status as “nigger,” with all its negative connotations, is clearly indicative of his eventual failure. According to Richard Dana Skinner, there are few scenes in all of O’Neill’s writing as profoundly evocative as the one in which Jim calls himself “nigger,” reflecting as it does one of the writer’s major issues: “the difficulty of facing the reality of one’s own soul and accepting it” (134). What Jim has accepted, and why it is so affecting, is a “reality” that itself is a mask: that black people are “niggers,” existing only in some negative cultural relation to white people.

All God’s Chillun Got Wings also thematically mirrors the earlier *Welded* and serves further to link Jim’s conflict to that of many of O’Neill’s protagonists. As Travis Bogard explains, the opening image in Act III of *Welded* was “germinal” to the concept that the playwright would explore in his next play, *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* (191). In describing the crux of the relationship between the mismatched central couple in *Welded*, O’Neill writes, “*They act for the moment like two persons of different races, deeply in love, but separated by a barrier of language*” (268). Along with this challenge, one that both Ella and Jim face, is the notion that the husband and wife in *Welded* are victims of a mutual alienation, that they are somehow inherently separated. At the same time, the central couple in *Welded* is cut off from the outside world, much as Jim and Ella are being boxed in by the “shrinking” walls of their apartment, and Eleanor is a woman

who undermines her husband's ambitions. Michael accepts his fate, as Jim must do in order to survive, calling love "the insult we swallow as the price of life" (265).

A further example joining *All God's Chillun Got Wings* to other O'Neill plays not dealing with black-white relations occurs in *The Great God Brown*, in which Margaret refuses (or is unable) to acknowledge her husband's true identity, a conflict that results in his destruction, much as Ella's desire for Jim to be "Painty Face" leads to his. Similarly, Con Melody, in *A Touch of the Poet*, works fervently to hide his shanty origins and to portray himself as a gentleman. Much like Jim Harris, Melody eventually assumes the role he has been trying to avoid all along: he acts as an Irish peasant, just as Jim plays the subservient "Jim Crow" to Ella's white matron.

Still another idea that *All God's Chillun* shares with much of O'Neill's body of work is the destruction of a potentially good man by a wife who does not accept his potential. In *The Iceman Cometh*, Hickey is driven to murdering his wife because he is unable to resolve the conflict between the physical and the psychological, her need for support against his desire to understand humanity's need to embrace a pipe dream or meet utter destruction. Ezra Mannon is similarly destroyed by his wife in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and Ruth's effort to possess and change her own husband dooms Robert in *Beyond the Horizon*. In "Diff'rent," Emma cannot accept Caleb as he is, requiring from him something different or nothing at all. Other examples of destructive wives weave their way throughout O'Neill's plays: Mrs. Keeney in "Ile," Nina Leeds in *Strange Interlude*, Abbie in *Desire Under the Elms*, Mrs. Rowland in "Before Breakfast," and Mary Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, among others. Thus, O'Neill infuses Jim and Ella with his familiar narrative logic of personal psychology in

which they are unable to overcome their awareness of their cosmic alienation, their aloneness. Indeed, as the playwright once remarked in regard to *All God's Chillun*, "The racial factor is incidental. . . . The play is a character study of two human beings" (*Son and Artist* 135), two people facing conflicts within their own egos.

Scene Three in *All God's Chillun* takes place five years after the events of Scene Two. Jim and Ella are now adults. The Expressionistically divided set remains, however. An arc-lamp illuminates both black and white faces with a "*favorless cruelty*" (96), and the drunken, nasal tenor from the whites' street is countered with a "*maudlin*" voice from the blacks'. The opposing forces remain simultaneously the same and different. We learn that Ella has been victimized by Shorty and Mickey, two white characters, while Jim has tried and failed to pass his exam. Ella tells Jim "*indifferently*" that she is now free from her oppressive relationship with the abusive Mickey. Jim "*wearily*" responds, "We're never free—except to do what we have to do" (99). With these words, Jim seems to become the amanuensis for O'Neill, voicing a philosophy that is eerily reminiscent of the playwright's own view of humanity's role in the universe.

Ella, who resents Jim, testifies to his worthiness: "You've been the only one in the world who's stood by me—the only understanding person—and all after the rotten way I used to treat you" (100). Although clearly Jim is intended to be seen as a good man, unfortunately his self-understanding is also self-defeating. "All love is white," he tells Ella; "I've always loved you" (101). While such a statement may provide fodder for critics who see O'Neill as favoring, consciously or otherwise, white standards, it must be remembered that O'Neill's ethnic portrayals can be understood in terms of his experience as he has seen it "intimately." It would be improbable to assume that O'Neill seriously

intended Jim to defer to a privileged caste. Rather, it seems more likely that Jim's comment reflects a personal, more so than cultural, psychology: Ella is white. Jim loves Ella. Therefore, love itself is white. Such a syllogism need not suggest any objective superiority inherent in whiteness. Just as Jim tries to, in a sense, "buy" himself white, he does so because whiteness is, to him, the mark of success, not necessarily the mark of superiority. This is why he tries to become white: with Ella on his side, he is convinced of his increased social standing and subsequent success in law school. Ironically and tellingly, he overlooks his own father's success, but such is his *hamartia* that he accepts the culturally imposed definition of success rather than his personal experience of it. Jim is not blind, only blinded.

Shortly after, he promises to take Ella away, to find somewhere free of racism, presaging Lavinia Mannon's own desire to escape to some island where she could be free of the psychological forces that have trapped her within the family curse. But even as he hopes for the best and pledges his devotion, pledging to be Ella's "black slave" and to adore her as "sacred," Jim immediately falls to his knees "*in a frenzy of self-abnegation*" (101) that indicates how aware Jim is of his own falsehood in elevating Ella. Jim has recognized his own life-lie, and it is the lie of a quantitative ethnic superiority. He has attempted to breach the walls of white society in vain, finally realizing that to do so was to acknowledge the acculturated belief in the superiority of one cultural group.

Unfortunately for Jim--as for Hickey, Parritt, Eben Cabot, Lavinia Mannon, Nina Leeds, Con Melody, Robert Mayo, and so many others--the perception of the life-lie as baseless leads him to his own destruction. If the life-lie supports characters in their individual pursuits, an awareness of its falsity undermines their efforts and predicates failure, as

happens with Jim. In this narrative strategy, too, Jim clearly reflects O'Neill's vision and is thus a full participant in the human condition.

It is important to remember also that Jim Harris is the first of O'Neill's black characters not to employ stereotypical black dialect. Harris and his sister Hattie are portrayed as intelligent, educated, committed people and are certainly presented with greater authorial sympathy than the white characters in the play. Mickey is abusive, both physically and mentally, and Ella is constraining and paranoid. Jim and Hattie, however, evince a more elevated social and cultural understanding. If Mrs. Harris, their mother, carries shades of O'Neill's earlier "Mammy Saunders" in her dialect (plausible, since she is not educated to the degree her children are), Hattie foreshadows such later feisty, proactive and ethnically aware dramatic characters such as Beneatha in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Here again, O'Neill is granting at least equal intellectual status to his ethnic characters.

The Harris women make their first appearance at the beginning of Act Two. In the Harris' flat, which is "*of the better sort*" (105), there is more expressionistic contrast, with old and new objects clashing "*queerly*." There are two telling objects on the walls. The first is a portrait of an elderly black man described as having "*an able, shrewd face*" but wearing "*outlandish lodge regalia, a get-up adorned with medals, sashes, a cocked hat with frills—the whole effect...absurd...*" (105). The immediate connections to Brutus Jones and Marcus Garvey are apparent and telling. Again, O'Neill underscores the exaggeration in the costume to exploit its masking function, though costuming itself is not inherently "absurd."

However, O'Neill seems to be suggesting not that black people in costumes, even grandly ornate ones, make for absurdity. Rather, the portrait works in contrast to another obvious item on the set. In a corner is a mask from the Congo, "*a grotesque face, inspiring obscure, dim connotations in one's mind, but beautifully done, conceived in a true religious spirit.*" O'Neill's appreciation for the mask is obvious, as is his focus on the "true" spirituality associated with it. Unlike the false Christianity created and embraced by Brutus Jones, the Congo mask represents the spirituality of those who are part of that culture. While O'Neill goes on to say that it "*dominates by a diabolical quality,*" he specifies that the diabolism is perhaps a result of the contrast imposed upon it within the mundane surroundings. In this brief opening description, O'Neill indicates his respect for the Harris' cultural heritage. Not only has he suggested that the false mask of the military regalia is "*absurd,*" but he has also ironically labeled the Congo mask as representative of "*true*" spirit. He has used the masking device to call attention to the paradox of masking, that it can either distort or reveal. Masking oneself to be something other than oneself is absurd; accepting one's own heritage is worthy of respect.

We learn shortly thereafter that the mask was presented to Jim and Ella as a wedding gift by Hattie, described as having "*a high-strung, defiant face—an intelligent head showing both power and courage. She is dressed severely, mannishly*" (105). Clearly, Hattie is not the kowtowing or fallen "negress" that populated the popular stage at the time. Not only does she seem to flout assigned ethnic roles but also gender roles, and she is not the sexually charged mulatto of so much white American fiction and drama—the kind of figure that frightened the Dancer in "Thirst." Mrs. Harris, on the other hand, is very sketchily presented, "*a mild-looking, gray haired Negress of sixty-five,*

dressed in an old-fashioned Sunday-best dress” (105). If she is a throwback to Mammy Saunders and her ilk, O’Neill underplays the similarity by minimizing subjectivity in her description. However, as the Congo mask dominates the room, Hattie dominates her mother, contrasting her to women who represent, as her mother does, earlier times. O’Neill seems to be suggesting that the future does not belong to those time-faded relics but to the new, the defiant. The mask may not be new, but the pride with which it is displayed may signify a new respect for a cultural heritage heretofore largely suppressed, at least within view of the white society of the time.

O’Neill also suggests the positive future for black people in Hattie’s charge to Mrs. Harris as they wait for Jim and Ella to return from Europe: “We don’t deserve happiness till we’ve fought the fight of our race and won it!” (107) Not only is the playwright forcefully making a case for self-empowerment among groups who traditionally have been oppressed, but he is, consciously or otherwise, echoing one of the recurrent characteristics of American slave narratives and folk tales: the necessity to actively secure freedom for and by people who have unjustly been denied access to it by a powerful majority.

When Jim enters, he recounts the story of how, despite his own happiness abroad, Ella became progressively troubled. “I was happy then—and I really guess she was happy, too—in a way—for a while” (108), he says. This echoing of Mary Tyrone’s reflection on her own carefree youth further connects the characters to O’Neill’s intimate family experience, linking together black and white characters who suffer through the same emotional vicissitudes. Shortly thereafter, in recounting the decision to return to the United States, Jim has “*talked himself now into a state of happy confidence*” (109),

recounting the need “to be really free inside and able then to go anywhere and live in peace and equality without any guilty uncomfortable feeling coming up to rile us” (109). He again looks to the past, one that we now know is tinged with his misperception, for there was no such freedom to be found there before he left. He remains bound by illusion. However, in this speech, Jim reflects Hattie’s defiant nature and suggests his own confidence. If she can succeed at post-graduate study as she explains to Ella who looks at her with “*queer defiance*” (110), then she suggests to Jim that he can also. Hattie’s forward-thinking attitude further underscores Jim’s entrapment in the past.

From the couple’s return until the end of the play, Ella is portrayed and described in even less positive terms than she was before marriage to Jim. If she smiles at Jim, she smiles “*a tolerant, superior smile,*” and when she sees the Congo mask, she gives a choked scream and looks at it “*with disgust*” (111). At one point, she even sneers at the portrait of the outrageously costumed Mr. Harris, calling him “a circus horse” and claiming in her fear, “It’s in the blood, I suppose. They’re ignorant, that’s all there is to it” (113). Since O’Neill has been careful to portray Ella as victimized by her own racism, her comments should be understood by the audience to be the ravings of her own ignorance. On the other hand, O’Neill ensured early in the play that Jim’s problem is not his ignorance or its resultant fear, but his willingness to accept the rhetorical labels that serve to perpetuate that ignorance. When he refers to himself as “Nigger,” he understands the social imperative that requires him to do so. It is his life-lie and his failure.

However, he proceeds to succumb to the needs of his life-lie as the action develops. While the Congo mask is made, through expressionistic stage devices, to

appear physically larger and thus more dominant from scene to scene (much like the encroaching forest in *The Emperor Jones*), Jim appears to shrink from reality and into his life-lie as his wife grows increasingly disturbed. As Hattie tells him, "...you're liable to break down too, if you don't take care of yourself" (116). Here, O'Neill is foreshadowing the ending of the play, wherein both Jim and Ella will descend into illusory worlds they have accepted to sustain their respective life-lies: Ella's insistence on inverting their ethnic identities, and Jim's need for denial in the face of his wife's insanity. When Hattie tells Jim that Ella called her a "dirty nigger," Jim replies, "No! She never said that ever! She never would!" (117). While the nature of their illusions may result from different needs—Ella's cultural need to enforce her sense of superiority of white over black and Jim's psychological need to acquiesce to her desires—the end is the same: they are both victims of illusions resulting from the rhetorical mask of racist psychology. "I've got to prove that I'm the whitest of the white," Jim exclaims (118); that is, he must prove that his love (which he equates with whiteness because Ella is white, as discussed previously) is the purest, but to do so means to submerge his intellect and build up his life-lie. In this case, the "reality of one's own soul" is, for Jim, the reality that he has internalized, consciously or otherwise, a sense of white superiority.

However, before he succumbs to Ella's ranting, he again sounds off with a rhetoric of ethnicity that reflects O'Neill's. "You with your fool talk of the black race and the white race!" he tells Hattie. "Where does the human race get a chance to come in?" (118). After ironically suggesting that the concept of the shared human race should be locked up, he takes his own suggestion in his need to support his life-lie: "I'm going to lock the door and it's going to stay locked, you hear?" (119). He has made his decision to

succumb to social forces that dictate and maintain white supremacy, and therefore he must pay the price. In doing so, he again ensures his full participation in O'Neill's dramas of doomed humanity.

Going Behind the Masks

Whether their doom is pre-ordained or not, for the first time O'Neill's black characters in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* are not described with stereotyped negative features that seem at a casual glance to contradict his own progressive views in earlier plays. There are neither eyes popping nor any other remnants of minstrelsy. In fact, the only grotesque descriptions in the play (the Congo mask notwithstanding) concern Ella. At the beginning of Scene Three in Act Two, Ella "*is painfully thin, her face is wasted, but her eyes glow with a mad energy, her movements are abrupt and springlike*" (120). In her efforts to attack the Congo mask because she feels it represents the power to take Jim away from her, she mingles "*crazy mockery, fear, and bravado*" (121). In this, at least, she is right: it is a mask that has caused her problems, but not an African mask. Rather, it is the mask, or life-lie, of her ethnic superiority that has driven her to the edge of madness. In a society dictating that white people are somehow more worthy of privilege, she cannot cope with a situation in which black people are happier, more successful and more empowered than white people. For O'Neill, it is a personal connection between his own experience and his artistic aims: first, because Ella functions extra-textually as a biographical recreation of his own mother; and second, because racist philosophy in its emphasis on division is anathema to his personal view of humanity's "Oneness." It is no wonder, then, that the insidious power of this divisive force is

exposed and held accountable for its effects on these characters' lives. Like Ella, he blames the mask, or life-lie, for the problems it has caused.

Despite his devotion to Ella, even in her insanity, Jim still seems to recognize his choice between reality and illusion. Admitting Ella's racism would force him to confront the falseness of his life-long attraction to her, but continuing to shield himself from it will empower the life-lie that will lead him to darker corners yet. Near the end of the play, he mockingly taunts God: "Good Lord, child, how come you can ever imagine such a crazy idea? Pass? Me? Jim Crow Harris? Nigger Jim Harris—become a full-fledged Member of the Bar! Why the mere notion of it is enough to kill you with laughing! It'd be against all natural laws, all human right and justice!" (122) Here, O'Neill relies on the loaded nature of "passing," signifying not only Jim's success on the exam but also his acceptance into white society. Jim's sarcasm sharpens the social commentary. Jim knows that there is no natural law that prevents him from succeeding. Rather, it is his acquiescence to a man-made entity—racism—that has prevented his advancement. For a brief moment, it appears that Jim will seize the opportunity to disrupt the illusion, to break through the mask to reality.

When Ella plunges a knife into the Congo mask, he calls her "You devil! You white devil woman!" (123), for he sees her attacking the symbol of his heritage, a connecting link to his culture. Ranald describes Ella's attempt to kill Jim and her stabbing of the Congo mask as efforts to assert her white superiority, in addition to signifying her insanity (64). O'Neill seems to connect notions of racism with insanity, at least in this instance.

However, as Ella suddenly regresses, her face “*regaining an expression that is happy, childlike and pretty*” (123), Jim slumps resignedly, knowing that his fate is sealed. Ella has stabbed the Congo mask, wounding him irreparably as he understands what Ella can not: that she has led him to the destruction of his natural being. When Ella asks him if God will forgive her, Jim replies, “Maybe He can forgive what you’ve done to me; and maybe He can forgive what I’ve done to you; but I don’t see how He’s going to forgive—Himself” (123). Jim is asserting that God has allowed mankind’s destructive nature to run rampant, to allow to flourish humanity’s divisions spawned by ignorance and fear rather than what O’Neill felt was the true state of humanity: an equality guaranteed by everyone’s eventual doom.

Acceding to Ella’s wishes, Jim finally succumbs, throwing himself to his knees. He “*raises his shining eyes*” to expose his “*transfigured*” face. “Forgive me, God—and make me worthy! Now I see Your Light again! Now I hear Your Voice!” Jim cries; “Let This fire of burning suffering purify me of selfishness and make me worthy of the child You send me for the woman You take away!” (124) Ironically, he is undone in his attempts to “pass,” in both senses of the term, by his ability to experience the most basic of human emotions: love. This emotional capacity is a powerful characteristic of humanity, so O’Neill is granting Jim the most profound of honors. Jim succumbs not because of his wife’s hysterics; rather, he does so because he is hopelessly in love, and therefore hopelessly human and therefore subject to the same life-lies that lead to destruction for all of O’Neill’s tragic figures. Jim has finally turned away from the philosophy that once guided him, an awareness of humanity’s shared lot of doom that echoes closely that of O’Neill. However, unlike Jim, the playwright would believe that

God, or fate, is not so closely involved in human events in such a naturalistic universe. Jim has turned to Ella's God, the same Christian God to whom Brutus Jones ultimately sacrifices himself. Like Jones, Jim's sacrifice is in vain, for he is simultaneously succumbing to a life-lie of ethnic division. Jones' failure was in turning to an alien God, rather than that of his ethnic heritage, in trying to deal with his own cultural demons. Jim's failure is similar, though his awareness of his traitorous actions is what finally drives him to the brink. In denying his heritage, in embracing the life-lie that he conceived of in "buying" white or marrying up, Jim Harris procures his own doom as the curtain falls.

Harris--as with Jones, Dreamy, and O'Neill's other black protagonists--finally is victimized not by a primitivistic or atavistic "black psychology" but by social forces that affect all of his characters, in or out of the specific contexts of the plays. According to Travis Bogard, Ella's stabbing of the mask is a form of symbolic genocide and her descent into madness symbolizes white prejudice that requires black people to play the role of Jim Crow (197). O'Neill is able not only to see the unfairness inherent in the social forces that lead to the demise of the central couple in the play, but also the nature of the problem itself. He tries to strip away the mask to reveal an insidious American injustice, painfully challenging his audiences to accept the reality, not hide behind the illusion of racial superiority.

As Doris Falk notes in her discussion of O'Neill's later plays, the poet's struggle is the same as it had always been in all his work, including *All God's Chillun Got Wings*: "the conscious intellect at war with the unconscious drives, the laceration of love and hate in every close human relationship, and the desperate search for self among the

masks” (157). Indeed, this search draws the characters, in this play and others, into a web of desire over which they relinquish control and leads ultimately to insanity or death. It doesn’t matter if the character is Jim Harris or Jamie Tyrone, Dion Anthony or Orin Mannon, Brutus Jones or Con Melody. They all prescribe their own defeat through their attempts to avoid what should not be avoided: the truth within their souls. In doing so, they are emblematic of so many in O’Neill’s canon who, regardless of ethnicity, try to escape destiny by hiding in the shadows of their life-lies.

In *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*, Jim Harris and Ella Downey exemplify this basic truth of O’Neill’s. In *The Iceman Cometh*, the shadow of illusion falls not on a central couple, but every denizen of Harry Hope’s bar, thus expanding the scope of Jim and Ella’s predicament to utter inclusiveness. That Joe Mott, O’Neill’s next and last significant black character, is one of those illusion-shadowed inhabitants is a climactic indicator of O’Neill’s ethnically inclusive rhetoric of doom.

Chapter Five

“You needn’t be scared of me!”

--Joe Mott, *The Iceman Cometh*

If *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* exists in part as a mask disguising a portrait of the destructive marriage of Eugene O’Neill’s parents, then the next play to be discussed in terms of O’Neill’s techniques of mixing the issues of ethnicity and autobiography strip away one more layer of the mask. *The Iceman Cometh*, often considered one of O’Neill’s greatest achievements, stands firmly in the tradition of the playwright’s historical plays as a look at the withering effects of crass materialism and the failed promise of the United States, echoing the thematic concerns of such O’Neill plays as *Gold, Ile, Dynamo, The Emperor Jones*, and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. The play is also firmly planted in the author’s own autobiographical tradition as seen perhaps most clearly in *Beyond the Horizon, Ah, Wilderness!, Hughie*, and *A Touch of the Poet*, as well as his opus, *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* and its heir, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. *Iceman*’s position at the crossroads of all of these plays, and others in his historical and family cycles, is appropriate, for it is perhaps the playwright’s most aching portrayal of that very bond of commonality, the idea of intrinsic relation that is, for O’Neill, central to the human experience. Evidence indicates that, except for some minor reworking

shortly before its production, *The Iceman Cometh* was written primarily in a period of seven months. Begun in mid-1939, the play was already undergoing “trimming” and polishing until January 3, 1940, according to O’Neill’s diaries (*Final Acts* 21). A Theatre Guild production, it was first presented in 1946, after some minimal rewrites. Perhaps fittingly, O’Neill began work almost simultaneously with *The Iceman Cometh* on what is generally recognized as his greatest play, *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*. These two plays, both set in 1912, are related in a more significant way than just the circumstances of creation and setting: in both plays, O’Neill’s characters are haunted by a past that seems to prevent any forward movement.

Art Imitates Life

Despite the fact that *The Iceman Cometh* had a relatively short gestation in terms of its actual writing, it is easy to recognize its far-reaching history, as it takes O’Neill back to his pre-World War I days, sloughing around the waterfronts and dives of lower Manhattan at the time of his failed suicide attempt (we will later see *Iceman’s* Don Parritt, the other “convert” to Hickey’s religion of death, succeed in what O’Neill himself failed). It is also set at the beginning of O’Neill’s writing career. As such, the play stands at another crossroads: it is both remnant of the past and harbinger of yet-to-be. In fact, a short story entitled “Tomorrow” was published by O’Neill in 1917, dealing with the same events that he would later expand upon and universalize in *Iceman*. Specifically, the play’s setting, Harry Hope’s bar, is based primarily on Jimmy-the-Priest’s bar in lower Manhattan, though Peter Hays clarifies O’Neill’s reliance on the “Hell Hole,” a bar named The Golden Swan, whose proprietor was the basis of the Harry

Hope character (71). In fact, most of the bars' habitués were recreated for *The Iceman Cometh*. Most germane to our study is the creation of Joe Mott, a watershed character for O'Neill and one that can be understood to epitomize O'Neill's rhetoric of ethnicity.

Based primarily on Joe Smith, a gambler O'Neill shared rooms with at Jimmy-the-Priest's, Joe Mott is black, a failed gambler, and, similar to Jim Harris in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, a victim of the desire to be accepted as "white." In trying to arrange funding for his gambling house, he self-identifies with the white man who is fronting him the money: "So I opens, and he finds out I'se white, sure 'nuff, 'cause I run wide open for years and pays my sugar on de dot, and de cops and I is friends" (590). To Joe Mott, money is the great equalizer, the passport to acceptance in the United States, the signifier of worthiness. In this realization, he is not unlike Brutus Jones. Joe Smith, on the other hand, was less successful in his pursuits. Apparently, O'Neill supported Smith financially for some time, payments Smith referred to as his "royalties" (Gelbs 656). O'Neill's supplementing of Smith's small pension is one indicator of the playwright's concern for black people. And Joe Mott, unlike Jim Harris, at least is aware that his "pipe dream"—existing as a successful white businessman—is a racist nightmare from which he is desperate to awaken (Pfister 136).

According to Kurt Eisen, Mott's realization lies at the very heart of the play's intentions. Therefore his presence as the sole black character inhabiting the bar is particularly revealing and makes him more truly representative of humanity's common predicament—unsatisfied pipe dreams that lead alienated souls only to death—than any of O'Neill's other black characters. He is, in a sense, a universalizing agent, and in being so, he embodies a nobility that expresses, on equal terms with the white characters in the

play, O'Neill's belief in a universal brotherhood. What O'Neill shows in the play is how humanity may learn about its tragic heritage and hopeless condition, but also how that awareness will not prevent eventual doom.

Joe Mott, the play's sole voice of the black experience, is not a victim of an alleged ethnic unconscious (as Brutus Jones has been claimed to be), a minstrel throwback trembling before the white threat (like Dreamy), nor is he for long the victim of the desire to be white (like Jim Harris). Rather, he is only part of the cacophony of symbolic voices that erupts during the last scene of the play. The fact that he is just one of the gang represents O'Neill's coming full circle in his ascending spiral of humanity. As the Sailor in "Thirst" is linked to his fellow passengers through Expressionistic use of color and language, Joe Mott is linked to his fellow travelers through the portrayal of common experience, his voice only one of the raucous chatter that ends the play, yet just as much a part of the play's tragic final scene as anyone's. Except for Hickey, Parritt (an aspect of Hickey's own character) and Slade, the other sixteen down-and-outers exist communally, in a society and universe that care nothing for color or class. In *The Iceman Cometh*, O'Neill's rhetoric of ethnicity is voiced in the cacophony, the repetitions, the stories and the common systematic recounting of experience. The characters *all* speak the same language, despite the ethnic inflections that punctuate their words.

In fact, it is a rhetoric that O'Neill uses in order to critique the failings of language itself, according to Bigsby: "Again and again he offers not only a dramatization of the inadequacy of words to feelings but enacted evidence of the betrayal of truth by words" (19). If Hickey, the long-awaited harbinger of death, betrays truth in his harangues, so do the flophouse residents. What is really true, what they really share that

allows them to understand each other and to exist coincidentally, is the bond of experience, rather than the illusory bond of language. No longer satisfied to critique his own *use* of language, O'Neill goes after language itself. The truth is evident: Hickey's preaching is useless in the face of the truth revealed in his own act of murder. Actions do speak louder than words, a fact Hickey should have known, for it was just such a message he was preaching to his friends. In coercing them to take action, to stop believing their own self-confessed failures, he was preaching a gospel of action. Unfortunately, his words carry less weight than his acts, and the losers drift back to the necessity of their respective pipe dreams. While, according to Frantz Fanon, mastery of language may afford remarkable power (18), in reality it is not limitless. We need to study how Brutus Jones empowered himself by speaking both black and white—his own language and that of the oppressor—but also how he was betrayed by his own actions. Similarly, Joe Mott, as with all the regulars at Harry Hope's, may speak his own language, but it is his experience—the reality that the words mask—that truly binds him to the others.

My study, while relying on the character of Joe Mott to draw comparisons among the various black characters already analyzed, will not focus on Mott in the way previous chapters focused on their black protagonists. He is, after all, not a leading character in terms of his word count and speaking time on stage. However, I will examine him in the context of the despair prevalent in the world of Harry Hope's bar. Hickey is the central figure in this tragedy of souls, and it is his agenda that collides with those of every inhabitant of the bar. Employing “the language of social cohesion” (Pfister 101), Hickey masks his camaraderie in the disintegration of the community, forcing the band of pipe-dreamers to look inward and dismantle their elaborate life-lies. Their lies are a shared

lie—that someday they will regain their self-respect—but they also share the knowledge that their pipe dreams are vital. When the pipe dreams become recognized for what they are, death comes, even though as Pfister claims, “Hickey represents unmasking as the therapeutic mean of freeing oneself” from one’s life-lies (100), or what Hickey himself calls “guilt and lying hopes” (*Iceman* 680).

Only Larry Slade, the resident cynic and former anarchist, observes the death that Hickey trails in his wake. Slade realizes that the characters’ desire to avoid the outside world in favor of their pipe dreams is a two-edged sword: even subconsciously, they know that they will fail in their efforts to re-enter the greater world beyond the saloon doors; and they will lose the community that binds them together in their shared failure. At one point, Harry threatens Willie Oban with banishment to his room, a punishment that Oban rejects, pleading with Harry to let him stay. “Please, Harry! I’ll be quiet,” he says. “Don’t make Rocky bounce me upstairs! I’ll go crazy alone!” (596). Indeed, separation from the social body is as much to be feared as the surrender of one’s pipe dreams. The only comfort to be found in a world in which life is measured by what one simply cannot accomplish is the fact that everyone else is sharing it. Whether realized in “Thirst”’s raft of survivors, Jones’ regression to a social, if not cultural, subconscious, Dreamy’s need to be part of his family in the face of certain death, Jim’s need to be assimilated, or the shared despair of Harry Hope’s, the vital necessity of the community to the pipe dream anchors and intensifies the difficulty of escape.

Hickey, in fact, returns to his saloon family in order to secure his own pipe dream of converting them. He adopts a new pipe dream in an effort to supplant the old dream of a happy marriage. His return to his pipe dream at the end reinforces the idea that the

communal experience of that dream is indeed a vital necessity. O'Neill's theory of tragedy, according to Zander Brietzke, requires this failure to overcome the pipe dream and the community supporting it. Man's inability to achieve the impossible is the tragic condition of humanity. It may be that "failure alone grants humanity nobility" (2), but failure grants that nobility unequivocally to all inhabitants of what Slade calls "The End of the Line Café" (577). Though they may all be signified by their ethnic or cultural origins or behaviors, the characters exemplify how O'Neill avoids providing them a solely ethnic, individualized existence in favor of one that avoids such boundaries. In doing so, he seems to suggest that we are more connected than separated, that ethnicity is an identifying label that loses its usefulness in the context of the greater vision of humanity's commonality. According to Stephen Black, O'Neill's development as an observer and reporter of the human condition can be seen in how he shows the group surviving this most intimate of intrusions by one of their own, leaving them laughing and singing while they ignore the tragedy that continues to loom (429). Their mutual pipe dreams comprise the vague hope that in the future they will recapture their glory days. Or as Norman Berlin states, "Sustained by their pipe dreams and alcohol, the hangers-on in Hope's saloon belong together and feed off each other; they are family" (85).

Joe Mott at Stage Center

When we begin to analyze Joe Mott's place in O'Neill's play, we see foremost that his presence in the social body is as vital as any other character's. Perhaps even as hinted at in his surname, one that suggests "mutt" and its connotations of inclusiveness, he's a conglomeration of varied characteristics existing in one being and creating a

cultural complexity that deepens the character, despite his subjugation to his own false dreams. As Edward Shaughnessy claims, “if the playwright’s black characters (like all his others) derive support from illusions, that dependency in no way robs them of complexity” (“faithful realism” 154). Precisely because Joe Mott is allowed to exist on such equal footing with the other sixteen losers, we can see his equal position in the human family more clearly than in such characters as Brutus Jones or Dreamy or Jim Harris, all of whom are highlighted as main characters whose equality with those around them is blown out of proportion because of their status as protagonists.

In the majority of O’Neill’s plays the conclusion drawn is that the fusion of two human beings can take place only in the world of pipe dreams (Dubost 102); here, the fusion is much greater, more universal and perhaps therefore more significant. It is a fusion of all beings, a human community perhaps hinted at in the variation on Joe’s last name. Such a conclusion could easily be supported by Norman Berlin’s description of O’Neill as “a white playwright who used black characters to explore his own sense of alienation” (85). This claim may be most obvious in even a brief glimpse at *All God’s Chillun*, where O’Neill encoded his parents’ identities into his central, black-white couple. In *Iceman*, everyone belongs, and in belonging, is doomed. Brutus Jones may represent humanity in his expressionistic existence, but Mott is *part of* humanity, with no favored status.

It is important to remember that O’Neill’s own politics of inclusion would suggest Mott’s central location. When *Iceman* was scheduled for Washington, D.C.’s National Theatre—a theatre that refused to seat black people—he was quoted as being “opposed to racial discrimination of any kind,” pledging to “insert a nondiscriminatory clause in all

future contracts” (Gelbs 886). It remains true that a few years earlier he halted a production of *Mourning Becomes Electra* that a black troupe wanted to present, but this refusal may have been for artistic or pragmatic, theatrical reasons, a result of his fear that the non-traditional casting would so disrupt audience perception of the play that its intentions would be missed. He had no problems, after all, allowing Paul Robeson to play the title character in a production of *The Hairy Ape*, in which the color issue would work with, rather than against, the expressionistic presentation of the play. As previously noted, O’Neill also protested the rescinding of Charles Gilpin’s Drama League dinner invitation.

He also continued to defend the honor of yet another of society’s lower rungs: prostitutes, or “tarts” as they are referred to in *Iceman*. Again, here is O’Neill working across cultural lines, focusing more on common human existence than artificial cultural designations. According to the Gelbs, he “bristled” when a friend made a casual remark about an Army experience involving a “two-bit whore” (127), resenting the term much as the prostitutes in *Iceman* embrace the term “tarts” and challenge the term “whores.” And in a particularly vivid account, the Gelbs recall an example of O’Neill’s tolerance that showed itself during rehearsals for the original production of *Iceman*. Walking from the theatre to a restaurant for lunch, the actors, still in their costumes and makeup that made them look like bums, picked up half a dozen real derelicts who thought that the actors were real bums. At the restaurant, the real derelicts were thrown out, along with some of the actors, but O’Neill appealed to the owner, and the real derelicts lunched with the cast, as O’Neill’s guests (866).

Regarding Mott in particular, according to Shaughnessy, there are no minor male characters in *The Iceman Cometh*. In claiming primacy for all of O'Neill's male characters in the play, no matter the number of lines or amount of stage time (which, for Mott, is relatively small), he claims Mott "is on an equal footing with the other characters" ("faithful realism" 153). If he never fully belongs and if he is taunted by the bartenders, he lashes back with equal vigor. "You white sons of bitches," he cries; "I'll rip your guts out!" (*Iceman* 658). While his threat may be as much a pipe dream as his return to proprietorship of a successful gambling house, Mott is showing how easily racial epithets can be used as double-edged swords. They are equally deceptive no matter which group, minority or majority, they are directed toward.

Joe Mott is admired by Larry Slade, the play's resident cynic and ironist, and Slade approves of Mott's comments about the pursuit of financial happiness. In his speech about the exploitation of anarchists and socialists, Joe seems to sum up Slade's take on existence. Describing how a Socialist feels "bound by his religion to split fifty-fifty" with others less fortunate, he says, "So you don't shoot no Socialists while I'm around. Dat is, not if dey got anything. Of course, if dey's broke, den dey's no-good bastards too." Slade responds, "Be God, Joe, you've got all the beauty of human nature and the practical wisdom of the world in that little parable"(575). Slade is highlighting the universality of Mott's position, a subject that Dubost describes as "humanity confronted with the world." Dubost claims that the dramatist cared "a great deal" about the link between human individuals and the greater world, that in *Iceman* in particular, "the question of [people's] relationship to the world is one of the most important issues" (2). Dubost also suggests that what is at stake is their sense of belonging in that world,

their recognition as individuals that make up the community, even though they themselves are the cause of their own failures “because the process followed in their pursuit of happiness carries within it the seeds of failure” (135). It is a pursuit shared by all of O’Neill’s main characters, black, white or otherwise. For example, Brutus Jones fails in his quest because, as we have seen earlier, he is trying to *break* his link to his own culture. This game of hide-and-ego-seek, as it might appropriately be termed, leads to the eventual realization of who the characters are in the greater world. In *Iceman*, each character reveals the conscious and unconscious motivations behind his respective downfall. However, the play does not necessarily reflect a strict determinism, though perhaps it is dramatizing a greater sense of an impending existentialism, since each is responsible for his own achievement and failure. Or, as Stephen Black states, “the group in Hope’s bar has been forced to face no less a bugaboo than human mortality” (426). However, the characters may be seen more as hopeful than faithless, since each also has the chance to recreate his past successes, making all characters symbolic of their own responsibility to humanity’s destiny.

If O’Neill is indeed claiming such a mutual responsibility, it must be understood that he was fully aware of the equal status of all human beings, regardless of color or class, allowing us to perceive the main conflict of the play as that between the conscious and unconscious, and the pursuit of illusion as central to existence. In these ideas, the play reflects not only such works as *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, *A Touch of the Poet*, and *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, but also *The Emperor Jones*, “The Dreamy Kid,” and *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*, among others. For O’Neill, then, the self (nor its self-concept) has no greater importance for one character than for any other character, and all

that human beings can ask of each other is pity and forgiveness (Falk 194). Such a description calls to mind the picture of life and death in Harry Hope's bar so vividly drawn by O'Neill, a picture to which I will now turn to see how the playwright's depiction of Joe Mott does indeed signify a language of inclusion.

Our first glimpse of Mott is in O'Neill's stage directions. Markedly, the playwright's description of Mott as "a Negro, about fifty years old, brown-skinned, stocky" contrasts with O'Neill's more potentially pejorative descriptions of his earlier black characters. "*His face is only mildly negroid in type,*" the directions continue; "*The nose is thin and his lips are not noticeably thick. His hair is crinkly and he is beginning to get bald. A scar from a knife slash runs from his left cheekbone to jaw. His face would be hard and tough if it were not for its good nature and lazy humour*" (566). In comparison to the descriptions of other black characters in earlier plays, these descriptive words are much less subjective. While it may be claimed that a "thin nose" and "thick lips" are stereotypical, Mott is treated no differently than are other characters, whose descriptions also rely on stereotype for easy identification and, tellingly, with greater subjectivity. O'Neill refers to Lewis as "*obviously English as a Yorkshire pudding*" (567), leaving it to the audience to assign characteristics at will. Hugo has "*a foreign atmosphere about him*" (566), and Rocky the Italian bartender has "*a flat, swarthy face and beady eyes*" (569). Perhaps most interestingly, Hugo initially refers to Rocky as "monkey-face" (570), a description for which O'Neill has been criticized in applying to black characters. If critics must cite O'Neill for ethnic slurs, they must do so fairly, indicating how he does so consistently, just as he treats his Irish characters in other plays with the same detachment. The telling point here is that in *Iceman*, there is no obvious

cultural bias. Rather, O'Neill's Hell Hole is a microcosm of what was then known as the American melting pot. In the darkness of the barroom, people of all types support each other, for without that support, their own dreams would die.

Such a claim does not obviate the fact that ethnic epithets are flung about with abandon. Slurs such as "wop," "ginny," "nigger," and "limey" are hurled about even as they function rhetorically as an equalizing device. Because the play is not a study of ethnicity or nationality, the application of such slurs to any particular group is mediated by their frequent use. Anyone at any time is subject to the same verbal treatment, a potent statement of the playwright's rhetoric of inclusion, or as Rocky himself says, "Dis dump is like de morgue wid all dese bums passed out" (572). We are all equal in death.

Rocky's comment indicates that O'Neill continues to struggle with his creation of dialect. Harold Clurman concluded after the American premiere of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* in 1956 that O'Neill's "stammering," a term taken from Edmund's poetic reflection near the end of the autobiographical play, was "still the most eloquent and significant stammer of the American theatre" (Cargill 216). Because Rocky's words are only part of the aural tapestry of the multicultural population of the bar, however, they stand out less as evidence of O'Neill's alleged racism than his inclusiveness. Everyone has his own manner of speech.

Interestingly, the denial-ridden Slade makes a claim early in the play that increasingly calls its own veracity into question as our awareness of the dramatic conflict unfolds: "As history proves, to be a worldly success at anything, especially revolution, you have to wear blinders like a horse and see only straight in front of you. You have to see, too, that this is all black, and that is all white" (580-81). Ironically, he will be

converted to Hickey's sense of death precisely through his acceptance of the fact that nothing can be divided so easily, an idea that there is an intrinsic connection among people that prevents the success he dreams of. He denies his real reasons for leaving the anarchist movement in favor of an easy and deceitful explanation that he uses to distract Parritt from learning his true motives, just as Hickey tries to make his own world sensible by providing a concrete validation for his actions. He, too, realizes the inefficacy of the lie, despite its attractiveness. Indeed, those lies are central to humanity's existence, according to both Hickey and O'Neill, as we have seen.

For Joe Mott, the lie of ethnic slurs is made evident when Lewis refers to him as "kaffir." Joe, unfamiliar with the term, asks what it means. Wetjoen replies, "Kaffir, dot's a nigger, Joe...Dot's de joke on him, Joe. He don't know you" (588). In effect, Wetjoen is claiming that Joe is not a "nigger," that skin color is an ineffective determinant in the language of signification, O'Neill's rhetoric of ethnicity. Joe then acknowledges the comment: "But I don't stand for 'nigger' from nobody. Never did. In de old days, people calls me 'nigger' wakes up in de hospital" (589). O'Neill is showing his own awareness of black people's sentiments, as well as Joe's awareness of what it means to be black in the United States.

Later in Act One, he tells Wetjoen, "I'll treat you white. If you're broke, I'll stake you to buck any game you chooses. If you wins, dat's velvet for you. If you loses, it don't count. Can't treat you no whiter than that" (594-95). In Act Three, Mott's intentions become even more apparent.

Maybe I throw a twenty-dollar bill on the bar and say, "Drink it up, " and listen when dey all pat me on de back and say, "Joe, you sure is white." But I'll say,

“No, I’m black and my dough is black man’s dough, and you’s proud to drink wid me or you don’t get no drink!” Or maybe I just says, “You can all go to hell. I don’t lower myself drinkin’ wid no white trash!” (660)

Unlike Jim Harris, he is able to survive without the white man’s approval. Unlike Brutus Jones, he does not have to secure his success at the hands of his own people. Unlike Dreamy, he is not afraid of the white threat. Rather, he is, at least in his pipe dream, ready to take on all comers, regardless of skin color, culture or class. O’Neill has realized a richly developed, if secondary, character in Joe Mott, a feat all the more remarkable in that his stage time and dramatic weight, in comparison to that of his predecessors, is limited. “Listen to me, you white boys!” he says aggressively in Act Two. “Don’t you get it in your head I’s pretendin’ to be what I ain’t, or dat I ain’t proud to be what I is, get me? Or you and me’s goin’ to have trouble” (625). Though he shortly will apologize for his aggressive threats, his subsequent repetition of them suggests that they are not merely evanescent, unlike the permeable borders of ethnicity and culture that both separate and unite Joe and his fellow bottom-dwellers.

In fact, Joe even recognizes exactly how untenable those borders are in his boasting of how he will treat his customers right. As his statements indicate, when he was “flush,” he was treated “white.” Here and throughout the play, “white” is equivalent to financial success, to achievement of the materialistic American dream. Anyone can be white, he seems to argue, as long as you have the money to show how you have succeeded. In this idea, Mott reflects the beliefs of Brutus Jones, who used the capitalist strategies he learned from white men during his days as Pullman porter to create his own empire. If Wetjoen denies that Mott is a “nigger,” his grounds for doing so are that Joe

is just like the rest of the residents of Harry Hope's, who still believe themselves successful through the haze of their pipe dreams.

Perhaps the paradigm can be most clearly observed in O'Neill's description of Hugo Kalmar, the anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois, failed anarchist revolutionary who continues to believe in the overthrow of the capitalist movement. Even down and out, "*everything about him was fastidiously clean. Even his flowing Windsor tie is neatly tied*" (566). On the other hand, Slade, who has given up on anarchy as a means to empower the powerless, "*has the appearance of having never been washed*" (566). O'Neill's sympathies are further evident in his portrayal of Rocky, who represents perhaps the only successful inhabitant of the bar, even in limited degree. He not only works for Harry Hope (and is clearly in charge of his supposed boss), but also serves as pimp for Margie and Pearl. "What if I do take deir dough?" he asks. "Dey'd on'y trow it away" (571). As Kalmar might charge, the businessman is growing rich at the expense of his workers. When Rocky talks about Willie Oban's father's success, Slade says, "It's a great game, the pursuit of happiness"(572), clearly referring to the capitalist, or at least materialist, vision of success. Of course, Slade is more broadly cynical. He has given up even on pipe dreams before the play begins, so his targets are greater than the parochial individual targets of the pipe-dreamers. "I know they're damned fools, most of them, as stupidly greedy for power as the worst capitalist they attack," he says, referring to Parritt's compatriot's in "the Movement" (579). It should be no surprise, then, when Parritt claims his betrayal for his mother was "just for the money" (654). As he was early in his career, O'Neill remains wary of the materialism that led to his own father's artistic

and psychological ruin, his mother's failed treatment at the hands of a quack doctor, and even the system that contributed to the validation of slavery and its lingering effects.

Victim as Victor

Joe is as much a victim of the culture that he hopes to buy into as Brutus Jones, Dreamy, or Jim Harris. In fact, actor James Earl Jones, who has played both Brutus Jones and Hickey (and whose father once played Joe Mott), suggests O'Neill's dilemma:

“If O'Neill set out to write a straight play about a deposed dictator from Caribbean island, like Haiti, it might never have been produced....So he gave you something with a whole lot of fun *and* a great documentary on American capitalist sentiment....But Brutus Jones was the ultimate capitalist, the ultimate exploiter. And that's not black, that's American” (Shafer 83-84).

My point exactly. The difference in *The Iceman Cometh* is that Joe is not seen as *the* victim of American capitalist culture that created the conditions of his subordination. Rather, he is only *one* of the victims, part of the universal brotherhood of death, which remains the great equalizer. As Michele Mendelssohn states, “O'Neill eschews a facile opposition between white and black and suggests that the boundaries between both are not distinct but *painfully* permeable” (27).

During rehearsals of the original Theatre Guild production of *Iceman* in 1946, O'Neill implicitly linked pipe dreams to what Joel Pfister labels “the concept of ideology” (102), or the American Pipe Dream: “This American Dream stuff gives me a pain...If it exists, as we tell the whole world, why don't we make it work in one small hamlet of the United States?” (Estrin 222) In *Iceman*, the same sentiment may be found

in Willie Oban's Act Three comments on his father's disgrace. According to Kurt Eisen, Oban is implying that the revolution that made American possible also was a pipe dream, one that led not to genuine happiness or spiritual fulfillment, but to the avarice that, as our observation of Slade has indicated, is integral to human nature (175). The conventional apprehension of that American dream and its coincident moral position is challenged, just as Hickey's wife, with her insistence on a pipe dream of any such conventional morality, is murdered at Hickey's hands. Rather, Hickey seems to call for a new morality, a progressive culture that would take into account its members who have been historically suppressed. Perhaps, not so ironically, Hickey's comments reverberate with O'Neill's philosophy of common human experience.

And of course, the metaphor of the pipe dream is central to the common plight of the characters in *The Iceman Cometh*. A story continues to be told about *The Iceman Cometh*, one that emphasizes O'Neill's use of repetition to enforce the central ideas of his play. Lawrence Langner of the Theatre Guild pointed out to O'Neill himself that the phrase "pipe dreams" is repeated eighteen times throughout the play. O'Neill, not to be outdone, responded, saying that he meant it to be repeated eighteen times (Langner 405). And while most of the daily newspaper critics generally applauded the Guild production of the play, there was also some grumbling about its worthiness, particularly in what they felt was excessive length and needless repetition. But if the repetition of a particular image or phrase creates a pattern and therefore emphasizes the ideas to be conveyed, it can also be seen as an inherent strength of the play, rather than a weakness. According to Zander Brietzke, "O'Neill's plays can be seen as musical compositions in which developing themes recur and transmute over time" (19), requiring the length that the

playwright gives them for all the notes to be played and all the repetitions to be performed so that an audience cannot miss his meaning, despite the variations on the themes that might be generated. And if Breitzke is correct in his observations that critics cite O'Neill's failure to create poetry that resonates on first hearing, then perhaps such repetition is key to perceiving the meaning that might otherwise go unnoticed.

The Rhetoric of Eugene O'Neill's Art

It is not only patterns of rhetoric within one play that are important, but patterns throughout Eugene O'Neill's career. With Joe Mott in *The Iceman Cometh*, the dramatist culminated a process that began with "Thirst" and developed throughout his career, not only in his dealings with black characters, but with all characters; that is, expiation of guilt, of psychological distress, of fear is more than a dramatic device. It is a psychic necessity. Awaiting their final punishment with equal parts dread and anticipation, knowing that the outcome will finally allow them to escape from the pain which has held them captive and simultaneously bound them to the rest of their universal coinhabitants, O'Neill's character-victims accept their destruction as a necessary part of their lives and do so in voices that may stammer, but are nonetheless dramatically revealing. As the character of Long asks in *The Hairy Ape*, "Yerra, what's the use of talking? 'Tis a dead man's whisper" (42).

Despite dialogue couched in what at first seems a poor recreation of black dialect, Brutus Jones exists as a microcosmic representative of the basic atavistic nature of all humans. The nature of the individual in O'Neill's work is the nature of the cosmos. According to Lionel Trilling, man inhabits just such a universe, with his glory lying in his

accession to its demands even as those demands affirm life in the face of individual defeat (22). Yes, the journey is difficult and long, as O'Neill's plays themselves often were, but they must be so to allow room for the devices the playwright uses, particularly those of language and culture, and nowhere more strikingly than where the two combine and ignite into something universal, something transcendent.

If there is no key to certainty in O'Neill, if his language and his characters continue to be controversial even in the context of his historical position and his achievements as both artist and political being, what might be agreed upon is that his plays, including those relying on black characters to carry the weight of O'Neill's aesthetic, scrutinize the dilemma of contemporary American life. Trapped by an inescapable past yet reaching toward the future, the characters explore their personal and cultural experiences in order to find some order and significance in the ultimate doom of human existence. Ultimately, Eugene O'Neill was not writing about black people or white people, but about people who are haunted by a past that refuses to die even as they themselves strive to journey beyond the horizon and into the unknown.

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