

This dissertation has been 61-4507  
microfilmed exactly as received

WINCHESTER, Otis William, 1933-  
A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF EUGENE  
O'NEILL'S STRANGE INTERLUDE.

The University of Oklahoma, Ph.D., 1961  
Speech-Theater

University Microfilms, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan

THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF EUGENE O'NEILL'S

STRANGE INTERLUDE

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

OTIS WILLIAM WINCHESTER

Tulsa, Oklahoma

1961

A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF EUGENE O'NEILL'S

STRANGE INTERLUDE

APPROVED BY

*Eugene S. Ferguson*  
*James S. Heeler*  
*Bruce Ingham Hanger*  
*William Carmack*  
*Wayne E. Brockmeade*

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

## PREFACE

Rhetoric, a philosophy of discourse and a body of theory for the management of special types of discourse, has been variously defined. Basic to any valid definition is the concept of persuasion. The description of persuasive techniques and evaluation of their effectiveness is the province of rhetorical criticism. Drama is, in part at least, a rhetorical enterprise. Chapter I of this study establishes a theoretical basis for the rhetorical analysis of drama. The central chapters consider Eugene O'Neill's Strange Interlude in light of the rhetorical implications of intent, content, and form. Chapter II deals principally with O'Neill's status as a rhetor. It asks, what are the evidences of a rhetorical purpose in his life and plays? Why is Strange Interlude an especially significant example of O'Neill's rhetoric? The intellectual content of Strange Interlude is the matter of Chapter III. What ideas does the play contain? To what extent is the play a transcript of contemporary thought? Could it have potentially influenced the times? Chapter IV is concerned with the specific manner in which Strange Interlude was used as a vehicle for the ideas. Which dramatic elements in the play were particularly effective as rhetorical devices? How were they used? The objectives of the study, to be assessed in Chapter V, are twofold: to examine Eugene O'Neill and Strange Interlude from the perspective of a rhetorical critic in hope of illuminating an important dimension of the man and his art, and to establish the usefulness of this

critical approach.

I am deeply indebted and sincerely grateful for the counsel of the members of my graduate committee, Dr. Roger E. Nebergall, Dr. William R. Carmack, Dr. Wayne Brockriede, Dr. Ansel H. Resler, and Dr. Bruce I. Granger. The time devoted by Dr. Granger to stylistic matters in the dissertation as well as to the ideas there expressed warrants special acknowledgment. I owe a further debt of gratitude to Dr. Albert J. Croft with whom I began my graduate work at the University of Oklahoma.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

| Chapter   | Page |
|---|------|
| I. A RHETORICAL INTERPRETATION OF DRAMA . . . . .         | 1    |
| A. The Rhetoric of Dramatic Purpose                       |      |
| B. The Rhetoric of Dramatic Theme                         |      |
| C. The Rhetoric of Dramatic Form                          |      |
| II. EUGENE O'NEILL AND <u>STRANGE INTERLUDE</u> . . . . . | 27   |
| A. Eugene O'Neill: Rhetor                                 |      |
| B. <u>Strange Interlude</u> : Rhetorical Drama            |      |
| III. DRAMATIC THEME IN <u>STRANGE INTERLUDE</u> . . . . . | 52   |
| A. The Underlying Unity                                   |      |
| 1. The Relation between Man and God                       |      |
| 2. The Sickness of Today                                  |      |
| 3. The Glorious Struggle                                  |      |
| B. Significance for the Nineteen-Twenties                 |      |
| 1. The Confirmation of Psychoanalysis                     |      |
| 2. The Conflict of Theologies                             |      |
| 3. The Confusion of Hedonism                              |      |
| 4. The Fiction of Heroism                                 |      |
| 5. The Perversion of Business                             |      |
| 6. The Failure of Science                                 |      |
| 7. The Ordeal of Art                                      |      |
| C. Summary  |      |
| IV. DRAMATIC FORM IN <u>STRANGE INTERLUDE</u> . . . . .   | 117  |
| A. The Rhetoric of Plot                                   |      |
| 1. Deterministic Orientation                              |      |
| 2. Reasonableness   |      |
| 3. Conflict   |      |
| 4. Crisis and Incident                                    |      |
| B. The Rhetoric of Character                              |      |
| 1. Symbolic Value   |      |
| 2. Identification   |      |

| Chapter                     | Page |
|-----------------------------|------|
| C. The Rhetoric of Dialogue |      |
| 1. Interior Monologue       |      |
| 2. Poetic Language          |      |
| D. Summary                  |      |
| V. CONCLUSION . . . . .     | 178  |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY. . . . .       | 184  |

## A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF EUGENE O'NEILL'S

### STRANGE INTERLUDE

#### I

#### A RHETORICAL INTERPRETATION OF DRAMA

George Pierce Baker has commented that "much if not all that concerns the persuasion of public argumentation concerns the dramatist . . . the dramatist is, after all, a sort of public speaker."<sup>1</sup> The literary career of Eugene O'Neill, who attended Professor Baker's playwrighting course at Harvard, evinces a consciousness of the same matters which concern the orator. The general purpose of this dissertation is to explore the relation which exists between the arts of rhetoric and drama. Its specific object is the analysis of certain rhetorical implications in O'Neill's Strange Interlude.

Rhetoric has been defined by Aristotle as "the faculty of discerning in every case the available means of persuasion."<sup>2</sup> If he intended that exposition be ancillary to persuasion, no change is necessary in this basic definition. Otherwise it must be modified to include informative discourse which is, in any case, only arbitrarily differentiated from that

---

<sup>1</sup>George Pierce Baker, Dramatic Technique (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), p. 509.

<sup>2</sup>Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1.2. 1355b 26, trans. Richard C. Jebb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909), p. 5.



of persuasion. A widely accepted contemporary definition, which is in the Aristotelian tradition, is that of Donald C. Bryant:

"Rhetoric is the rationale of informative and suasory discourse; it operates chiefly in the areas of the contingent; its aim is the attainment of maximum probability as a basis for public decision; it is the organizing and animating principle of all subject matters which have a relevant bearing on that decision."<sup>3</sup>

By these definitions any verbal enterprise which is didactic or tendentious, that is, is marked by an instructive intent or by a purposive disposition to promote a point of view, is rhetorical. The modern drama, more so than most poetic forms, is commonly concerned with specific contemporary issues and frequently attempts to modify the attitudes of the audience. This suasory dimension of drama invites something other than the usual literary or dramatic critical approach. While the basic province of rhetoric is public address and the bulk of its critical standards and techniques most appropriate for that form, rhetorical criticism does provide a useful point of departure for the analysis of a play as a persuasive instrument. The study of a literary form, however, presupposes a basically literary approach. Ultimately the rhetorical critic must rely upon descriptive techniques familiar to the literary critic. The critical techniques appropriate in one context must be so modified when applied to drama that the end product, except as it emphasizes the persuasive function of language, is at times almost indistinguishable from that of a literary study. The foundations for such an approach can best be summarized through an analysis of the rhetorical implications of three major divisions of drama: purpose, theme, and form.

---

<sup>3</sup>Donald C. Bryant, "Rhetoric: Its Functions and Its Scope," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXIX (December, 1953), 408.

### A. The Rhetoric of Purpose

The immediate purpose of rhetoric is persuasion. Its ultimate purpose is social coordination and control. A poetic<sup>4</sup> enterprise, in order to be considered rhetorical, must exhibit these intents. This does not intend to suggest that the poetic and rhetorical purposes are in any real sense separable. Any distinction, while it may provide insights into the basic philosophy of discourse, is apparent only in the case of such extremes as some forms of advertising and lyric poetry. Here, one is clearly intended to arouse and direct feeling, while the other is a record of personal feelings. And, in this case, it might be said that a relative presence or absence of a tendentious purpose on the part of the author is a factor in distinguishing between two forms of verbal enterprise. In theory, the basic purpose of poetry is expression or creation, while that of rhetoric is impression or illumination. The primary purpose of rhetorical discourse, unlike that of some poetry, is the instruction and direction of an audience. However, the satires of Aristophanes, John Bunyan's allegorical Pilgrim's Progress, Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," and the sermons of John Donne demonstrate the limitations in the dichotomy. Clearly, then, there exists a large body of discourse which is both poetic and rhetorical and rarely does knowledge of the author's purpose enable the critic to make any distinction between the two.

The various definitions of what constitutes persuasion in poetry suggest certain problems for a rhetorical interpretation of dramatic intent. If persuasive communication is interpreted as the transfer of feelings, attitudes, moods, meanings, ideas, ideologies, truths, insights, intuitions,

---

<sup>4</sup>The term poetry refers in this case to all imitative or imaginative literature, including drama.

world views, from one person to another, then all poetry is rhetorical. W. S. Howell is so defining it when he proposes that "poetical utterance belongs to the enterprise of communication by virtue of the fact that it does actually convey to readers a something that they did not have before."<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Burke's contention that all art, especially literature, must have "a hortatory function, an element of suasion or inducement of the educational variety . . . must be partially forensic"<sup>6</sup> is founded, in part, upon the same interpretation. The broad view of what constitutes persuasive communication in poetry is derived from the psychological definition of the process which considers any stimuli presented by an individual that elicits a response in another to be essentially communicative in nature. Valid though the proposition may be, some separation needs to be made between highly subjective and generalized moods, impressions, sensations on the one hand and more objective and specifically directed social commentary on the other.

If persuasive intent is limited to that avowedly didactic or propagandistic purpose of poetry which is associated with highly specific ideas and transitory issues and which accordingly sacrifices poetic excellence, then no poetry, or only the worst, can be termed rhetorical. The problem is more one of form or content than it is of purpose. When a playwright substitutes ideological fervor for subtlety and slogans for poetic values, "his dramatic skill, not his persuasive intention, is to

---

<sup>5</sup>W. S. Howell, "Literature as an Enterprise in Communication," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXIII (December, 1947), 417.

<sup>6</sup>Kenneth Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941), p. 321.

blame."<sup>7</sup> The tendency to consider rhetorical purpose an alien element in the theater is, in part, a consequence of having associated drama with the general class of poetry, which in turn is characterized by the qualities of the most extreme examples. Such opinions as that of W. Bridges-Adams, who contends that "there is only one form in which the theater can put on the ideological gloves without soiling its hands, and that is satire,"<sup>8</sup> are based upon too narrow a definition of rhetorical purpose.

Briefly, since this will be expanded in connection with the discussion of dramatic theme, an author evinces a rhetorical purpose when he seeks to modify the thinking or behavior of his audience relative to some contemporary social problem. While this may be the primary intent of the rhetor and the secondary object of the poet, it is nonetheless a purpose common to both.

A rhetorical purpose is one of the most natural and constant features of literature, especially drama. Poetic-dramatic theory and the history of dramatic literature emphasize the importance of this dimension. Poetic-dramatic theory has from its very beginning acknowledged the communicative-persuasive object of drama. Theorists have never succeeded in defining entirely separable purposes for the rhetorical and poetic arts. Aristophanes, Plato, and Aristotle all expressed the opinion that poets are teachers.<sup>9</sup> Horace based much of his Art of Poetry upon Cicero's De

<sup>7</sup>Ross Scanlan, "Rhetoric and the Drama," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXII (December, 1936), 641.

<sup>8</sup>W. Bridges-Adams, Looking at a Play (London: Phoenix House, 1947), p. 34.

<sup>9</sup>G. M. A. Grube, "Rhetoric and Literary Criticism," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLII (December, 1956), 340. The references cited are Aristophanes (Frogs, 1055 and 1009-10), Plato (Republic, second and third books, especially 398 a-b) and Aristotle (Politics, [1336a 30-33], Poetics, 2.1 [1448a 2-4], 5.1 [1449a 30-35], 15.1 [1450a 17], 25.8 [1461a 4-9]).

Oratore. Longinus' attempt to liberate poetry from rhetoric by maintaining that the purpose of imaginative literature was not persuasion, but ecstasy or transport, failed when this state was interpreted as implying a readiness to act, little different from the object of persuasion. A greater or lesser didactic function in drama, and in literature generally, was assumed throughout much of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Virtually all the major critics from Dante (1265-1321) through Dryden (1631-1700) accepted the idea that literature had, in this respect especially, a distinctly utilitarian function.<sup>10</sup> Savonarola, who represents the extreme authoritarian position, took the view that literature had no purpose other than as propaganda. That literature had three functions--to teach, delight, and move--was a popular concept of the period. Most clearly stated by Minturno (L'Arte Poetica, Book II, 76), it is probably an elaboration of the popular Horation idea that the poet's aim was "either to profit or to please, or to blend in one the delightful and the useful" (The Art of Poetry, 333).<sup>11</sup>

During the later Renaissance, and certainly by the eighteenth century, the question of purpose received less attention. However, each new departure in literary philosophy, form, and criticism tended to revive the issue. The special didactic possibilities in the novel form interested Johnson, although his approach to the matter is a negative one. Shelley represented the view of the Romantics with his antipathy toward the

---

<sup>10</sup> Some of these were Boccaccio, Trisino, Elyot, Cinthio, Minturno, Mazzoni, Sidney, Tasso, and Milton. See Allan H. Gilbert (ed.), Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden (New York: American Book Co., 1940). Savonarola, Politian, and Vida, although not included in Gilbert's volume, should be added to this list.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. pp. 289 and 139.

Renaissance acceptance of a didactic purpose for literature; he upheld the high moral purpose of poetry and, thus, tacitly acknowledged its rhetorical function. The sociological approach of Taine implies a relation between literature and life which suggests that he was aware that it operated as a rhetorical instrument. In general, "if poetry could be defended by giving it the practical usefulness of rhetoric and oratory that was done. If oratory could be defended by making the orator a teacher of poetic truth, that was done."<sup>12</sup> Rene Wellek and Austin Warren state a view which would appear to summarize adequately modern thinking on the subject. If persuasion implies an intent "to influence readers to share one's attitude toward life, then there is plausibility in the contention that all artists are propagandists or should be, or that all sincere, responsible artists are morally obligated to be propagandists."<sup>13</sup>

The theater has always been, to one degree or another, associated with problems and controversial persons contemporary to it, and has been didactic and propagandistic. The comedies of Aristophanes (e.g., The Clouds and The Birds) were of this category. The religious dramas of the Middle Ages (the mystery, miracle, and morality plays) were, in part, devices for instruction. The titles of many prominent plays of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation suggest a rhetorical intent: The Treacheries of the Papists, Moses and Christ Corrupted by Sodomites, The Whore of Babylon. The criticism of the church hierarchy in German plays of the fifteenth

---

<sup>12</sup>Everett Lee Hunt, "Rhetoric and Literary Criticism," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXI (December, 1956), 340.

<sup>13</sup>Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1942), p. 26.

century, the anti-monarchial dramas of the French Revolution, and the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Rousseauistic English melodramas are random examples of movements which clearly illustrate the presence of a rhetorical purpose. It was not, however, until the nineteenth century that such a purpose became a dramatic requirement. Prior to this time the view of life was such that drama enjoyed a greater universality. Man was conceived as a creation of personal will and as everywhere reducible to the same common elements. The increasing urbanization and industrialization of society and the deterministic-materialistic philosophic attitudes that it produced had far-reaching social effects. The fundamental conflict of human drama became "the unremitting struggle of man, individually and collectively, with the material facts of existence, with the inexorable laws of nature, and with the mysterious forces of his own psychology."<sup>14</sup> No drama which pretends to deal with reality can avoid dealing with these problems and no playwright can so concern himself without assuming the role of a rhetor, that is, consciously or unconsciously functioning as a persuader. The intent of the playwright and the content of the play were similarly affected. Most nineteenth and twentieth-century playwrights--Brieux, Ibsen, Strindberg, Schnitzler, Hauptmann, Wedekind, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Andreyev, Galsworthy, Maugham, Shaw, O'Neill, Rice, Lawson, Anderson, Odets, Miller--have had as a secondary if not primary purpose the reform of some aspect of modern society. The rhetorical intent of the author, far from automatically condemning a play to pedestrian didacticism, is frequently a factor which ultimately contributed to its dramatic success.

---

<sup>14</sup> Harold R. Walley, The Book of the Play (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), p. 56.

In summary, the existence of a persuasive intent on the part of the author is necessary to a play's being considered a rhetorical enterprise. His purpose must be one of stimulating the audience to think and ultimately behave in a certain manner with reference to persons, institutions, ideas, or objects. Unlike poetical genres which belong to the highly restricted class of the purely poetic, such a purpose is an important dimension of drama. The playwright is motivated, in part at least, by a desire to influence an audience and not simply by the need to give vent to some creative urge within himself. Most drama, while embodying distinctly poetic purposes, clearly evinces a rhetorical intent as well.

#### B. The Rhetoric of Theme

The matter of rhetoric is ideas. To be classed as a rhetorical enterprise, a play must contain ideas or themes. It is difficult to find in critical literature an explicitly stated definition of dramatic theme. Ordinarily, the term "theme" is used in reference to the central thought of the play which can be stated declaratively, or the environment or social phenomenon of the play. The most apparent weakness in the first definition is the implication that a play has a single thesis or "moral." A play as complex as Strange Interlude alludes to numerous topics and is rich in ideas. The last and less familiar definition of theme is likely to be so rooted in the setting and situation of the specific play that it ignores the abstractable implications in the intellectual content. While useful as an approach to such plays as the folk dramas of Paul Green, it is inadequate in the case of Strange Interlude.

The Aristotelian concept of "thought" is an excellent point at which to begin the construction of a rhetorical view of dramatic theme.



Thought, the third part in Aristotle's scheme of tragedy, is defined in the Poetics as "the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances."<sup>15</sup> Thought, further, "is found where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated."<sup>16</sup> This definition suggests three possible interpretations of thought. First, drama, since it is an imitation of the actions of men, cannot exist apart from thought. Thought underlies all activity and is manifest in any representation of human beings. Second, this thought content is, in its narrowest meaning, composed of value judgments either explicitly stated or implied in the dialogue or in the general action of the play. Third, in a slightly broader sense, the concept of thought would include all commentary upon states of reality derived from the play's dialogue or action. These are the meanings generally embraced by the term "theme."

The perspectives of the rhetorical critic and literary critic of drama may differ slightly in the case of theme. Both are interested in the relation of author, play, and audience.<sup>17</sup> In general, however, the literary critic is more concerned with the play as a creative enterprise and as such tends to define theme with special reference to the author's personal psychology and philosophy. The rhetorical critic, aware of the

---

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, Poetics, 6. 1450b 4-5, trans. S. H. Butcher (New York: Dover Publications, 1951), p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> In literary criticism this is not always the case since there are schools of thought (e.g., The New Critics) which attempt to view one aspect of the complete process with as little reference as possible to other considerations. The nineteenth century French literary critic, Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, exemplifies the view which emphasized the interrelation of the three elements in the total literary problem. He proposed that the literary document be considered in terms of the contemporary history, the author's psychology, and the moral condition (race, surrounding, and epoch).

play chiefly as it is an instrument for persuasion, is especially interested in the relation which exists between the ideas expressed in the play and the social thinking of the audience. For this reason, the rhetorical critic would be inclined to interpret theme with particular reference to those aspects of the play's intellectual content which have the greatest implicative significance for the audience in terms of their contemporary social situation. Ultimately the two are related in any complete analysis of theme.

Audience adaptation is the underlying principle of rhetoric. It is the standard by which the rhetorical critic of drama must evaluate the idea content of a play. No drama can be entirely poetic if the descriptive term "poetic" is limited to discourse which is a record of personal feelings made without regard for the audience or occasion. In order to succeed in the theater poor drama flatters the conceits and satisfies the prejudices of the audience. Good drama, that is drama characterized by sincere expression rather than mawkish sentiment, is confronted with essentially the same requirements, although it appeals to nobler sentiments. The dramatist, like the orator, "must consider his time, audience, their prescriptions and prejudices, the great issues of the moment, in short the entire cultural milieu as it affects his audience, subject, and himself."<sup>18</sup>

The concern of the playwright for the audience necessitates that drama be associated with a particular epoch (although it may hold meanings

---

<sup>18</sup> Roland M. Frye, "Rhetoric and Poetry in Julius Caesar," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXVII (February, 1951), 44. William Archer, (Play Making: A Manual of Craftsmanship /New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1942/ p. 13) correctly maintains that "drama has no meaning except in relation to an audience." George Pierce Baker, (Dramatic Technique, p. 509) has similarly observed, "No dramatist can work care free in regard to his audience."

for other times than its own). For this reason drama is a more significant document of social history than most other forms of literature. The author's thinking is in part a product of the social-cultural environment. And the author's social commentary, either as the object of persuasion or as the means by which the interest and sympathy of the audience are aroused, is ordinarily directed toward some issue of the time. The author's message and the probable audience perception of that message are best estimated by noting the relation between the popular ideas and activities of the time and those of the play.

That intellectual content which is associated with the persuasive purpose of the author is, especially from the rhetorical point of view, only one aspect of dramatic theme. The influence of an interpretive function of the audience is a factor which is frequently overlooked. Many authors admit that they did not fully comprehend their own message at the time of composition. In a letter to one of his interpreters, O'Neill suggests that the audience or critic (who is an idealized audience) may legitimately discover ideas: "It is undoubtedly true that the author is not always conscious of the deeper implication of his writings while he is actually at work on them, and perhaps never becomes fully aware of all he has revealed."<sup>19</sup> The audience perceives ideas in a play which may be unconscious, purely incidental, or even accidental on the part of the author. Aspects of the theme may not grow out of the author's intent so much as out of the circumstances of the play; an audience frequently injects meaning into a drama by associating it with some extraneous issue.

---

<sup>19</sup>Richard Dana Skinner, Eugene O'Neill, A Poet's Quest (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1935), p. vii.

The extent to which the exposition of theme can appropriately be considered the object of drama is pertinent to a rhetorical interpretation of dramatic theme. There are basically two opposing views. One insists that thematic exposition is the purpose of drama, the distinctly dramatic elements being important only as they sustain the total form and project the theme. When the theatrical elements attract audience attention as ends rather than means they are considered detrimental to thematic exposition. Modern serious drama, which emphasizes ideas and avoids being classed as sheer entertainment, appears to tacitly accept this view in one degree or another.

The traditional view, which is opposed to the above only through its position on a continuum, would tend to consider all aspects of the total dramatic experience as being so inextricably related that none could be considered the "object" per se. Aristotle, for example, listed the parts of Tragedy in the order of their importance--plot, character, thought, diction, music, and spectacle.<sup>20</sup> The concept of thought is roughly parallel to theme although theme enters, by implication, into other parts as well. For Aristotle, the end of drama was not thematic exposition but rather catharsis or the purgation of certain strong emotions, a response related to the active dramatic experience. Critics contemporary to O'Neill generally reflect a similar attitude. Brander Matthews interpreted theme as the source of the dramatic conflict, theme being from his point of view the beginning rather than object of the play.<sup>21</sup> William Archer takes the

---

<sup>20</sup>Aristotle, Poetics, 6. 1450a 37-1450b 18, trans. Butcher, pp. 27 and 29.

<sup>21</sup>Brander Matthews, A Study of Drama (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910), p. 99.

same position and further cautions against "the ostensive predominance of the theme--that is to say, the abstract element--over the human factors in the composition."<sup>22</sup> George Pierce Baker contends that, while theme is important to the dramatists, its exposition cannot be the object of the playwright since he must satisfy requirements more basic to the form.<sup>23</sup>

Both views, that thematic exposition is the object of drama and that it is but one aspect of the dramatic experience and probably secondary to the projection of character and plot, hold certain implications for a rhetorical interpretation of drama. The rhetorical critic, conceiving of drama as an instrument for persuasion, would accept the proposition that thematic exposition is the object of the play, but at the same time he must be aware that the persuasive effectiveness of the play is largely determined by the integration of all the elements of the dramatic form. A play must succeed dramatically (i.e., it must project all phases of itself and excite an appropriate generalized emotional response) in order to succeed rhetorically.

Neither the themes of rhetoric nor drama are theoretically confined to any special class of subject matter. The majority of speech situations involve attempts by speakers "to establish the justice or injustice, the true or false, of an action or a condition; to praise or blame someone or something; or to urge that a course of action be or not be followed."<sup>24</sup> The themes of most plays have as a subject some issue

---

<sup>22</sup>William Archer, Playmaking (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1942), p. 16.

<sup>23</sup>Baker, Dramatic Technique, p. 509.

<sup>24</sup>Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird, Speech Criticism (New York: Ronald Press, 1948), p. 7.

which involves the stronger emotions. For example, American drama since World War I has especially concerned itself with social issues, normally a matter associated with public address.

A few illustrations will suffice. Elmer Rice wrote numerous plays of social and economic protest like The Adding Machine (1923), an expressionistic analysis of the depersonalizing effect of a business society, and Street Scene (1929), a study of tenement life. George Kaufman's political satires--Of Thee I Sing (1932), both with Morrie Ryskind, The First Lady (1936), with Kathrine Drayton--dealt indirectly with serious issues. The position of organized labor in the nineteen-thirties attracted the attention of playwrights: Paul Peters and George Skier's Stevedore (1934), Albert Bein's Let Freedom Ring (1935) and Clifford Odets' Waiting For Lefty (1935) all supported the class solidarity of the workingman and constructed a rationale for the strike and social agitation generally. Racial protest is evident in plays like Paul Green's In Abraham's Bosom (1926) and John Wexley's They Shall Not Die (1934), which was based specifically on the Scottsboro trial. A number of plays written during the period dealt, in one way or another, with war: Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings' What Price Glory (1924) questioned America's mission in World War I, Robert Sherwood's Idiot's Delight (1936) takes as its theme the horror of war and his There Shall Be No Night (1940) protests the Russian invasion of Finland, and Lillian Hellman's The Watch on the Rhine (1941) contends that isolationism is an untenable position.

The twenties and thirties, a time of considerable activity in the legitimate theater and a time of social upheaval, demonstrate the importance of ideological purpose in American drama. Three of the era's

major playwrights--Elmer Rice, John Howard Lawson, and Clifford Odets--concerned themselves almost exclusively with social issues; two producing organizations--The Group Theater and Theater Union--devoted themselves primarily to plays of social criticism.

Following the association of the drama of ideas at this time with left-wing propaganda, the number of plays with an avowedly persuasive purpose fell off sharply ~~what~~. During the forties and fifties, such views were no longer equated to economic conditions of boom-and-bust nor so popular because of the newly arisen political conflict between East and West. Nevertheless, the importance of idea content in American drama of the last two decades is still evident, as the work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, the dominant American playwrights since 1945, makes clear. The work of the former recalls the plays of "social significance" popular during the nineteen-thirties. All My Sons (1946) is an indictment of wartime profiteering and the system that breeds it. Death of a Salesman (1949) protests against the corrupting influence of modern society. Miller's objection to the security trials of the period lies behind The Crucible (1952). The fact that Tennessee Williams, unlike Miller, "gives primacy to the psychologically rather than socially relevant facts of each situation"<sup>25</sup> tends to obscure the quantity of abstractable idea content of his plays. All of Williams' plays, as for example The Glass Menagerie (1945) and A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), are studies of the "clash between an enfeebled tradition of gentility and a society which has never known what the term means."<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>John Gassner, The Theater In Our Times (New York: Crown Publishers, 1954), p. 349.

<sup>26</sup>Joseph Wood Krutch, The American Drama Since 1918 (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1957), p. 326.

In summary, the rhetorical critic of drama, interested in the play as an instrument for persuasion, would define theme in light of the following considerations. Theme is that body of value judgment and commentary upon states of reality expressed or implied in the dialogue or in the course of the action of the play. This intellectual content must be abstractable, that is, not confined to the play. It must contain implicative significance for the audience with relation to the contemporary situation and be capable of modifying human thought and behavior. Thematic exposition is, with reservations, the object of the dramatic experience. While theme is not limited as to subject matter, the rhetorical critic of drama is more concerned with plays which treat subjects that are traditionally the matter of public address.

### C. The Rhetoric of Form

Rhetoric is primarily associated with public address although it is not wholly confined to that form of discourse. Dramatic form, by virtue of a play's persuasive intent and intellectual content, is a rhetorical enterprise. It is a form well suited to the rhetorical objective "of adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas."<sup>27</sup> Aristotle believed that rhetoric was particularly useful "with hearers who cannot grasp the unity of an argument which has many stages, or follow a long chain of reasoning";<sup>28</sup> by the same reasoning drama often seems a more suitable means for persuasion than oratory. As Hoyt Hudson suggests, rhetoricians who utilize the devices and factors of interestingness peculiar to imitative literature, in many cases simply recognize that such forms are more adequate

---

<sup>27</sup>Bryant, Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXIX, 413.

<sup>28</sup>Aristotle, Rhetoric, i. 2. 1357a 1, trans. Jebb, p. 9.



to the circumstances.<sup>29</sup> Shaw, who "loved to emphasize the contention that his choice of the dramatic form as a vehicle for his messages was mere accident,"<sup>30</sup> is a case in point. By using drama as a vehicle for the promulgation of his social doctrines rather than a more typical form, such as public address or the pamphlet, he probably acquired a far wider and more receptive audience. Modern rhetoric is more interested in the activity occasioned than in the forms by which the activity is aroused. Accordingly, any form of discourse which functions rhetorically--pamphlet, sermon, novel, poem, drama--is one of "the available means of persuasion."

Obviously, there are differences between the traditional form of rhetoric, public address, and the other types of linguistic enterprise which are functionally rhetorical. The idiom, grammatical structure, and arrangement of the parts are not the same. The author's personality is communicated more directly to the audience in oratory than it is in drama, although the playwright is less restricted by his form than is the orator. This larger personal dimension is especially manifest in Eugene O'Neill. As Doris Falk notes:

"The catalyst compounding art and idea in O'Neill's work is the author's psychological state. It links the dramatic qualities of each play to the central thesis. Pace, tenseness, and reality of action, types and degrees of characterization, repeated by changing symbols, all reveal a state of mind--conscious and unconscious--as much as they do an explicit philosophy."<sup>31</sup>

The orator speaks directly to his audience while the playwright must speak

<sup>29</sup>Hoyt Hudson, "The Field of Rhetoric," Quarterly Journal of Speech, IX (April, 1923), 152.

<sup>30</sup>Krutch, The American Drama Since 1918, p. 21.

<sup>31</sup>Doris V. Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 12.

through his actors. Nor are the actors heard by the audience in the same sense that the speaker is. They are overheard. And in addition, the words of the orator are used to illuminate objective reality while the language of a drama may, if it relies upon poetic symbolization, illuminate matters which in turn illuminate objective reality. The speech is almost always expected to deal with some specific issue; hence, it must demonstrate from the outset an explicit purposiveness not expected of drama. There are numerous other differences as well between the two forms. Certain of these were mentioned in connection with dramatic theme and need not here be reviewed.

It is the proximity of the audience as much as the quality of intent or content which determines the rhetorical status of a form of verbal enterprise. By way of example, Hoyt Hudson summarizes the relative distance of several poetic forms.

We should probably agree that most free from the rhetorical element, as being most purely expression and least concerned with impression, are the personal or subjective lyric and rhapsodic poem. Next I should place the idyll, pastoral poetry, and after them the whole field of narrative poetry, including the romance and the epic. In these this consideration of the audience is generally less than in dramatic poetry.<sup>32</sup>

Drama, as the above discussion might suggest, possesses a rhetorical dimension which is derived from its form. Aristotle's Poetics, a theory of drama that is reasonably complete and fundamentally accepted, is useful in establishing a foundation for a rhetoric of drama. These four considerations contain rhetorical implications: the concept of imitation, the cathartic function of drama, certain of the parts of tragedy,

---

<sup>32</sup>Hudson, Quarterly Journal of Speech, IX, 151.

and one of the five critical objections. Drama is classified as an imitative art. ("The poet being an imitator . . . must of necessity imitate one of three objects,--things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be.")<sup>33</sup> If this imitative quality takes the form of the literal transcriptions associated with Naturalism or even if it is an idealized representation of human life, as Aristotle undoubtedly intended, it is latently rhetorical. Inevitably imitation leads to a representation of man's relation to his environment. It is difficult to consider social, political, economic, religious, or ethical issues without consciously or unconsciously supplying the audience with value judgments. As drama represents some aspect of life, the audience tends instinctively to imitate this representation. Aristotle realized, as do modern psychologists, that "Imitation is one instinct of our nature."<sup>34</sup> Imitation is an integral element in learning and fundamentally associated with persuasion.

The ultimate object of dramatic imitation is a two-fold excitation and purgation of the emotions.<sup>35</sup> In this connection, Ross Scanlan contends that "a drama excites emotion only when the spectator can attribute to its content a reality in some degree comparable to that of life itself."<sup>36</sup> This audience perception of an association between drama and life establishes an atmosphere suitable to persuasion. "Thought and character are the two natural causes from which actions spring."<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup>Aristotle, Poetics, 25. 1460b 8-9, trans. Butcher, p. 97.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid. 4. 1448b 20, trans. Butcher, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid. 6. 1449b 27-28, trans. Butcher, p. 23.

<sup>36</sup>Scanlan, Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXII, 638.

<sup>37</sup>Aristotle, Poetics, 6. 1450a 1-2, trans. Butcher, p. 25.

Thought has already been defined as "the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances," to be "found where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated."<sup>38</sup> Aristotle specifically refers the reader to areas of politics and rhetoric for a detailed consideration of thought.<sup>39</sup> This concept of thought, or dianoia, common to both the Rhetoric and Poetics, is very nearly the same as the "invention" of the Latin rhetoricians. While in the Poetics thought is what Donald C. Bryant termed the "internal rhetoric of the drama,"<sup>40</sup> it may nevertheless have an effect upon the opinions of the audience. The efforts of the character to persuade each other provide the dramatist with an excellent opportunity to modify the thinking and behavior of the audience. In effect, the speeches they make to each other the playwright makes to the audience. An outstanding example of such a persuasive use of "internal rhetoric" is found in the plays of G. B. Shaw. Character, the second part of tragedy, is defined by Aristotle as "that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids."<sup>41</sup> Any value judgments the characters make, especially in view of the consequences of their decision, are potentially persuasive. Since the characters are, by virtue of the imitative qualities of drama and the imitative propensity in the audience, examples and objects for identification, a degree of rhetorical effect is unavoidable.

Aristotle's censure of the "morally hurtful" as one of the five

---

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 7. 1450b 11-12, trans. Butcher, p. 29.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Bryant, Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXIX, 423.

<sup>41</sup>Aristotle, Poetics, 6. 1450b 8-9, trans. Butcher, p. 29.

critical objections is a negative recognition of the didactic effect of drama. Samuel Johnson takes a similar position in regard to eighteenth-century novels which, because "they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life,"<sup>42</sup> potentially influence the ethical standards and moral actions of the reader.

Dramatic form, aside from any rhetorical intent and content which a play may possess, is fundamentally rhetorical. The requirements of the form probably impose upon the author, in some instances, a rhetorical attitude he did not consciously choose.

The rhetorical critic of drama is interested in how the total dramatic form and its specific elements function rhetorically. The substance of all drama is simply what people do, are, and say; or plot, character, and dialogue. It is the dynamic interaction of these three basic elements that produces the intellectual-emotional response which is the dramatic experience. The dramatic elements function rhetorically in two ways: first, as they effectively arouse and maintain audience attention and second, as they are sources of ideas and the means by which persuasion is achieved.

Attention is obviously a prerequisite for any impression, poetic or rhetorical, which the author wishes to effect in the audience. The word "dramatic" is frequently applied to anything which possesses attention arousing characteristics. George Pierce Baker has noted that the primary aim all dramatists have in common is twofold: "first, as promptly as possible to win the attention of the audience; secondly, to hold that

---

<sup>42</sup>Samuel Johnson, The Rambler, no. 4, Saturday, March 31, 1750, quoted in G. W. Allen and H. H. Clark, Literary Criticism: Pope to Croce (New York: American Book Co., 1941), p. 65.

interest steady, or better, to increase it till the final curtain falls."<sup>43</sup> The most exoteric manifestation of a play's success in this respect is its stage and publication history. The means at the disposal of the dramatist for acquiring audience attention are more numerous and effective than those of the orator. Consequently, conventional public address is with increasing frequency being supplanted by such devices as film strips, socio-dramas, and panel discussions.

The dramatic elements of plot, character, and dialogue are in several ways a source of ideas for the audience. First, the author may structure the drama in such a manner that the ideas he wished to express appear to develop naturally from the interaction of plot and character. Most of what is ordinarily considered the message of a play reflects this pattern. Second, there are those ideas basic to the playwright's world view which shaped the play and are implicit in the dramatic elements, although not its persuasive purpose as such. Third, the dramatic elements may suggest ideas quite apart from the author's conscious or unconscious intent.

Specifically, plot is the structural form by which the total drama is given unity, coherence, and meaning. It is important to the rhetorical effectiveness of the play for two major reasons. First, plot is the context from which ideas emerge and to which they refer for meaning. Ideas are generalizations based upon experience. What the characters in the play experience is the story or plot. On the basis of this experience the characters or the audience or both arrive at conclusions about life. The playwright who structures the plot in such a way as to impel the audience to accept certain ideas is using plot as a rhetorical device. The

---

<sup>43</sup>Baker, Dramatic Technique, p. 16. In rhetorical theory, attention is particularly associated with Thomas Wilson (Arts of Rhetorique, 1553) for whom it was a distinguishing doctrine.

close relation which exists between an idea and the context out of which it grows is a special advantage of drama. In oratory the ideas expressed by the speaker are more isolated from their source in human experience. The speaker in most cases simply assumes that the audience recalls the milieu of his ideas or, if he does refer back to the context, he is limited to description and cannot recreate the sense of personal involvement that the playwright can through dramatic representation. Second, it is not enough that plot serve as a reservoir from which ideas can be drawn. In order to be rhetorically and even dramatically effective it must provide opportunities for the character to abstract and examine ideas from the context of their experience. These moments of conflict and decision, less frequent in life than in drama, and the incidents which bring principals together or otherwise elicit some verbal response from a character, are clearly important to the exposition of theme.

The rhetorical importance of character is based upon two functions. Character is, first, a catalytic agent through which ideas implicit in the plot are made explicit for the audience. That is to say, characters are representatives of ideas and spokesmen for ideas. Second, it is largely through character development that the audience is empathetically involved with the issues arising from the plot. Although plot may demonstrate some implicative ideological significance for the audience, it is not in itself an especially forceful device for persuasion. It is as an object of identification that character exerts its greatest rhetorical appeal. Through emotionally sharing the experience of the characters of a play, an audience is inclined to accept their attitudes toward life as well.

The rhetorical function of dramatic dialogue is obvious. The explicitness of language, compared with other forms of exposition such as

setting, physical action, and the more generalized qualities of tempo and mood, makes it the most useful and basic means for persuasion. Aspects of the dramatic dialogue peculiar to the individual play often have a special relation to the themes and contribute more specifically to thematic exposition.

The rhetorical effectiveness of any specific dramatic element is largely determined by the extent to which an audience accepts the total dramatic illusion as a satisfactory metaphorical description of life. All "great literature strikes a responsive chord in all men because its central metaphors can be traced to archetypal images buried in the unconscious mind of humanity."<sup>44</sup> This is the appeal, basic to the rapport of dramatic experience, which can be utilized as a means for associating the ideas of a play with the audience. Metaphor is also a highly generalized rhetorical end. A metaphor is often a new conception of man, the universe, or the relation of man to his total environment, which, if internalized, can influence attitude and behavior.

In summary, drama, although not the type of discourse commonly associated with rhetoric, derives its status as a rhetorical enterprise from two sources. First, a persuasive condition of the intent and content of a play, whether this be a product of the author's conscious or unconscious purpose or of the interpretive function of the audience, insures that the form is rhetorical. Second, an implicit rhetoric resides in the dramatic form itself, partly a product of its audience proximity, partly the result of its basic nature. Certain of the major aspects of drama--imitation, thought, plot, character, catharsis--lead almost

---

<sup>44</sup>Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension, p. 70.



inevitably to some consideration of man's relations to his environment. Hence, dramatic form encourages a rhetorical purposiveness on the part of the author and stimulates the choice of objects for imitation which have rhetorical implications.

This study of Eugene O'Neill's Strange Interlude considers three aspects of the play's rhetoric--purpose, theme, and form. Chapter II surveys the rhetorical implications in O'Neill's life and art and discusses factors influencing the rhetorical significance of Strange Interlude. Chapter III interprets the persuasive themes of the play and relates them to the times. Chapter IV analyzes the rhetorical function of the dramatic elements.

## CHAPTER II

### EUGENE O'NEILL AND STRANGE INTERLUDE

Eugene O'Neill's persuasive intent is difficult to assess. This chapter reviews certain facts about his life and work in support of the contention that he was motivated in part by such a purpose, and it discusses the availability of Strange Interlude as a persuasive social force. Clearly, the rhetorical analysis of Strange Interlude, performed in Chapters III and IV, offers the most convincing evidence that persuasion was one of Eugene O'Neill's principal guiding considerations.

#### A. Eugene O'Neill: Rhetor

The critic, interested in defining Eugene O'Neill's social philosophy as a basis upon which to interpret the rhetorical implication of his plays, is limited by the condition of the evidence. O'Neill is not the protagonist of a set of definitely formulated ideas nor is he possessed by a single unifying social doctrine.

The author's commentary is not particularly helpful. Preternaturally seclusive, O'Neill avoided publicity and public statements. The references he has made to his art are notable for their inarticulateness and obscurity. The best insight into the purpose and nature of the playwright's message is provided by the plays themselves. But here the

obsessive introspection, the pervasive aura of inconclusiveness, the manner in which O'Neill alternately clutches and rejects ideas, and the constant revolution of ideas--both within any specific play and even his total career--contribute to the difficulty faced by the critic who would assess him as a rhetorical dramatist. However, a brief survey of biographical matters and certain major plays suggests something of O'Neill's attitude toward his function as a playwright.

Oliver M. Sayler, writing in Century Magazine, recorded an O'Neill interview in which the playwright summarized his developing attitude toward social protest.

I asked O'Neill not long ago what the theater meant to him and life.

The theater to me, he said, is life--the substance and interpretation of life.

And life?

Life is a struggle, often if not usually, unsuccessful struggle; for most of us have something within us which prevents us from accomplishing what we dream and desire. And then, as we progress, we are always seeing further than we can reach. I suppose that is one reason why I have come to feel so indifferent toward political and social movements of all kinds. Time was when I was an active socialist, after that, a philosophic anarchist. But today I can't feel that anything like that really matters. It is rather amusing to me to see how seriously some people take politics and social questions and how much they expect of them. Life as a whole is changed very little, if at all, as a result of their course. It seems to me that, as far as we can judge, man is much the same creature, with the same principal emotions and ambitions and motives, the same powers and the same weaknesses as in the time when the Aryan race started toward Europe from the slopes of the Himalayas. He has become better acquainted with those powers and those weaknesses, and he is learning ever so slowly how to control them. The birth-cry of the higher man is almost audible, but they will not come by tinkering with externals or by legislative or social fiat. They will come at the command of the imagination and will.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Oliver M. Sayler, "The Real Eugene O'Neill," Century Magazine, CIII (January, 1922), 351.

These views of Eugene O'Neill, published in January of 1922, are corroborated in his personal life and plays.

O'Neill's social criticism did not flow in conventional channels. While he associated with labor radicals in Greenwich Willage and with the political vanguard of liberals associated with the Provincetown Players, he never aligned himself officially with any reform movement or participated beyond the point of showing sympathy. O'Neill's only definite published contributions to social agitation as such are several verses. "Fratricide," a moderately long anti-war poem published in the New York Call on May 17, 1914, is a fairly typical statement of protest from the period. Why "bleed and groan--for Guggenheim! / And give your lives for--Standard Oil!", O'Neill questions, and ends with the lines "All workers on the earth/ Are brothers and WE WILL NOT FIGHT!"<sup>2</sup> And in The Masses for February, 1917, appeared "Submarine" a poem in which O'Neill, a metaphorical submarine whose aspirations were torpedoes, sank symbolic representatives of a material society--"Rust-eaten, grimy galleons of commerce/ Wallowing with obese assurance."<sup>3</sup>

His loss of faith in both the organized reform movements and the popularly discussed panaceas is the product of three factors. First, and probably least significant, was the influence upon O'Neill of the cynicism and disillusion associated with the nineteen-twenties which led many to reject idealism and positive reform programs.

Second, the apparent insulation which dissociated O'Neill from the specific trials of his times may have been the result of a tendency to

---

<sup>2</sup>Ralph Sanborn and Barrett H. Clark, A Bibliography of the Works of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Random House, 1931), pp. 116-17.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

stress the universal and abstract and an accompanying preoccupation with thinly disguised facts of his personal history. The themes of his plays generally dealt with philosophical and psychological problems rather than with social issues. His attention was focused most clearly upon matters to either side of the realm inhabited by conventional reformers. Regardless of the cause, the playwright's relative isolation from historical particulars is evident. O'Neill was not so noticeably influenced by the two wars which marked the beginning and end of his career or by the intervening turbulent two decade as other authors contemporary with him. For example, Ah Wilderness!, his only comedy, was written and produced in 1933, during the depths of the Depression. However, O'Neill never ignored the current ideas and conflicts of his time. His concern with the spiritual sickness and mental torment of twentieth-century man led inevitably to an analysis of social institutions which were, in many cases, the cause or manifestation of these ills.

The third and most important factor determining the nature of O'Neill's social consciousness was his life experience. What he did (sailor, prospector, beachcomber, odd job man), where he lived (water-front dives in Argentina, a New York saloon known as "Jimmy the Priest's," the forecastle of a ship) and those with whom he associated (derelicts, sailors, prostitutes) acquainted him with the backwater of human experience. Economic insecurity, the rapidly solidifying stratification of society, and the multitude of inequalities and incongruities in a system dominated by material motives were realities for O'Neill and not simply the cliches or abstractions they were for many social critics. He was more aware of the complexity of the problems and more conscious of their origin and most serious effects than were many of his contemporaries.

Consequently O'Neill, as his remarks to Oliver Sayler indicate, came to view most specific social doctrines as oversimplified and illusory solutions. In the tradition of earlier (and ultimately more successful) reformers he sought to perfect society by acquainting man with the truths of his existence rather than through the erection of new social machinery.

O'Neill was interested in man not as the unit in a mass but as an individual. He was, however, conscious that man was a product of forces--social, cultural, economic, political, religious--which were in a state of decay and flux. The forces in O'Neill's life which are important determinants of his social consciousness suggest the foundations of the rhetorical intent evidenced in his plays.

Although much of O'Neill's early life was spent either touring with his father's theatrical company or in boarding schools, a home of sorts was maintained in New London, Connecticut. New England, at the turn of the century, was in a state of transition. The small farms of stony soil and hillocks could not compete with Western agriculture. The social and economic problems concomitant with industrialization were accentuated by the rivalry of Southern mills. The New England aristocracy of Beacon Hill and elsewhere contrasted sharply with the Irish and Italian immigrants. New England, the uncontested seat of American culture during the first half of the nineteenth century, resembled in certain intellectual respects a decadent civilization. The New England of O'Neill's boyhood formed an excellent seed bed for the developing social consciousness of the rhetorical dramatist.

O'Neill's conception of his purpose and function as a playwright was not influenced by the requirements of the popular theater, except in the case of some early and unsuccessful one-act plays. O'Neill's father,

who sacrificed family and his own artistic potential to a financial goal of "forty thousand a year," contributed significantly to the playwright's attitude. Of this, Hamilton Basso reports O'Neill as saying, "That's what caused me to make up my mind that they [the strictly commercial interests in the American theater] would never get me. I determined then that I would never sell out."<sup>4</sup> Fortunately his association with the Provincetown Players and Theater Guild enabled him to indulge his genius without particular reference to the requirements of the commercial theater. He adapted neither technically nor thematically to it. O'Neill was almost defiant about the integrity of his work. In a newspaper interview he said:

I intend to use whatever I can make my own, to write about anything under the sun in any manner that fits the subject. And I shall never be influenced by any consideration but one: Is it the truth as I know it--or, better still, feel it? If so shoot, and let the splinters fly wherever they may. If not, not. This sounds brave and bold--but it isn't. It simply means that I want to do what gives me pleasure and worth in my own eyes, and don't care to do what doesn't.<sup>5</sup>

As in the case of traditional social reform movements, O'Neill did not accept the solutions of traditional religion. His Catholic heritage, however, may have influenced his social philosophy. Most O'Neill plays are characterized by a consideration of fundamentally religious problems. The conflict between good and evil and man's desire to feel himself in harmony with something outside himself are, according to Joseph Wood Krutch, phenomena the persistence of which concerns the Catholic Church as well as O'Neill.<sup>6</sup> The way in which the Church early influenced

---

<sup>4</sup>Hamilton Basso, "The Tragic Sense," New Yorker (February 28, 1948), p. 34.

<sup>5</sup>Burns Mantle, American Playwrights of Today (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1929), pp. 516, quoting The Public Ledger (Philadelphia, 1923).

<sup>6</sup>Krutch, American Drama Since 1918, p. 118.

O'Neill may have been as it directed his thinking toward the religious aspect of the human dilemma rather than toward some other aspect, such as the economic. That the playwright's solutions or attempts at solutions were highly original and independent of the Catholic standards of truth does not lessen the possibility that this was one source of his purpose and approach.

The belief that the playwright's primary purpose was the critical examination and modification of society was originated by nineteenth-century European dramatists. One source of O'Neill's rhetorical purpose may have been his familiarity with modern drama, including the works of Ibsen, Strindberg, Wedekind, Kaiser, Toller, Hasenclaver, and others. Ibsen was probably the first in modern times to consider the theater a platform for the promulgation of ideas. The tradition he initiated has become a dominant one in modern drama. Like Strindberg, O'Neill dealt with significant ideas and like the Expressionists, he adapted his dramatic forms to the ideas. The relation between the drama and the advanced thinking of such people as Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Jung, and Freud further suggests the serious purposefulness with which the playwright approached his work. O'Neill was a student as well as a progenitor of ideas.

O'Neill's motives and message spring principally from his personal realms of being, the recesses of his own psychology. Some of the playwright's fundamental attitudes are derived from his father, a dominant personality compounded of New England parsimony and Irish romanticism, and his mother, from whom, as it is noted in the stage directions of Long Day's Journey Into Night, Edmond (Eugene O'Neill?) inherited his "extreme nervous sensitivity."<sup>7</sup> The erratic pattern of his earliest years until

---

<sup>7</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 20.



the age of eight, touring the country with the elder O'Neill's company, and later the rigid exile of boarding schools, undoubtedly influenced his development. When his first plays came to production the author had seven years of world wandering behind him. In 1909-1910 he prospected for gold in Honduras and caught malarial fever. After a short term as assistant manager and bit actor with his father's company he sailed on a Norwegian bark to Buenos Aires. In Argentina during the years 1910 and 1911 he worked at a succession of jobs ashore and at sea and was at various times destitute and "on the beach" in Buenos Aires and New York. The several months O'Neill was confined to a tuberculosis sanatorium and his earlier unsuccessful marriage to Kathleen Jenkins were undoubtedly important influences as well. Why O'Neill thought as he did is, of course, an unanswerable question. But that he had a variety of experiences which surely influenced his attitudes is evident.

The most significant evidence that Eugene O'Neill considered his mission as a playwright a serious and purposeful one is the manner in which he approached his task. No other American playwright has been so undeviating and uncompromising in his attitude toward writing. And with few has the message been such an integral part of their psychology and philosophy and so intimately related to their theory of artistic expression.

Eugene O'Neill is commonly and correctly termed "the poet of the individual."<sup>8</sup> The themes of his plays are products of a personal tension and are addressed to the soul rather than the socialized instinct of the audience. It is inevitable, however, that his search for the sources of man's torment and the need to explain and justify that suffering should

---

<sup>8</sup>Sanborn and Clark, A Bibliography of the Work of Eugene O'Neill, pp. 116-17.

lead him finally to some form of social protest.

The nature of this criticism is distinctly religious in plays like The First Man (an attack on Puritanism), Lazarus Laughed (a conception of immortality), Dynamo (a search for new gods), and Days Without End (an affirmation of Catholicism). It is social and economic in The Great God Brown and Marco Millions (which explore the effect of materialistic values upon man's nobler instincts), in Anna Christie (which blames social pressures for personal sin), The Hairy Ape (which protests the prison-like economic stratification of society), and in The Emperor Jones and All God's Chillun Got Wings (which, among other things, attack racial discrimination). But these are inadequate descriptions since most O'Neill plays, including Strange Interlude, are much too complex in their content to be so easily explained.

Several of O'Neill's early one-act plays (e.g., Fog and The Web, both written in 1914) contain a very direct although sentimentally naive form of social criticism; and in The Iceman Cometh (1939, 1946) and Long Day's Journey Into Night (1949, 1956),<sup>9</sup> representative plays of his last years, social criticism in the usual sense ceases to be possible, all life and thought and action being illusory constructions of man's pride. The Emperor Jones, Anna Christie, The Hairy Ape, The Great God Brown, Marco Millions, and Strange Interlude, all written between 1920 and 1927, mark O'Neill's highest achievements as a rhetorical dramatist. Strange Interlude, coming at the end of this period, contains both the social comment characteristic of these plays and the deepening inconclusiveness of the plays which follow, Dynamo, Mourning Becomes Electra, and Days Without End. A

---

<sup>9</sup>The first date designates in each case the year in which the written version was completed, the second year that of the play's production.

brief review of certain major rhetorical plays in order of their composition, from Beyond the Horizon (1918, 1920) through Days Without End (1933, 1934), suggests O'Neill's persuasive motive and indicates something of the nature of his social criticism.

Beyond the Horizon (1918, 1920), O'Neill's first play to receive a Broadway production and national attention, is concerned with the narrow horizons of impoverished farm life, the relation between the creator and speculator, and the tragic subversion of the idealistic spirit which can be justified or avoided only through sacrifice. Robert and Andrew Mayo's personal tragedies are indictments of an American society then turning away from the idealistic creativity of an earlier day to the materialistic speculation of the present.

The Emperor Jones (1920, 1920), although principally a psychological fantasy, contains obvious social, economic, and racial implications. On an island in the West Indies, Brutus Jones, an American Negro convict escaped from a chain gang, has ruled as "emperor" for two years. He attained his position of power by applying the ways of the white man learned while a Pullman porter. In The Emperor Jones the relations between the Negro and white man are reversed. Jones says of Smithers, "Dere's little stealin' like you does, and dere's big stealin' like I does."<sup>10</sup> Assuming that a parallel exists between the society of the island and that of contemporary civilization in general, O'Neill indicts a social structure which rewards the "big stealin'" and punishes the "little stealin'." The ignorant "bush-niggers" revolt, decisively ends the domination of Jones. Having lost a position of superiority that is no less artificial than most status roles, he gradually disintegrates into a fear stricken figure--

---

<sup>10</sup>Eugene O'Neill, Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill (New York: Random House, n.d.), p. 8.

the product of the vicious system of a modern industrial world which prevents the Negro from either attaining equality or remaining primitive.

Diff'rent (1920, 1920), while not a theatrical success, is unique in the singleness of its purpose. The play is an attack on Puritan inhibition, especially sexual-repression. Emma Crosby breaks her engagement with Caleb Williams after hearing that the sea captain is not "diff'rent" from other men but that he has had an affair with a native woman in the South Sea Islands. The happiness of both is thwarted and tragedy ensues when Emma's puritan repressions are exposed for what they are, empty illusions.

In The First Man (1921, 1922) Curtis Jayson's rigid, masculine puritanism prevents his discarding the romantic illusions, growing out of the death of his children and subsequent neurotic dedication to his career, that hold him imprisoned. He cannot accept Martha's pregnancy, her primitive reaffirmation of life, and ultimately catastrophe ensues.

The implications of social protest in The Hairy Ape (1921, 1922) are more apparent than in most of O'Neill's plays. Yank, apart from the philosophic connotations of his inner conflict, is a symbol of a deep social protest against the whole structure of modern civilization. Yank is a stoker, hidden from the modern world in the clanging bowels of an ocean liner. He dismisses Long's socialistic haranguing against "the damned Capitalist class" with the confidence of one who belongs: "What's dem slobs in de foist cabin got to do with us? One of us guys could clean up de whole mob wit one mit. Who makes dis old tub run? Ain't it us guys? Well, den we belong, don't we? We belong and dey don't. Dat's all."<sup>11</sup> One of those "slobs in de foist cabin" comes below out of

---

<sup>11</sup>O'Neill, Nine Plays, p. 44.

curiosity and her revulsion at seeing Yank is such a disturbing experience for his primitive soul that he begins to perceive the incomprehensible unnaturalness of the social system and class structure. Yank's various attempts to understand, then to oppose the order in which he counted for nothing end in failure. His problem, moreover, is not a matter of low wages, unemployment, or any of the commonly discussed symptoms of the sickness of the industrial age. Symbolic of O'Neill's unique perception of the dilemma, Yank's need is not to be met by the I. W. W. or Salvation Army or presumably any reform or relief organization. He says:

Cut out an hour offen de job a day and make me happy! Tree square a day, and cauliflowes in de front yard--ekal rights--a woman and kids--a lousy vote--and I'm all fixed for Jesus, huh? Aw, hell! What does dat get yuh? Dis ting's in your inside, but it ain't your belly. Feedin' your face--sinkers and coffee--dat don't touch it. It's way down--at de bottom. Yuh can't grab it, and yuh can't stop it. It moves, and everything moves. It stops and de whole woild stops. Dat's me now--I don't tick see?--I'm a busted Ingersoll, dat's what. Steel was me, and I owned de woild. Now I ain't steel, and de woild owns me. Aw, Hell! I can't see--it's all dark, get me? It's all wrong!"<sup>12</sup>

The Hairy Ape is a social drama of unusual depth. On one level it is a protest against man's inhumanity to man. But O'Neill was interested in the source of the problem, not simply the surface manifestation, in the ultimate rather than the immediate effect. Man's total relation to a hostile universe in which he has been born with a consciousness of not belonging is the basic theme of the play.

All God's Chillun Got Wings (1923, 1924) is a study of the psychological effect of race prejudice. Jim, a Negro who possesses qualifications that would have made a white man successful, fails to attain either his professional objective or a normal love relationship with a white girl

---

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

because of a deep-seated self-consciousness, the legacy of a minority people. O'Neill illuminates the tragedy of the situation with impressive subtlety and sympathy.

Both The Fountain (1922, 1926) and Desire Under the Elms (1924, 1925) are important for their religious connotations. In The Fountain, Nano, a native familiar with the superficiality and materialistic character of the white man's religion explains this knowledge to another "savage":

NANO. Their devils make them strong. But they are not true warriors. They are thieves and rapers of women.

CHIEF. Have they no God?

NANO. Their God is a thing of earth! It is this! (He touches a gold ornament that the Chief wears.)

MEDICINE (Mystified.) Gold? Gold is sacred to the sun. It  
MAN. can be no God itself.

NANO. (Contemptuously.) They see only things, not the spirit behind things. Their hearts are muddy as a pool in which the deer have trampled. Listen. Their Medicine Men tell of a God who came to them long ago in the form of a man. He taught them to scorn things. He taught them to look for the spirit behind things. In revenge, they killed him. They tortured him as a sacrifice to the Gold Devil. They crossed two big sticks. They drove little sticks through his hands and feet and pinned him on the others--  
thus.<sup>13</sup>

In Desire Under the Elms, Ephraim Cabot's conception of God as hard and unsympathetic is an important idea, as it is in several of O'Neill's other plays:

Well--this place was nothin' but fields o' stones. Folks laughed when I tuk it. They couldn't know what I knowed. When ye kin make corn sprout out o'stones, God's livin' in yew! They wa'n't strong enuf fur that! They reckoned God was easy. They laughed. They don't laugh no more . . . They're all under ground--fur follerin' after an easy God . . . God's hard, not easy! God's in the stones! Build

---

<sup>13</sup>Eugene O'Neill, *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, 1 (New York: Random House, n.d.), 428-29.

my church on a rock--out o' stones an' I'll be in them!  
 That's what He meant t' Peter! Stones. I picked 'em up  
 an' piled 'em into walls. Ye kin read the years o' my life  
 in them walls, every day a hefted stone, climbin' over the  
 hills up and down, fencin' in the fields that was mine,  
 what I'd made thin's grow out o' nothin'--like the will o'  
 God, like the servant l' His hand. It wa'n't easy. It  
 was hard an' He made me hard fur it.<sup>14</sup>

Also apparent in Desire Under the Elms are the tensions produced by a patriarchal society and the struggle for land.

The Great God Brown (1925, 1926) contains, as major themes, several ideas which have social significance. It demonstrates the inner conflict created by the antagonistic primitive and puritan drives, the one expressing and the other inhibiting the creative life impulse. It is also a study of the artist's inability to adjust to a materialistic society and an indictment of American Babbittry, including the clearest and most bitter references to the debilitating sentimentality of Babbitt's religion.

Marco Millions (1925, 1928) is an unequivocal protest against the business ideal and the materialism and philistinism of Western society. Marco Polo, the major character, is a product of the era of prosperity, the confident and spirited merchant who, as Kublai said, "has not even a mortal soul . . . only an acquisitive instinct."<sup>15</sup> The objectivity and subtle humor of Marco Millions contributed to its persuasive appeal. The play is a satire and the Venetian merchant indicts himself:

MARCO. My tax scheme, Your Majesty, that got such wonderful results is simplicity itself. I simply reversed the old system. For one thing I found they had a high tax on excess profits. Imagine a profit being excess! Why, it isn't humanly possible! I repealed it. And I repealed the tax on luxuries. I found out the great majority in Yang Chau couldn't afford luxuries. The tax wasn't democratic enough to make it

---

<sup>14</sup>O'Neill, Nine Plays, p. 172.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 251.

pay! I crossed it off and I wrote on the statute books a law that taxes every necessity in life, a law that hits every man's pocket equally, be he beggar or banker! And I got results!

CHU-YIN. In beggars?

KUBLAI. I have received a petition from the inhabitants of Yang Chau enumerating over three thousand cases of your gross abuse of power!

MARCO. Oh, so they've sent that vile slander to you, have they? That's the work of a mere handful of radicals--

KUBLAI. Five hundred thousand names are signed to it. Half a million citizens accuse you of endeavoring to stamp out their ancient culture!

MARCO. What? Why, I even had a law passed that anyone caught interfering with culture would be subject to a fine! It was Section One of a blanket statute that every citizen must be happy or go to jail. I found it was the unhappy ones who were always making trouble and getting discontented. You see, here's the way I figure it; if a man's good, he's happy--and if he isn't happy, it's a sure sign he's no good to himself or anyone else and he better be put where he can't do harm.<sup>16</sup>

Lazarus Laughed (1927, 1928) is concerned with achieving a new attitude toward life, one which does not admit a fear of death. Lazarus returns from the grave and delivers his message, "There is no death . . . There is only life . . . Death is the fear between."<sup>17</sup> Lazarus Laughed and The Fountain are one phase of O'Neill's religious thinking.

Dynamo (1928, 1929) is a vastly broader and more significant form of religious protest which bears considerable resemblance to that phase of the themes in Strange Interlude. Here O'Neill repudiates the Puritan God of vengeance, guilt, and inhibition, the God of Reverend Light. The protagonist, Reuben Light, is searching for a God who is acceptable to

---

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 256-57.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 387 and 388.



man's primitive as well as scientific-materialistic rationality. The conception of this new God is vague and made vaguer still when Reuben meets annihilation at the hands of the dynamo, the personification of the maternal-electrical deity. Reuben's questioning undoubtedly reflects that of modern man.

But I have got to finish telling you all I have come to know about her--how all those things end up in her! Did I tell you that our blood plasma is the same right now as the sea was when life came out of it? We have got the sea in our blood still! It's what makes our hearts live. And it's the sea rises up in clouds, falling on the earth in rain, made that river that drives the turbines that drive the dynamo! The sea makes her heart beat too! But the sea is only hydrogen and oxygen and minerals, and they're only atoms and atoms are only protons and electrons--even our blood and the sea are only electricity in the end! And think of the stars! Driving through space, round and round, just like the electrons in the atom! But there must be a center around which all this moves, mustn't there?<sup>18</sup>

The persuasive implications of Mourning Becomes Electra (1931, 1931) are obscured by its association with the classical story of Electra and Clytemnestra. However, the play is a grand conflict between puritanism and primitivism, between the austere, even proud inhibitions of New England and the free innocence symbolized in the "Blessed Isles." It is not wholly a personal conflict between good and evil but has its roots in social mores; the prime mover of the play is, after all, the avenging son of a Mannon unjustly disowned for yielding to the honest impulses of love and marrying a servant girl. The dictatorial strength of psychological forces (a modern substitute for the Greek Fates) and especially the incestuous impulses fundamental to the play (e.g., Christine says at one point, "I know you, Vinnie! I've watched you ever since you were little,

---

<sup>18</sup> Eugene O'Neill, Dynamo (New York: Horace Liveright, 1929), pp. 133-34.

trying to do exactly what you're doing now! You've tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin! You've always schemed to steal my place")<sup>19</sup> point emphatically to the play's psychoanalytic implications.

Days Without End (1933, 1934) is O'Neill's most "religious" play in the traditional sense. On the surface it appears to advocate a return to Catholicism, the other social and economic "isms" having failed to fulfill their Utopian promise. The play is significant as an indication of O'Neill's changing attitude toward social reform. The playwright was never totally convinced that alterations in the political or social machinery offered any cure for the sickness of today, or at least he was inept in proposing constructive changes. Increasingly, O'Neill became aware that salvation is an individual search, that the perfection of man collectively was to be ultimately achieved through the perfection of man singly. Hence, the social and economic protest implicit in most of O'Neill's plays gradually assumes a more distinctly religious connotation toward the end of his career. The introspective nature of the religious directions in the playwright's search may have contributed to the negation and pessimism which marked his later work.

#### B. Strange Interlude: Rhetorical Drama

There are three reasons why a rhetorical analysis of Strange Interlude is justified. First, and most important, the sheer quantity of relatively tangible ideas contained in the play indicates such an approach. Second, it is one of O'Neill's most experimental plays. (And the forms he uses are always dictated by the nature of the problem and are never

---

<sup>19</sup>O'Neill, Nine Plays, p. 716.

simply theatrical stunts.) Third, the wide and enthusiastic audience which Strange Interlude acquired is evidence of the play's appeal and suggests that it exerted some influence upon its times and was accepted as a broadly accurate metaphorical description of the nineteen-twenties. The basic process of all persuasive discourse is one "of adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas."<sup>20</sup> Strange Interlude contains ideas which are projected to an audience in such a manner as to be persuasively appealing; the play is clearly rhetorical. While Strange Interlude is not O'Neill's greatest play--to Desire Under the Elms or Mourning Becomes Electra must go this honor--it is his most important rhetorical play. Although in Chapters III and IV matter and manner will be discussed in greater detail, an introductory assessment provides a useful perspective at this point.

Strange Interlude is in some respects typical of the protest literature written during the nineteen-twenties. The decade was a period of active social revolution, although the static qualities of the economic and political order and the general loss of interest in reform and idealism tend to suggest otherwise. A significant number of intellectuals were clearly disturbed by the persistence well into the twentieth century of Victorian manners and morals, medieval economics, and Rousseauistic idealism. And, as Kimball Young suggests, "When men begin to criticize their own social order, to question the mores, laws, and forms of government, that society is already in the process of change."<sup>21</sup> In a decade which stressed self-expression, it was appropriate that social criticism should

---

<sup>20</sup>Bryant, Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXIX, 413.

<sup>21</sup>Kimball Young, Social Psychology (2nd ed., New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1944), p. 322.

be given articulation by the artists, especially the writers.

Rather more in the 1920's than in other periods did books clearly establish the inevitability of their inclusion in an adequate history of the times. An author might take refuge in an ivory tower to avoid the rub of the world, yet he could not help reflecting the world. Even less could he avoid influencing it.<sup>22</sup>

Mark Sullivan's comment about the nature of the relationship between literature and life, more pertinent in the case of drama than of other literary forms, is basic to the point of view of this study. A relatively small group of writers and artists, to which the label "the lost generation" was originally applied, influenced the entire decade of the nineteen-twenties with their disillusionment, sense of frustration, cynicism, Byronic self-consciousness, and romantic self-pity. Disillusioned about war and the ideals of glory, honor, courage, and sacrifice, they began to investigate other aspects of life and found much of it similarly empty images. The emphasis upon youth, a characteristic of the period, accelerated the rate at which ideas associated with the lost generation permeated age groups too old to be directly associated with the First World War or the moral upheaval which this experience engendered. The effect of the war upon literature during the nineteen-twenties is reflected in Strange Interlude. Gordon Shaw's death two days before the armistice sets in motion the chain of events which is the play. It is doubly ironic because death is the ultimate sacrifice a man can make to an illusion. The ideas born of the war gather momentum from the apparent corroborating evidence of scientific determinism and all thinking which questioned the validity of man's traditional perception of himself and his relation to

---

<sup>22</sup>Mark Sullivan, Our Times: The Twenties, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 322.

the externals of his environment.

Literary themes, during the period, were generally more contemporary and indigenous than heretofore. O'Neill was fundamentally motivated by the philosophical questions raised by the present social environment. His basic mission as a playwright was to mediate in the dilemmas which confronted modern man. In most respects O'Neill shared both this general purpose and the influences which precipitated it with other writers of his generation. Consequently, the ideas Strange Interlude contains are for the most part typical of the decade. The use of psychoanalytic material, for example, was not new in 1928 since "virtually all the serious American playwrights of the twenties reflected Freudian thinking to some extent, expressing playgoers' preference if not their own."<sup>23</sup> (Philip Barry, S. N. Behrman, John Howard Lawson, George Kelly, Sidney Howard, Maxwell Anderson, Elmer Rice, and Robert Sherwood are cases in point.) Moreover, several novelists (e.g., Waldo Frank, Sherwood Anderson, Carl Van Vechten) affirmed the primitive ideals of freedom and innocence and attacked the guilt-producing inhibitions associated with puritanism. O'Neill's protest against the insensitive superficiality engendered by strictly material motives is a basic theme of Sinclair Lewis' novels. The relation of the artist to a business civilization is treated in Marc Connelly and George Kaufman's Beggar on Horseback (1924). And Elmer Rice's Adding Machine (1923) explores the ultimate effect of a scientific philosophy upon human values. In short, most of the ideas contained in Strange Interlude, and in some cases O'Neill's particular approach to them, could have been derived from the popular current of social criticism of the

---

<sup>23</sup>W. David Sievers, Freud on Broadway (New York: Hermitage House, 1955), p. 134.

decade. A rhetorical analysis of the play provides insights into the literary themes of the decade.

O'Neill's social protest is, in other ways, unique and more worthy of special study than many of the more obvious rhetorical dramas of the period. Since he does not altogether fit into the prevailing pattern, there has been a tendency to disregard the rhetorical implications of his plays. The abstractable meanings of such notable social dramas of the nineteen-twenties as Laurence Stallings and Maxwell Anderson's What Price Glory and John Howard Lawson's Processional are admittedly more evident, but O'Neill's interpretation of social evils may be more significant. The matters which incite most social agitation are, for him, symbols of a deeper dilemma. O'Neill's conception of this dilemma which underlies and unifies the specific problems of man's existence is particularly clear in Strange Interlude. It suggests the course of social history which led inevitably to man's loss of the sense of belonging. This explanation of the ultimate cause and basic nature of the human dilemma is probably O'Neill's most significant contribution as a thinker. Because of his deep understanding of the situation he was not susceptible to the myopic judgment that affected many of his contemporaries. And aware of the complexities involved in prescribing cures for man's ills, O'Neill maintained reservations where others had none.

Strange Interlude is O'Neill's most complex play, embodying all the great themes of his previous ones. For example, the psychoanalytic implications earlier appeared in Diff'rent and The Great God Brown; the theological conflict between puritan and primitive motives in The First Man, Desire Under the Elms, The Fountain, The Great God Brown, and Marco Millions; the protest against absolute ethical codes in Anna Christie;

the criticism of the standards by which the age chooses its heroes in The Great God Brown; the protest against the business ideal in Beyond the Horizon, The Hairy Ape, The Fountain, The Great God Brown, and Marco Millions; the consideration of the scientific attitude in The First Man; and the investigation of artistic imagination in a materialistic society in The Great God Brown.

The character types in Strange Interlude, essential to the play's intellectual meaning, had also appeared previously. Nina Leeds embodies certain characteristics of Martha (The First Man), Abbie, (Desire Under the Elms), and Cybel (The Great God Brown). Charles Marsden is an effeminate and civilized descendant of Ephraim Cabot (Desire Under the Elms). Marco (Marco Millions) and Billy Brown (The Great God Brown) reappear as Sam Evans. And Ned Darrell is a later version of Curt Jayson (The First Man). Each of the major characters symbolizes a definite set of attitudes and, hence, is a part of the play's persuasion. In order to heighten the importance of this dimension of character, O'Neill permits them to speak these attitudes aloud. By using the interior monologue the ordinary limitations of conventional dialogue are in part overcome and the characters can comment on their experience to a degree hitherto difficult. This is at once the most novel and the most rhetorically valuable technique in the play.

The contention that Eugene O'Neill infused ideas into the stream of popular thought which combined with other similar opinions to exert an influence upon the period and those proceeding it must rely upon implication for its proof. The wide theater and reading audience which Strange Interlude attracted is evidence that his ideas were at least presented to an enthusiastic and presumably receptive public.

Strange Interlude was heralded in 1928 as "not only the supreme novelty of the play season, but also as the most significant drama so far written by an American."<sup>24</sup> The interior monologue and its great length were certainly "novel" and undoubtedly contributed to the play's popularity. The performance began at five-thirty in the afternoon and recessed at a quarter to eight, for dinner, and resumed at nine for slightly more than two hours. Strange Interlude won for O'Neill a third Pulitzer Prize and contributed to the international stature of the author who would be awarded the Nobel Prize in 1936. It opened with a star cast at the John Golden Theater, New York City on January 30, 1928.<sup>25</sup> Produced by the Theater Guild, it was to be their greatest success. The New York production ran for 426 performances.<sup>26</sup> Several companies toured with the play, all meeting with success. For example, it ran nine weeks in Los Angeles and seventeen weeks in Chicago. A special train brought people from Boston, the play having been banned there, to see it in Quincy, Massachusetts.

---

<sup>24</sup>Mantle, American Playwrights of Today, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup>Staged by Philip Moeller

Cast: Charles Marsden . . . . . Tom Powers  
 Prof. Leeds . . . . . Philip Leigh  
 Nina Leeds . . . . . Lynn Fontanne  
 Sam Evans . . . . . Earl Larimore  
 Edmund Darrell . . . . . Glenn Anders  
 Mrs. Evans . . . . . Helen Westley  
 Gordon, a boy . . . . . Charles Walters  
 Madeline Arnold . . . . . Ethel Westley  
 Gordon, a man . . . . . John J. Burns

Judith Anderson, Gale, Sondergaard, Pauline Lord, Elizabeth Risdon, and Mary Ellis also played the part of "Nina" at various times in either the New York production or on the road.

<sup>26</sup>Freedley and Reeves, A History of the Theater (New York: Crown Publishers, 1941), p. 602, list the New York run as 432 performances.



Strange Interlude has also been produced in most European countries and in Australia.

The first edition of Strange Interlude appeared in February, 1928. The first printing, consisting of twenty thousand copies, sold quickly and "for months it held its place as a national bestseller."<sup>27</sup>

A motion picture version of Strange Interlude was released in late summer of 1932.<sup>28</sup> The interior monologue technique was well suited to the cinema since the passages in this form could be spoken audibly for the audience while the actors themselves maintained closed lips. The movie version was highly publicized, given a lavish Hollywood premier, and considered the cinema event of the year. It was not the critical success which had been hoped for but did play to large audiences across the country at a time when movie attendance was quite high. Problems in casting were probably the chief reason for its limited critical acclaim although the rewritten version of the script was declared an improvement.

Other factors than the intrinsic merits of the play itself contributed to the success of Strange Interlude. Eugene O'Neill's reputation is important in this respect. The critical support, acquired early in his career, was an important facet of his reputation. Even before

<sup>27</sup>Anita Block, The Changing World in Plays and Theater (Boston:

<sup>28</sup>A Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Production

Directed by Robert Z. Leonard

Cast: Nina Leeds . . . . . Norma Shearer  
 Prof. Leeds . . . . . Henry B. Walthal  
 Sam Evans . . . . . Alexander Kirkland  
 Edmund Darrell . . . . . Clark Gable  
 Charles Marsden . . . . . Ralph Morgan  
 Mrs. Evans . . . . . May Robson  
 Gordon, the boy . . . . . Tad Alexander  
 Madeline Arnold . . . . . Maureen O'Sullivan  
 Gordon, the man . . . . . Robert Young

O'Neill had achieved a New York production, The Smart Set had published three of the one-act plays, marking his first national recognition and, more significantly, the beginning of his association with George Jean Nathan. Nathan, if not O'Neill's discoverer, was certainly his most influential promoter. The prestige gained from the sympathetic acknowledgment of critics like H. L. Mencken, Burns Mantle, Kenneth Macgowan, Barrett H. Clark, Benjamin De Casseres, and numerous others prior to 1928 contributed to the success of Strange Interlude. Beyond the Horizon, produced in February of 1920, established O'Neill as a major playwright. It was a commercial success, went on tour after the regular season, and won the Pulitzer Prize for that year.<sup>29</sup> Between that time and the opening of Strange Interlude, seventeen full-length O'Neill plays were produced. Five of these were distinct successes: The Emperor Jones (1920), Anna Christie (1921),<sup>30</sup> The Hairy Ape (1922), Desire Under the Elms (1924), and The Great God Brown (1926). The New York season of 1926-1927 was the first in many years without an O'Neill opening. The lull probably contributed to the enthusiasm aroused when the Theater Guild produced two of the playwright's most unusual and lavish plays within the same season. Marco Millions opened on January 9 and was already a success when Strange Interlude followed on January 30, 1928.

O'Neill's popular reputation as a dramatist was based primarily upon several aspects of his dramas. First the novelty and unpredictability of his forms of expression and style contributed much to the

---

<sup>29</sup> Previous to this the Provincetown Players had produced eleven of O'Neill's short plays--two in Provincetown, Mass., and the remainder at The Playwrights' Theater, Macdougall Street, New York. The Washington Square Players, the other major experimental theater in this country, also produced a one-act play in New York.

<sup>30</sup> Anna Christie also won the Pulitzer Prize.

excitement that his plays aroused. Second, in spite of this constantly changing form, O'Neill maintained a reputation as a theatrical craftsman, an attribute which appealed especially to the critics. Third, the boldness of his themes (e.g., sexual expression, miscegenation, incest, adultery) was an important factor in acquiring an audience. And Fourth, the aspect of O'Neill's dramas that contributed most to his reputation as a thinker was the illusion of profundity which emanates particularly from his longer plays. The bold psychological penetration and prolonged probing of the problems of existence, which is as much a part of the total conception as the themes of many O'Neill plays, form the basis for his popular reputation as a playwright with a message. Strange Interlude, one of his most unusual and imaginative plays, embodies all of these qualities.

There is no method for ascertaining the influence of Strange Interlude upon the thinking of the time. Certain ideas appear to be more tangible and abstractable than others. Those ideas which were likely most influential are those related to paramount issues of the nineteen-twenties. The clarity and forcefulness of expression also influenced the play's persuasive value. Finally, its popularity attested to its audience appeal and to its availability as a source of ideas.

## CHAPTER III

### DRAMATIC THEME IN STRANGE INTERLUDE

The themes of Strange Interlude which are most distinctly rhetorical are those abstractable ideas that possess significance for the social issues of the times. This content is the object of the play's persuasion; it potentially influences the social thinking and behavior of the audience.

This chapter is concerned with defining and describing the ideas contained in Strange Interlude, both the underlying philosophic structure and the specific implications for the nineteen-twenties. The following chapter will analyze the principal methods by which, with respect to the ideas, persuasion is achieved. Obviously the ideational content of a play and its forms of expression are not separable. All that is considered in the next chapter will provide additional support for those ideas which have been discussed in the present one.

#### A. The Underlying Unity

Strange Interlude contains one of the clearest statements of Eugene O'Neill's world view. With but little interpretation and interpolation on the part of the critic it can be reduced to a cause-effect-solution pattern. The cause is to be found in the estranged relations between man and God; the effect is the sickness of today; the solution is the glorious struggle. O'Neill is most acutely conscious of the sickness

of today, a state of tension and suffering which is the immediate effect of man's present circumstances. These circumstances are the inevitable result of the evolution of man's consciousness of himself and his universe. The ultimate cause may be briefly identified as the estrangement of man and God. The projected solution, the contention that man achieves a measure of nobility through struggle, follows as an only alternative. This three-part pattern underlies O'Neill's conception of the human dilemma and is the philosophic matrix of his plays.

O'Neill's Weltanschauung is explicitly set forth in a letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn written in 1925:

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.<sup>1</sup>

This document, probably the most significant personal statement of a world view, is a valuable reference point for the critic interested in the underlying unity of thought in O'Neill's plays.

#### 1. The Relation Between Man and God

"Most modern plays," states O'Neill, "are concerned with the relation between man and man, but that does not interest me at all. I am interested only in the relation between man and God /italics mine/."<sup>2</sup> The playwright's search for the ultimate causes of human suffering led him inevitably to the conclusion that it lay in the estrangement of man and God.

---

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day (New York: F. S. Crofts and Co., 1945), II, 199.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Wood Krutch, "Introduction," O'Neill, Nine Plays, p. xvii.

O'Neill apparently conceived this estrangement as a gradual process, possessing three relatively distinct stages: the Primitive, Puritan, and Scientific-Materialistic. Vaguely historical, this evolutionary pattern has influenced every phase of man's being and continues to do so with cumulative intensity. A description of each stage--along with its representative characteristics, conflicts, and dominant character types--indicates the pervasiveness of the pattern in O'Neill's work and its special implications for Strange Interlude.

The Primitive Stage was that state of original harmony. Conscious of a sense of belonging, the man of this period is comparable to the South Sea natives in Mourning Becomes Electra and not distantly removed from his simian relation, the ape in The Hairy Ape. In short, man was contentedly absorbed in a universe whose horizons were the cyclic processes of life, birth, and death and in whose expression he was but an "infinitesimal incident." In a pregnant reverie, Nina associates herself with the spirit and deity of this Primitive Stage:

The world's whole and perfect . . . and the is is beyond  
reason . . . questions die in the silence of this peace  
. . . I am living a dream within the great dream of the  
tide . . . breathing in the tide I dream and breathe my  
dream into the tide . . . suspended in the movement of  
the tide, I feel life move in me, suspended in me . . .  
no whys matter . . . there is no why . . . I am a mother  
. . . God is a mother . . .<sup>3</sup>

The Primitive Stage is characterized by a complete acceptance of the realities of man's relation to the universe, fulfillment of the feminine forces in nature, and the dominance of the id. These basic tendencies are expressed in a variety of forms in Strange Interlude, although

---

<sup>3</sup>O'Neill, Nine Plays, p. 573-74. Hereafter all page references to this edition will appear in the body of the text.

here they are reverted to rather than natural and coexist with antagonistic propensities as later elaborations will suggest. Man, aware that he is wholly immersed in an impersonal regenerative-degenerative process is possessed with a sense of humility and sacrifice. The feminine influence is clearly symbolized in the conception of a "God the Mother," the Oedipus complex, and the sexual-maternal drives. The instinctive and amoral properties of the id are inescapable dimensions of personality and are especially significant in Strange Interlude.<sup>4</sup>

This stage is unique in its relative absence of inner conflict. The biogenic needs, largely uncomplicated by inhibitory considerations, were capable of direct gratification, or if not, the frustrating obstacle was clearly defined. Moreover, the simplicity of the few biogenic drives reduces the possibility of any conflict of motives.

The Primitive forces affect O'Neill's characters in numerous ways. There are the ideal representatives of this spirit like Cybel in The Great God Brown, Abbie in Desire Under the Elms, May Fife in Dynamo, and Kukachin in Marco Millions. In Strange Interlude, the Primitive spirit is important as a principal, though not undiluted, influence upon Nina. During her pregnancies of Acts III and V she is a complete embodiment of the Primitive. Normally, Nina is in the position of a modern, her drives toward the expression of Primitive desire inhibited and opposed. As symbols of the ultimate victory of Primitive truth are Eben in Desire Under the

---

<sup>4</sup>The id, more commonly termed the id function in order to convey the impression that it is descriptive of functions rather than a neural region, is that body of relatively unconscious motivational tendencies based upon the biogenic needs of the organism. The biogenic drives are those motives which have their origin in the biological nature of the organism and arise as a function of hereditary and maturational processes rather than on the basis of learning. "Naturally, the id knows no values, no good and evil, no morality" (Sigmund Freud, New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis [New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1933/, p. 104).

Elms, Dion and Brown in The Great God Brown, and Robert in Beyond the Horizon. In the case of Yank in The Hairy Ape and Jones in The Emperor Jones, Primitive truth prevails through the exhaustion or resignation of the protagonist.

The Puritan Stage was a product of man's developing "self-awareness, reason, and imagination."<sup>5</sup> Through pride he began to visualize himself as a unique and special force in the universe, different in this respect from all other creatures. In order to deny his origin, man sought to subjugate the Primitive within himself through the development of a moral sense and strict ethical codes. In connection with this, he creates a God in his own image and looks to this deity as proof of his superiority. The result is an authoritarian and censorious "God the Father" (p. 524) who characteristically whispers, "It'd be a sin" (p. 545).

A few representative characteristics of the Puritan State are the development of illusions concerning man's nature and status in the universe, assertion of the masculine forces, and the dominance of the superego.<sup>6</sup> With the development of illusions which obscure the truth of his

---

<sup>5</sup>The quoted terms are those of Erich Fromm (Man for Himself [New York: Rinehart and Co., 1947], p. 40). Puritanism is an ambiguous term and requires qualification. Its use in this study is partially derived from the nineteen-twenties, a period in which much of the intellectual revolt expressed itself as anti-Puritan, paralleled in England by anti-Victorianism. Puritanism, considered the moral counterpart of Philistinism, became popular as a label for convention, piety, and hypocrisy--the anathema of considerable avant-garde social criticism. The term is retained here for three reasons: it suggests a pre-scientific age, it implies a moral consciousness associated in Western societies with the Christian-Hebraic tradition, and it was especially current at the time Strange Interlude was written.

<sup>6</sup>The superego is "representative of all moral restrictions, the advocate of the impulse towards perfection; in short it is as much as we have been able to apprehend psychologically of what people call the 'higher' things in human life." (Freud, New Introductory Lectures, p. 95). The superego exercises these three functions with regard to human behavior. First, it is self-restrictive in terms of moral prohibition (conscience, or the behavioral tendencies prohibited by moral standards). Second, it



existence, man becomes proud and possessive. The result of this sense of specialness is a gradual alienation from life. The Fall and subsequent expulsion from the Garden of Eden are possibly racial memories of man's development from a state of Primitive innocence to Puritan consciousness. "God the Father," a stern but personal deity, and the Electra complex and patterns of father dominance represent the emerging masculine impulse. The developing superego, with its multitude of often conflicting psychogenic motives and moral considerations, vastly complicates man's inner life.

This state is characterized by conflict between the Puritan and Primitive whenever these relative opposites come into contact. In Strange Interlude the conflict exists on three indistinct levels, the last being the most basic. First, there is the clash of characters who are oriented in their motivation around opposite influences, as in the case of Nina's Primitivism and Professor Leeds's Puritanism. Second, ideas representative of the opposing philosophies are in conflict; for example, throughout the play a relativistic conception of good and evil is opposed by an absolute system of ethics. Third, the conflict is commonly so internalized that it becomes what B. R. Sappenfield terms "id-superego conflict" and describes as the "conflict between a biogenic and psychogenic motive."<sup>7</sup> The disintegration of Darrell's personality is largely the result of a clash between his sexual motives and his moral values along with concern

---

is self-guidance in terms of aspirations for ultimate achievement (values and ideals). Third, it is self-perception (egoistic tendencies). While the id involved relatively unconscious tendencies, the superego includes both conscious and unconscious motivation.

<sup>7</sup>Bert R. Sappenfield, Personality Dynamics (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 402.

over the effects upon his career of any lost prestige. This brief suggestion of the Puritan-Primitive conflict in Strange Interlude is incomplete. The matter is considerably more complex viewed from the reference point of modern man.

The function of Puritan forces upon and through characters is important in numerous O'Neill plays. Chris and Burke in Anna Christie, Emma Crosby in Diff'rent, Curt Jayson and his family in The First Man, and Ephraim Cabot in Desire Under the Elms are distinctly representative of aspects of Puritanism. In Strange Interlude it is Professor Leeds who symbolizes the Puritan view.<sup>8</sup> His early death in the play suggests that, deprived of Puritan illusions about life, life itself became unbearably self-effacing. Marsden assumes his legacy of Puritanism but in an alloyed state. Marsden is more in the position of modern man (the third stage), barred from the solace of either Primitive innocence or Puritan pride.

The Scientific-Materialistic Stage is the most important for O'Neill since it represents the conditions of contemporary man. The same self-awareness, reason, and imagination which produced the Puritan Stage led inevitably to chaos, the images of both man and God being confused and their relation uncertain. Scientific objectivity is accorded the same faith formerly reserved to the Deity, and materialistic skepticism has challenged the former conceptions. Man, it now seems, is not possessed of a will. His thoughts and actions are determined almost totally by heredity and environment. Furthermore, he is but an offshoot of the animal, a slightly altered simian who retains the Primitive behind a civilized facade. His degradation is complete with the realization that he

---

<sup>8</sup> Edwin A. Engel (The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933], p. 205) also notes that Professor Leeds represents the superego.

is merely the temporary occupant of an insignificant island of temporal-spatial matter. God fares little better. The Puritan God and the associated moral strictures appears unreasonable in light of this new view of man and his relation to a hostile or at least disinterested universe.

The most prominent features of the Scientific-Materialistic Stage are the ego functions--thinking, memory, learning, judgment, etc. Significantly for the present three-stage conception of man's total development, Freud has contended that the ego "has to serve three harsh masters," the tyrants being "the external world, the super-ego and the id."<sup>9</sup> Modern man is in a somewhat similar position. He must contend with the incongruities and protective illusions of the Puritan and with the self-effacing realities of the Primitive. Nor is man's adaptation to the external world an entirely smooth process. One aspect of this is the rise of science and business, both of which O'Neill examines in light of their effect upon human beings.

The conflict of the Scientific-Materialistic Stage produces the "sickness of today"--a complex of tensions and sufferings, the focal point of O'Neill's dramatic gaze. The Primitive Stage did not contain conflict in the usual sense of the term. During the Puritan period the problem was simply one of repression, inhibition, denial, or withdrawal with regard to Primitive impulse, their being little question about the dominant social values. Successful integration was possible, although Freud and

---

<sup>9</sup>Freud, New Introductory Lectures, p. 108. Freud does suggest that "the ego appears as a gradual development both in the history of the individual and the race," possibly implicit validation for the conception of a three stage evolution of man from a psychological standpoint (Patrick Mullahy, Oedipus Myth and Complex: A Review of Psychoanalytic Theory /New York: Hermitage Press, 1952/, p. 7).

O'Neill observed that the Primitive-Puritan conflict could produce neurosis and tragedy. In the Scientific-Materialistic period of the present, man is capable of perceiving the truth concerning his existence as an infinitesimal incident in the expression of the universe. At the same time, neither the vestiges of Puritan pride nor the new-found sense of power over nature can permit man to accept life as "something in one cell that doesn't need to think" (p. 651) or as "merely strange dark interludes in the electrical display of God the Father!" (p. 681). Modern man requires the incompatibles of rational truth and protective illusion. This dilemma, largely the product of the circumstances of man in the Scientific-Materialistic Stage, is the sickness for which O'Neill must find a remedy.

All of O'Neill's tragic heroes struggle with some facet of essentially the same problem: a rational compulsion to search out realities from among illusions and an equally impelling need to retain Puritan illusions as protection against the self-effacing Primitive truth of man's inconsequentialness. Yank, in The Hairy Ape; especially Robert, but also Ruth and Andrew, in Beyond the Horizon; Curtis Jayson in The First Man; Dion and Brown, in The Great God Brown; Reuben Light, in Dynamo; Lavinia, in Mourning Becomes Electra; and particularly the protagonists in all of his later plays demonstrate the struggle of modern man with this dilemma. In Strange Interlude, Edmund Darrell and Sam Evans are the obvious representatives of the Scientific-Materialistic Stage, although Nina and Marsden are confronted with the problems of this period. Darrell, the scientist, early in the play considers himself free of the Primitive-Puritan conflict. "Immune to love because of his scientific understanding of its real sexual nature" (p. 515) and independent of "irrelevant

moral ideas" (p. 569), he is practically destroyed when he discovers himself possessed of both and the two in direct clash. Evans, the businessman, largely escapes inner conflict, his materialistic values never faltering. Through the sacrifice and pain of others, however, a crisis never comes. Nina, who represents the Primitive impulse, and Marsden, who symbolizes the Puritan, are more complex than the other characters of Strange Interlude. Within them the dilemma is most intense.

The three stages in man's total development (the Primitive, Puritan, and Scientific-Materialistic) inevitably created a series of related conflicts which attained their full significance relatively recently. Although not specifically a problem of the nineteen-twenties, the matter was the object of considerable intellectual speculation and did contribute a great deal to social change during the decade. Strange Interlude, written in 1926 and 1927, reflects much of this concern. The particular set of circumstances that Eugene O'Neill found prevalent in the nineteen-twenties is the sickness of today, an effect or end product of man's religious-philosophical-psychological-social development summarized in the three-stage evolutionary pattern.

## 2. The Sickness of Today

Eugene O'Neill, describing his mission as a playwright, has said that it was to "dig at the roots of the sickness of today [*italics mine*]" as I feel it--the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with."<sup>10</sup> This preoccupation with the sickness of today and the

---

<sup>10</sup>Barrett H. Clark, Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays (New York: Dover Publications, 1947), p. 120.

consequent tension and suffering is the prevailing motif of O'Neill's plays. It is, briefly, the incompatibility of Primitive truth and Puritan illusion and the need of man for both. Primitive truth is self-effacing, yet man's compulsive rationality leads inevitably to it. Puritan illusion is rationally untenable, but it is required by man's pride.

Many in the nineteenthcenturies were acutely conscious of this dilemma. The First World War, having exhibited its mechanical terrors, and industrialization, illustrating its dehumanizing effects generally, demonstrated that integration would not be a simple matter of replacing the old God with dynamo deities. The transition of society from Primitive to Puritan had been accomplished gradually and with comparative smoothness over the space of several centuries in the West. The rise of the Scientific-Materialistic Age created its own unique problems and revived those of the past in a more awesome form.

O'Neill's conception of the sickness of today is not unique. Its value lies partially in the fact that the view was shared by other inquiring minds of the twenties and later. Erich Fromm, a Neo-Freudian psychologist interested in the interaction of social institutions and individual personality, has summarized modern man's dilemma in a statement which describes very well O'Neill's apparent conception.

Self-awareness, reason, and imagination have disrupted the "harmony" which characterizes animal existence. Their emergence has made man into an anomaly, into the freak of the universe. He is a part of nature, subject to her physical laws and unable to change them, yet he transcends the rest of nature. He is set apart while being a part; he is homeless, yet chained to the home he shares with all creatures . . . Being aware of himself, he realizes his powerlessness and the limitations of his existence . . .

Reason, man's blessing, is also his curse; it forces him to cope everlastingly with the task of solving an insoluble dichotomy . . . Man is the only animal for whom his own

existence is a problem which he has to solve and from which he cannot escape. He cannot go back to the prehuman state of harmony with nature; he must proceed to develop his reason until he becomes the master of nature, and of himself.<sup>11</sup>

Two of the most articulate students of the effects of this dilemma upon thought and behavior during the nineteen-twenties were Bertrand Russell and Joseph Wood Krutch. In the essay "A Free Man's Worship," first published in Mysticism and Logic (1918), Bertrand Russell described man's relation to the universe as derived from the new Scientific-Materialistic consciousness. The following paragraph was popular among many intellectuals of the decade as the only defensible view.

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocation of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins--all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.<sup>12</sup>

Joseph Wood Krutch, describing man's inability to accept the truth of his condition in the universe nor yet deny it, stated in The Modern Temper (1929) that "try as he may, the two halves of his soul can hardly be made

---

<sup>11</sup>Fromm, Man for Himself, p. 40. Doris Falk (Eugene O'Neill, p. 36) has quoted this reference in a similar connection.

<sup>12</sup>Quoted in Frederick J. Hoffman, The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade (New York: Viking Press, 1955), p. 243. George Gaylord Simpson, a vertebrate paleontologist, essentially reiterated the view when in a recent statement he declared that, "man is in the fullest sense a part of nature and not apart from it. He is not figuratively but literally akin to every living thing, be it amoeba, a tapeworm, a flea, a seaweed, an oak tree, or a monkey. In a word, man lives in a world in which he is not the darling of the gods." ("Views of Life," Time, January 11, 1960, p. 30.)

to coalesce, and he cannot either feel as his intelligence tells him he should feel or think as his emotions would have him think, and thus he is reduced to mocking his torn and divided soul."<sup>13</sup>

In Strange Interlude, the sickness of today is manifest in the frustration, indecisiveness, and mental anguish experienced by the major characters. These conditions are immediately produced by a series of opposing concepts associated with the Primitive and Puritan forces. "God the Mother," reality, hedonism, ethical relativism, and the expression of life impulses are in conflict with "God the Father," illusion, sacrifice, ethical absolutism, and the inhibition of life impulses. Each set of ideas represents a general tendency which defies specific and complete analysis. Translated into particulars, the tension between the Primitive and Puritan propensity may take any number of forms. For example, Nina's drive to be free from the paternal possessiveness of Professor Leeds in Act I is reducible to the Primitive-Puritan conflict. She succeeds in breaking the physical bonds but not the spiritual ones. In Act II, when Nina confesses "I wanted to believe in God at any price" (p. 523), she is conscious of modern man's dilemma. The indifference of the "modern science God"(p. 523), though it be realistic recognition of Primitive truth, is not sufficient substitute for Puritan illusions. The sickness of today is man's inability, in spite of his Scientific-Materialistic enlightenment, to reconcile his need for Primitive truth and Puritan illusion, and his inability to exist happily without both. An answer to this dilemma is one important objective of Eugene O'Neill's mission as a rhetor.

---

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Hoffman, The Twenties, p. 240.



### 3. The Glorious Struggle

"The one eternal tragedy of Man," wrote O'Neill, "lies 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."<sup>14</sup> That the struggle is glorious is O'Neill's nearest approach to an affirmative solution for the sickness of today. He accepts man's dilemma as just that; hence it is a struggle, unresolvable except through integration (e.g., Welded, Beyond the Horizon) or exhaustion (e.g., Strange Interlude, All God's Chillun Got Wings, Days Without End).

Strange Interlude is a celebration of life. The mere depiction of it was highly dramatic to O'Neill. The desire to illuminate life in greater variety, complexity, and intensity is nowhere more evident than in Strange Interlude. As Marsden summarized the matter, "This is life and this is sex, and here are passion and hatred and regret and joy and pain and ecstasy, and these are men whose hearts are weak and strong, whose blood is blood and not a soothing syrup" (p. 658). Through sheer abundance of appetites and activities, life attains a mysterious significance quite apart from any reason or justification. Nina's insatiable need to possess and consume her four men--husband, son, lover, and father image--establishes her as a symbol of the Primitivistic celebration of life which prevails throughout the play.

The strange interlude, which is the play, is that part of life between the unconsciousness of youth and the exhaustion of age in which man pursues the incomprehensible search for meaning. Through this struggle with unalterable forces and insoluble dilemmas O'Neill's heroes attain

---

<sup>14</sup>Quoted in Quinn, A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day, II, 199.

nobility. Nina, completely fulfilled as a woman by the converging desires of her four men, ironically knocks on wood to preserve the status quo. Age alone is enough to frustrate this, and does.

In summary, man lives in awe of and in spite of the forces around him. To be content as an infinitesimal expression of an unfathomable universe was possible during the Primitive stage. The need to belong which resulted in his becoming self-conscious is associated with the Puritan. Modern man is wholly consoled by neither but must, because there are no alternatives, live with both.

There are times in Strange Interlude, and in O'Neill's plays generally, in which the struggle does not seem glorious. The play does possess a degree of inconclusiveness. Nina experiences an historical regression in her behavior and appears to form an Electra-like attachment to a father image (Marsden). Darrell finds peace in scientific asceticism; Marsden finds it through transforming a long-standing Oedipus complex into an unnatural relation with Nina who has become more a daughter than wife. Most of O'Neill's characters are possessed by neurotic obsessions and hover near that soul-destroying self-consciousness which leads eventually to the cessation of meaningful action.<sup>15</sup> In short, seldom do his heroes find any satisfactory solution for their problems.

This inconclusiveness undoubtedly reduced O'Neill's stature in the eyes of the social critics of literature who were influential during

---

<sup>15</sup> This latter propensity is especially evident in the later plays, The Iceman Cometh (written in 1939), Long Day's Journey Into Night (1940-41), A Moon for the Misbegotten (1943), and A Touch of the Poet (1943).

the two decades following the production of Strange Interlude.<sup>16</sup> While the play does possess "social significance" (i.e., social criticism and possibly some definite and objective reform program), it is in a form unacceptable to many critics. O'Neill was concerned with matters to either side of where the social critics felt he should be. He was generally interested in the intensely personal realms of human suffering and in the most fundamental sources of that suffering. He discovered dilemmas rather than solved problems. Dilemmas can have no solution in the usual sense; they must be lived with. The confusion that the critics perceived in O'Neill's work is a product of their own inability to distinguish between a dilemma and a solvable problem, and lies outside the play. John Gassner has observed that "there are actually two kinds of confusions which, although they cannot be distinguished, manifest themselves differently even within the same piece of writing--those which deepen and intensify an author's work, and those which weaken it."<sup>17</sup> O'Neill's work derives strength from confusion. He is an explorer, not expositor. He can only conclude, as Nina does in Strange Interlude, that "life is" (p. 573) and

---

<sup>16</sup>By way of example is this statement from V. F. Calverton's The Liberation of America (quoted in Sophus Keith Winther, Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study /New York: Random House, 1934/, pp. 289-90): "Overwhelmed by the age that is upon him, and drives within himself for a solution of the contradictions which the age represents, O'Neill has fumbled and floundered in every direction in an attempt to find truth and free it from its fetters. Mentally bandaged as he is by a world which has provided no faith for him to live by or accept, his excursions into the psychic frontiers of personality have resulted only in a kind of magnificent confusion. In play after play he has endeavored to escape that confusion--but confusion only mounts and multiplies. Brilliant with insights into individual personalities as his plays always are, nowhere do they catch up with those personalities in terms of those deeper values which reveal the relationship between personality and civilization."

<sup>17</sup>John Gassner, The Theater In Our Times (New York: Crown Publishers, 1954), p. 31.

that somehow, as Marsden puts it, nobility is achieved through its being "an interlude of trial and preparation" (p. 681).

Eugene O'Neill's views serve him well as a dramatic philosophy. The irony, sustained tension, and problematic nature--the perplexing questions of life being more dramatic than the solutions--are all products of this philosophy. The estrangement of man and God, the sickness of today, and the ennobling potentialities of vain struggle are the cause-effect-solution pattern of the playwright's thought which underlies all of his major dramas.

#### B. Significance for the Nineteen-Twenties

Translated into specific terms for the nineteen-twenties, the rhetorical implications of the play's themes are more apparent. The title, Strange Interlude, is as descriptive of the period as it is of the play. Strange Interlude is, in part, a representative abundance of sensational episode, a dramatic catalogue of the mixture of revolution and "tremendous trivia"<sup>18</sup> of the nineteen-twenties. The contemporaneity of the play is evidenced in its close association with the spirit and popular ideas of the time.

Life in the United States during the nineteen-twenties was a mixture of somnolence and change. Many historians say that the period can only be explained as a postwar reaction, but some agree that it began well before the First World War or that a cyclic change inevitable in history had swung the pendulum in the direction of laissez faire and pessimism, away from social reform and idealism. Strange Interlude is a metaphoric

---

<sup>18</sup>Frederick Lewis Allen, The Big Change (New York: Harper and Bros., 1952), p. 133.

representation of the decade of the twenties. Marsden's brief description of the play may suggest something of the varieties and excesses of emotional experience which O'Neill observed in the period: "This is life and this is sex, and here are passion and hatred and regret and joy and pain and ecstasy, and these are men whose hearts are weak and strong, whose blood is blood and not a soothing syrup" (p. 658).

"Sex" was "the hysterical preoccupation which characterized the Postwar decade."<sup>19</sup> A number of interesting forces made this revolution inevitable. The war had created a state of mind which opposed the inhibited conventions of the earlier century with regard to sex. Over two million American soldiers came into direct contact with continental manners and standards and their return affected an observable change in American patterns of behavior. The revolution was less directly accelerated by the growing independence of the American woman. The economic freedom and the simplification of housekeeping duties left a reserve of energies and emotions. The tendency to demonstrate this emancipation led to a breakdown in the sexual reticence which formerly classified women as the guardians of morality. Freudian psychoanalytic views, which find special emphasis in Strange Interlude, were an important force in altering sexual standards. Science had gained popularity during the war and scientific skepticism became an important arbiter of morals, replacing the stricter Puritanism. The Freudian gospel, popularly based upon the dogma that salvation lay in facing the facts of sex, gained popularity. The effect of psychoanalysis was twofold. First, it appeared to demonstrate scientifically the advisability of having an uninhibited sex life

---

<sup>19</sup>Frederick Lewis Allen, Only Yesterday (New York: Harper and Bros., 1931), p. 348.

and secondly, it offered a set of terms (libido, repression, sublimation, etc.) which made the subject available for even sophisticated discussion around the cocktail tray and Mah Jong table. Much of this revolution was a reaction against the static and often unrealistic moral codes of the nineteenth century. The result led both the revolutionists and the defenders of the Puritanic modes of behavior to extremes. The obsession with sex was encouraged by and manifest in such things as advertising, women's fashions, the automobile, prohibition, the confession and sex magazine, movies, contemporary novels, and the theater. Strange Interlude was but one of the most popular plays of the nineteen-twenties to deal with the theme of sex. Robert Benchley, after a decade of such sex-oriented drama, expressed a widely prevalent opinion when he wrote in his dramatic page in the New Yorker, late in 1930:

"I am now definitely ready to announce that Sex, as a theatrical property, is as tiresome as the Old Mortgage, and that I don't want to hear it mentioned ever again . . . I am sick of rebellious youth and I am sick of Victorian parents and I don't care if all the little girls in all sections of the United States get ruined or want to get ruined or keep from getting ruined. All I ask is: don't write plays about it and ask me to sit through them."<sup>20</sup>

"Passion" is highly descriptive of the emotional intensity of the nineteen-twenties. Sensual pleasure and herd pursuits have perennially engaged popular energies, but in this period, as Henry M. Robinson suggests, the urge for gratification and excitement was particularly nearsighted.<sup>21</sup> His description of one phase of this passionate energy, while probably an overstatement, is an interesting appraisal:

In their pitiful infantilism, the people clamored for

---

<sup>20</sup>Quoted in Allen, Only Yesterday, pp. 348-49.

<sup>21</sup>Henry M. Robinson, Fantastic Interim (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1943), p. 22.

fairy tales, and yearned in particular for stories that recounted in sugar-tit accents the wondrous pleasures of love. The emphasis on love amounted to erotomania; love became the governing phantasy of the age, the avowed and overt end of millions of lives. Men and women were obsessed by the shimmering image of what they believed to be due them in love, and shrewd exploiters of the national appetite kept the vision whirling erotically before their audiences.<sup>22</sup>

The self-control and moderation of the Victorians with regard to emotional ecstasy were to some extent discredited. The frenzied quest for love was typical of the intensity which accompanied the search for sensual gratification.

"Hatred" aroused in the course of the abruptly terminated war was released in a wave of violence and intolerance. Harvey Wish describes this hysterical reaction as being "compounded of a Red scare, chauvinism, racialism, and a middle class fear that organized labor was plotting revolution."<sup>23</sup> "It was an era of lawless and disorderly defiance of law and order, of unconstitutional defense of the Constitution, of suspicion and civil conflict--in a very literal sense, a reign of terror."<sup>24</sup> The decade was opened with a rash of anti-Bolshevist riots and strikes accompanied by violence. The powerful American Socialist Party did for a time consider violent mass action, but any serious threat of a socialistic regime or revolution passed quickly. The Red scare, which became a panic, gained momentum and the early nineteen-twenties were characterized by a rash of arrests and deportations and the paralyzing fear of being thought radical.

---

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>23</sup>Harvey Wish, Society and Thought in Modern America, II (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1952), 415.

<sup>24</sup>Allen, Only Yesterday, p. 46.

The gospel of white supremacy eventually replaced the radical threat. Race riots, outrages against the Jew and Catholic, the growing power of the Ku Klux Klan, an inordinate interest in crimes of violence, and the emerging pattern of organized crime all demonstrate the suspicion, intolerance, violence and general hatred of the decade.

"Regret" followed closely upon the insanities and excesses of the war's aftermath. The sex obsessions, experiments with uninhibited passion, and unleashed hatreds were beginning to arouse regrets in the collective conscience. Allen suggests that a "sense of regret"<sup>25</sup> was the key note of the nineteen-twenties. Some of the values which were so enthusiastically discredited had represented a stability not easily replaced. Strange Interlude suggests something of the disillusionment which resulted from the studied cynicism and greater sex freedom of the decade. The purpose of life became confused by new uncertainties and new doubts. Once the business of asserting new freedoms was accomplished, a feeling of regret and disillusion spread, since little remained that seemed in any sense real or secure.

"Joy" was a dominant emotional experience of the nineteen-twenties. People were learning to amuse themselves once more after the fears abated following World War I and the postwar reaction. The guilt-producing inhibitions of an earlier era were being realistically modified. A lingering sense of disillusionment encouraged a more desperate search for the sources of joy. This accentuation of physical luxuries and joy-producing experiences was in part responsible for such obsessions as adult toys, fads, and scandals. Strange Interlude reflects this particular interest in pleasure

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 238.



through reference to a great variety of means--rowing, football, yachting, flying, tennis, and European tours.

"Pain" is a necessary concomitant of change. The painful consequences of the social revolution were most apparent in the sudden and rapid increase of several psychological maladjustments. Strange Interlude suggests this in its emphasis upon the psychological suffering and neurosis of Nina, Marsden, and Darrell. During the nineteen-twenties, the incidence of incurable manic-depressive psychoses and schizophrenia nearly doubled.<sup>26</sup> These two conditions are particularly significant when viewed in relation to the social patterns of the time as they represent extreme states of emotional instability and sexual confusion. The conflict of a firmly ingrained and older set of values with the newer, both to some extent socially rewarding, created serious psychological frustrations on an altogether different level than the simple repression or sublimation of sexual drives.

"Ecstasy" might have described the frantic spirit which in the period, seemed capable of turning trivia and trifles into obsessions and fads. The intensity and variety of emotional experience which characterized Strange Interlude bears considerable resemblance to the nineteen-twenties. The spirit of the decade is reflected in the play.

Still more significant for this study than these characteristics are those specific ideas of the play which have special relevance to the period. Strange Interlude is a dramatic testimony that many of the ideas and ideals men live by are soul-destroying illusions. This is the message which permeates Eugene O'Neill's literary career, and it is possibly the

---

<sup>26</sup>Sullivan, Our Times, p. 207.

basic theme in the play, containing within itself the several major ideas. The psychoanalytic connotations at least demonstrate that both O'Neill and Freud were interested in the neurosis-producing polarity which exists between man the reality and man the illusion. The principal popular illusions which the playwright attacks in Strange Interlude are these: traditional theology, the happiness myth, the heroic image, the business ideal, the scientist hypocrite, and the artist dilettante. Much of the tragedy of the play and the period of the twenties is a product of the widespread irrational worship of these ideals.

Eugene O'Neill's voice was but one of a chorus raised in social protest during the decade. The zenith of the revolt of the intellectuals was reached by about 1928, the year Strange Interlude was first produced.<sup>27</sup> The circulation of The American Mercury (and presumably the influence of H. L. Mencken) attained its peak in 1927.<sup>28</sup> By 1929 there were indications that the protest movement was less interested than before in simply destroying the illusions of American civilization and more seriously concerned with abating the mental depression produced by the philosophical disillusionment of the times. In that year both Joseph Wood Krutch's The Modern Temper and Walter Lippman's A Preface to Morals were popularly received. Also, an interest in the humanism of Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt and the widespread effort to find permanent values in the scientific philosophizing of Whitehead, Eddington, and Jeans dates from about that time. The literature of revolt that flourished during the nineteen-twenties naturally tended to emphasize the reasons for its existence. The

---

<sup>27</sup> Allen, Only Yesterday, p. 245.

<sup>28</sup> Mencken was a literary critic for the Smart Set from 1908 to 1923 and, along with George Jean Nathan, a joint editor, probably influenced the publication of some early plays of Eugene O'Neill's in that journal.

consequent bleak view of the decade is clearly an unfair one, especially in view of its literary accomplishment. But until the image is revised this is what it remains.

### 1. The Confirmation of Psychoanalysis

What is his speciality? . . . neurologist, I think . . .  
 I hope not a psychoanalyst . . . a lot to account for,  
 Herr Freud! . . . punishment to fit his crimes, be forced  
 to listen eternally during breakfast while innumerable  
 plain ones tell him dreams about snakes . . . pah, what  
 an easy, cure-all! . . . sex the philosopher's stone . . .  
 'O Oedipus, O my King! The world is adopting you!' . . .  
 (p. 516)

Marsden's statement contains the only direct reference to Freud and his theories in Strange Interlude. It suggests the cult-like popularity which psychoanalysis attained during the period but does not indicate the extent to which that concept of human personality was utilized throughout the play both as a principal theme and as fundamental to the basic structure.

Any attempt to associate Strange Interlude with psychoanalytic thought must contend with several statements in which O'Neill largely repudiated any direct or conscious influence. In a letter to Barrett H. Clark on the matter he said:

Authors were psychologists, you know, and profound ones, before psychology was invented. And I am no deep student of psychoanalysis. As far as I can remember, of all the books written by Freud, Jung, etc., I have read only four, and Jung is the only one of the lot who interests me. Some of his suggestions I find extraordinarily illuminating<sup>29</sup> in the light of my own experience with hidden human motives.

And in reply to a question from Arthur H. Nethercott, he reiterated and expanded upon his views:

---

<sup>29</sup>Clark, Eugene O'Neill, p. 136.

There is no conscious use of psychoanalytical material in any of my plays. All of them could easily have been written by a dramatist who had never heard of the Freudian theory and was simply guided by an intuitive psychological insight into human beings and their life impulses that is as old as Greek drama. It is true that I am enough of a student of modern psychology to be fairly familiar with the Freudian implications inherent in the actions of some of my characters while I was portraying them; but this was always an afterthought and never consciously was I for a moment influenced to shape my material along the lines of any psychological theory. It was my dramatic instinct and my own personal experience with human life that alone guided me.

I most certainly did not get my idea of Nina's compulsion from a dream mentioned by Freud in "A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis." I have only read two books of Freud's, "Totem and Taboo," and " . . . and the Pleasure Principle." The book that interested me the most of all those of the Freudian school is Jung's "Psychology of the Unconscious," which I read many years ago. If I have been influenced unconsciously it must have been by this book more than any other psychological work.<sup>30</sup>

At the time of its first production, Strange Interlude was popularly considered a Freudian play. It is principally for this reason that the rhetorical critic, interested in the communicative-persuasive effect of drama, is justified in considering Freudian and Jungian ideas a major theme of the play. In addition, while Strange Interlude is not a tract or case history, it does incorporate concepts from current sources of psychoanalytic ideas which O'Neill acknowledges having read.

Although Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung did differ at many points, popularized psychoanalytic theory tended to be an indiscriminating synthesis of both. Most of the psychoanalytic connotations in Strange Interlude could have referred to either. Of the two principal figures, O'Neill has stated a preference for the theories of Jung. Certain concepts associated with Jung are suggested in Strange Interlude, notably the

---

<sup>30</sup>Arthur H. Nethercott, "O'Neill on Freudianism," Saturday Review of Literature, May 28, 1932, p. 759, quoted in Sievers, Freud on Broadway p. 98.

extension of the libido, the collective unconscious, archetypal images, introversion and extroversion, and the nature of neurosis. Jung used the term libido in a broader sense than Freud, stripping it of its distinctly sexual character. This extended definition of the libido is "equivalent to Schopenhauer's will to live and Bergson's *elan vital*."<sup>31</sup> The libido, or basic life force, is a fundamental aspect of the Primitive force. Nina's sexual and maternal needs and her urge toward dominance, emphasized at the end of Act VI when she feels a triumphant sense of power over her four men, are manifestations of libidinal energy. If Nina's Primitive orientation is intended to represent the most direct and complete fulfillment of the libido, then the concept is somewhat more Jungian than Freudian in its comprehensiveness.

Jung also elaborated upon the Freudian concept of the unconscious in a manner suggested in Strange Interlude. He conceptualized it as

---

<sup>31</sup>Robert S. Woodworth, Contemporary Schools of Psychology (New York: Ronald Press, 1948), p. 199. Doris Alexander has discussed the relation of Nina's neurosis to Schopenhauer's will to live in "Strange Interlude and Schopenhauer" (American Literature XXV /May, 1953/, pp. 213-228). The Eros of Freud, libido of Jung, and the instinctual will to live of Schopenhauer are all similar. It would be difficult to discover which, if any, of these conceptions most influenced O'Neill.

Jung did not accept the death instinct (Thanatos), which Freud considered as existing opposition to eros as a reality. O'Neill became increasingly aware of an instinctual polarity in the human being between a life (Eros) and death drive and on this particular point more nearly approximates Freud. Eros is most evident in plays like Desire Under the Elms and The Fountain. The conflict between Eros and Thanatos is implied in The Great God Brown and Mourning Becomes Electra. The Iceman Cometh and most of O'Neill's later plays exhibit an increasing prevalence of the death drive. In Strange Interlude, Darrell uses the phrase "death wish" (p. 644) in reference to Nina's desiring Evans' death. The same phrase is frequently used in psychoanalytic literature as a synonym for Thanatos, or a self-death instinct, but its presence is worth noting. More clearly a death wish in the conventional psychoanalytic sense of the term is Nina's speech in the final moments of the play: ". . . to die in peace! I'm so contentedly weary with life!" (p. 682)

consisting of two separate although related layers. The personal unconscious consists of material that has been repressed, forgotten, or unconsciously learned. O'Neill clearly infers that relatively unconscious factors do influence behavior. Marsden with his Oedipal attachment and guilt feelings is a case in point. The interior monologue may be intended in part to represent this level of the unconscious.<sup>32</sup> The second level in Jung's scheme is the collective unconscious, the common groundwork of humanity out of which each individual develops his personal conscious and unconscious life. In Strange Interlude, Nina's associating herself in her pregnant state with the sea and tide is undoubtedly intended to suggest the collective unconscious.<sup>33</sup> Jung refers frequently to the same symbols in explanation of his theory of collective unconscious.

The archetype, a concept original with Jung and the id of Freud's system are also included in the collective unconscious. The id pertains to primitive patterns of acting while the archetypes describe primitive ways of thinking. O'Neill may have been influenced by Jung's concept of the archetypal images of the male and female, termed the animus and anima. In all his plays and especially in Strange Interlude the masculine and feminine are definite and opposing impulses. This is fundamental to the playwright's concept of character and dramatic conflict. Nina, with her varied and voracious desires related largely to the reproduction and

---

<sup>32</sup>The interior monologue does suggest the Freudian "pre-conscious," an intermediate level between the entirely conscious and unconscious, and "free association," the type of uncensored speech such as might be produced on the psychoanalyst's couch.

<sup>33</sup>Falk (Eugene O'Neill, p. 51) is of the opinion that the similar references in Anna Christie to the sea and fog can definitely be attributed to O'Neill's familiarity with the Jungian concept of the collective unconscious. She also discussed the possibility that the "Fate," "mystery," and "biological past" which are so fundamental to O'Neill's thinking are synonymous for the collective unconscious (pp. 5-8).

preservation of life, is a personification of the anima. The men in the play represent the several aspects of the animus.

Another Jungian concept which appears basic to O'Neill's characterizations is that of introversion and extroversion. The attention of the introvert is said to center upon internal experience (thoughts, feelings, and ideals) while that of the extrovert is concentrated upon the physical and social environment. In Strange Interlude it is Marsden who is most definitely introverted while Evans is an extreme extrovert. Although it is a relatively simple and obvious idea, it was much discussed during the nineteen-twenties in relation to psychoanalysis and it is unlikely that O'Neill was not familiar with it in this connection.

Nina's neurosis, presuming for the moment that its conception was influenced by psychoanalytic theory, can be interpreted as either Jungian or Freudian. For Freud, her neurosis could be said to have originated in an unresolved childhood impulse for sexual union with her father. Any situation which required a similar inhibition or repression of sexual desire would revive the guilt feelings associated with the Electra complex. Gordon's death frustrated the natural course of Nina's fulfillment. The guilt which she assigns to her failure to consummate their union before his departure is in part a product of a revived Electra attachment. The antagonism she feels toward her father and the desperate need to move away from him indicates a struggle with the impulse and suggests that this is the basic source of Nina's guilt. Repeated failures to attain psychological equilibrium eventually break down her resistance to the Electra tendencies. Nina turns to Marsden, a father surrogate, and regresses into childhood.

Jung's theories concerning the nature of neurosis are even more

clearly apparent in Strange Interlude. He would interpret Nina's Electra complex as the by-product of a simple regression to a state of relative security from a situation which, because of its traumatic or frustrating nature, arouses feelings of insecurity. Gordon's death is the traumatic shock, implicit in the Jungian scheme, which sets the story in motion. One aspect of this shock for Nina is the sudden and dramatic frustration of mature sexual expression. When this is thwarted, immature sexual impulses, in this case masochistic reactions, emerge and come into conflict with the more mature superego motives and guilt ensues. Nina's blaming herself for not having insisted upon physical union with Gordon and her later sacrificing herself sexually to hospitalized war veterans are directed by this masochistic urge. A second attempt at mature fulfillment of the sexual-maternal drives is aborted when she learns of the hereditary insanity in the Evans family. The series of traumatic shocks and frustrations magnify the intensity of Nina's needs and produce a neurotic woman of insatiable emotional appetite. For a moment she attains all her desires through the possession of the various attentions of four men. Sam Evans as her husband, represents material security; Charles Marsden, a kind of father surrogate, is the object of a revived Electra complex; Edmund Darrell symbolizes sexual fulfillment; and Gordon, her son, fulfills the maternal drives. In spite of Nina's wishes, the status quo of the relationships cannot be maintained. Nina escapes the most painful consequences of its disruption and her neurosis through a form of regression. Her childhood subjugation to a father symbol revived, Nina views the trials of her adult life as an interlude. Nina's neurosis, regardless of its source, is principally responsible for establishing Strange Interlude as a psychoanalytic study.



In addition to the above concepts associated primarily with Carl Jung, there are other psychoanalytic ideas implied in the play, notably the primacy of the sexual drive, the relation of inner conflict to neurosis, the form taken by neurotic symptoms, and the psychological insights afforded through dreams and slips of the tongue.

Strange Interlude suggests that O'Neill agreed with psychoanalytic thought concerning the primacy of the sexual drive in determining personality. Nina's neurosis is largely the product of frustrated sexual and associated maternal drives. Her relationships with all the men of the play is clearly of a sexual basis although it takes several forms. Sam Evans, who is largely free of any neurotic tendencies, is momentarily incapacitated by a fear of sterility. The guilt and repressions with which Marsden struggles throughout much of the play are clearly the result of a conflict between immature and mature sexual motives. Darrell's personality disorientation is a product of sexual frustration.

The idea that inner conflict was the cause of neurosis is generally associated with psychoanalysis. Darrell's personal struggle illustrates the psychoanalytic interpretation of inner conflict very clearly. He desires Nina sexually, he is rationally aware of the adverse effect this attachment will have upon his career and mode of thought, and he is conscious of a sense of honor and duty which forbids it. The three-way conflict between the id, ego, and superego is evident. A similar pattern is equally apparent in the other characters as well. It was undoubtedly a desire to demonstrate this level of personal conflict in greater detail which led O'Neill to devise the interior monologue technique. The interior monologue, with its attempt to penetrate the surface life of characters and to demonstrate the conflict between the spoken and silent

thought and conscious and unconscious processes, is probably the most distinctly psychoanalytic dimension of Strange Interlude.

Dreams and slips of the tongue are viewed by psychoanalysts as insights into unconscious motives and aroused considerable popular interest. Both appear in Strange Interlude. Marsden's dreams are largely concerned with his repressed sexuality. Nina's are more richly symbolic and are products of her guilt feelings and insecurity. The several slips of the tongue in the play suggest that O'Neill was directly influenced by Freudian psychology. For example, Darrell says, with reference to Evans' obesity and high blood pressure, "It's nothing to hope--I meant, to worry over!" (p. 651).

The characters in Strange Interlude illustrate a number of neurotic symptoms which recall psychoanalytic labels and descriptions. Nina's preoccupation with Gordon becomes an obsession. The persistent guilt ridden memories of Marsden are a form of compulsive reaction. Both Darrell's scientific research and Marsden's literary career are forms of sublimation. Marsden admits that he has written "Fairy Tales for Grown-ups--about . . . lovers who avoid love in hushed whispers" (p. 657). And he correctly evaluates Darrell's work as "a pretense" and the Doctor as "a scientific dilettante" (p. 629). Their careers are, in part, a substitute for the direct expression of motives which were socially unacceptable (e.g., sexual expression and aggression).

The above brief analysis by no means exhausts the psychoanalytic implications in Strange Interlude. The clear presence of those and other ideas suggests that O'Neill could have been more directly influenced than he realized or cared to admit and that the audience did have a moderately legitimate foundation for calling the play psychoanalytic.

Psychoanalytic theory has been a major idea of the twentieth century. Its influence upon literature and social values is incalculably profound. The circulation of psychoanalytic thought in America dates from 1909, when Freud and Jung lectured at Clark University. The visit aroused considerable public interest and won adherents to the views among psychologists in this country. Numerous newspaper references and some two hundred books discussed Freud before 1920.<sup>34</sup> The real penetration of psychoanalytic thought took place during the nineteen-twenties.<sup>35</sup> The year Strange Interlude was produced, 1928, probably represented the high point for the dramatic utilization of psychoanalytic themes and forms and for the prestige of Freudian theory generally. During the next decade it became "evident that neither Freud nor Watson had infallible answers for the problems of humanity."<sup>36</sup> Also, psychoanalytic theory became absorbed into the intellectual current, losing much of that appeal of the unfamiliar which characterized its earlier reception.<sup>37</sup> During the nineteen-twenties Freud and Jung were themselves read very little and understood even less. As a result, the psychoanalytic theory which eventually did become incorporated into popular thought had been "filtered through successive minds of interpreters and popularizers and guileless readers and people who had

---

<sup>34</sup> Wish, Society and Thought in Modern America, II, 311.

<sup>35</sup> Frederick J. Hoffman, Freudianism and the Literary Mind (Baton

<sup>36</sup> Allen, Only Yesterday, p. 352.

<sup>37</sup> John Gassner (The Theater in Our Times, p. 255) comments that O'Neill tends to take "ideas per se with too much of the seriousness of those who have only recently discovered 'ideas'". Undoubtedly the unintegrated state and newness of psychoanalytic theory during the nineteen-twenties contributed to this tendency in Strange Interlude.

heard guileless readers talk about it."<sup>38</sup> Regardless of his intentions or his relation to Freudian and Jungian thought, O'Neill functioned as one of these "popularizers."<sup>39</sup> Mark Sullivan relates that people "went by the thousand to take Eugene O'Neill's five-hour lesson in psychopathology, Strange Interlude."<sup>40</sup> The attention which psychoanalytic ideas excited in 1928 undoubtedly contributed to the success of the play. Conversely, Strange Interlude infused into the public mind additional interpretations of Freudian and Jungian thought through its existing as an example of those ideas in action.

The influence of psychoanalytic thinking upon social values and subsequent behavior remains both elusive and profound. Briefly it was a part of the general wave of curiosity about sex which occupied those years. For a generation in revolt against lingering nineteenth century manners and morals, psychoanalytic theory--with its emphasis of the sexual basis of personality, description of the possible consequences of repressions, and convenient vocabulary--offered appropriate scientific justification for the new pattern of thought and behavior. The fact that Freud defined sex very broadly, cautioned against libertinism, and would not have accepted the exaggerated inclusiveness with which many of his terms were popularly applied, was frequently ignored. The import of psychoanalysis was not confined to sexual behavior and its implications. Most moral values and judgments were in some way affected by this new concept of human motives. In 1928 it was still too early to grasp the philosophical

---

<sup>38</sup>Allen, Only Yesterday, p. 99.

<sup>39</sup>Oscar Cargill (Intellectual America: Ideas on the March /New York: Macmillan, 1941/, p. 720) comments that Strange Interlude is "a dramatized textbook of all the neurosis discoverable by psychoanalysis."

<sup>40</sup>Sullivan, Our Times: The Twenties, p. 393.

implications of Freudianism. Psychoanalytic theory emerged as probably the most important influence upon social behavior of any single philosophy of scientific determinism.<sup>41</sup> It provided insights into man's subjective nature and inspired a new attitude toward mental health and the treatment of psychoneurosis.

In summary, O'Neill evidently found the psychoanalytic concept of man's lifelong struggle with mental conflicts both philosophically and dramatically acceptable. The playwright functioned, by audience assent if not by conscious intent, as a popularizer and interpreter of Freudian and Jungian doctrine. Strange Interlude is, particularly in this respect, a significant rhetorical drama of the nineteen-twenties.

## 2. The Conflict of Theologies

I wanted to believe in any God at any price--a heap of stones, a mud image, a drawing on a wall, a bud, a fish, a snake, a baboon--or even a good man preaching the simple platitudes of truth, those Gospel words we love the sound of but whose meaning we pass on to spooks to live by!  
(p. 523)

Nina, desperately in need of some external directive force, here utters a desire which was particularly prevalent in the nineteen-twenties, when the traditional theological concepts were found to be inadequate for the modern world. Strange Interlude reflects the philosophical conflict and mental disquietude which accompanied the revolution in religious thought. The play is, for Nina, a pilgrimage without a true Mecca, the nearest equivalent being a vague desire for happiness and fulfillment.

Strange Interlude is a conflict between two theologies, the Puritan and the Primitive, and two ethical systems, the absolute and the relative.

---

<sup>41</sup>Wish, Society and Thought in Modern America, II, 312.

The first, in each case, is inadequate and the second largely unattainable. Strange Interlude embodies one of Eugene O'Neill's most virulent attacks upon the illusion of Puritanism. The conflict is not clearly decided by the play's conclusion since both philosophies share a degree of partial victory and partial defeat.

As suggested earlier in this chapter, there are three forces at work in the play and three distinct conceptions of a deity--the Primitive, Puritan, and Scientific-Materialistic. Corresponding to these three, Nina speaks in one passage of wanting "to believe in any God at any price--a heap of stones, a snake, a baboon"; "a good man preaching the simple platitudes of truth, those gospel words we love the sound of but whose meaning we pass on to spooks to live by!"; "the modern science God" (p. 523). The Deities are in one respect identical. They are equally "deaf and dumb and blind" (p. 680) to man's "trifling misery of death-born-of-birth" (p. 523).

Science is never in serious contention as an adequate sanction in human life. Darrell, with his scientific perspective, is conscious of the elemental motivating forces in life and the consequent irrationality of a strict morality. This knowledge enables him neither to accept the Primitive view, that "life is something in one cell that doesn't need to think!" (p. 651), nor entirely to dispense with the "irrelevant moral ideas" (p. 569) of Puritanism. Reason discloses the truth of Primitivism and falsity of Puritanism; pride cannot accept either. The scientist in Strange Interlude evidently favors the Primitive view but, confronted with the inescapable theological dilemma, ultimately suffers a personality disintegration. Sam Evans, the businessman who is also a thoroughly contemporary character, largely accepts the Puritan philosophy. He escapes

Darrell's fate by simply avoiding any consideration of the inconsistencies which exist between his Materialistic philosophy and Puritan morality.

The Puritan God is a male image. Professor Leeds and later Marsden, a father surrogate, represent this god for Nina. For O'Neill also and for many during the nineteen-twenties, "God the Father" was not a personal and beneficent Deity. He is a capricious God for whom "our lives are merely strange dark interludes in the electrical display" (p. 681) and a God "whose chest thunders with egotism" (p. 525). Nina finds Him "too hard for tired heads and thoroughly comfortless" (p. 525). The absolute and inflexible system of ethical standards related to this Puritan Deity is strongly assailed in Strange Interlude.<sup>42</sup> What little happiness Nina achieves is, with but few exceptions, through violating these strict standards.<sup>43</sup> By the same rule, most of the suffering in the play is a direct result of either obeying the traditional Christian code or failing to escape the guilt aroused by a lingering consciousness of that system of morality. It was the "code-bound Gordon" (p. 501) and a Nina held back by the thought "what would your father say?" (p. 502) who failed to consummate their relationship and achieve a degree of happiness. Throughout Strange Interlude a sense of guilt and a vision of the death and suffering associated with God the Father subvert Nina's happiness: "Black . . . in the midst of happiness," she thinks, "black comes . . . again . . . death . . . my father . . . comes between me and happiness" (p. 580).

---

<sup>42</sup>As Winther (Eugene O'Neill, p. 145) suggests, all of the Ten Commandments are violated to a greater or lesser degree in the course of the play.

<sup>43</sup>Nina's hedonism is in itself a significant theme of the play and will be specifically discussed in the following section.

Strange Interlude is largely the story of a human being who had lost faith with the traditional ethical code but who cannot escape its influence and live beyond the pale of moral considerations. A major problem of the play could have been solved at any point that Nina finally decided either to remain with Evans and accept the fixed standards of duty and fidelity or marry Darrell and live by a naturalistic code of ethics. The same holds true for Darrell who oscillates philosophically between his amoral scientific rationality and his moral sensibilities. It is the memory of Gordon which sustains the Puritan absolute ethics for Nina. This is ironic since it was through the death of Gordon that she originally found the Christian virtues wanting.

Nina's loss of faith in the Puritan God ("God the Father") and what he represented led her to a reinterpretation of God based upon a new image, that of a mother. The Primitive God is associated with the cyclic pattern of life processes. Even human suffering, the explanation of which Doris Falk found basic to O'Neill's theme, can thereby be mystically explained as an experience inherited from the birth pain of God the Mother.<sup>44</sup> This Primitive God is identical with life itself. Nina's expression of faith is the simple acknowledgment, "life is" (p. 573). A God so elemental and universal largely precluded any higher form of intellectual life. As Nina observes, "questions die in the silence of this peace" (p. 573). Even emotional experience, with reference to this conception of God, ultimately becomes rather illusory. Accordingly, life becomes like a "great dream" (p. 563). Herein lies one of the problems of Strange Interlude. Nina's "sleep with peace" (p. 681) at the end of the play is apparently

---

<sup>44</sup>Falk, Eugene O'Neill, p. 4.



not a symbolic unification with the Primitive God. Rather, it is the product of a psychological historical regression, the ebb of passion and flow of exhaustion having combined to thrust Nina backward into the paternal possessiveness of her father's and Marsden's Puritanism.

The Primitive God, because of its elemental nature, is necessarily amoral. It does, however, exert motivational influences (e.g., Nina's sexual-maternal drives) from which a relativistic or naturalistic ethical philosophy can be derived. Strange Interlude, according to Sophus Winther, is "a play which involves the condemnation of an old ethical theory and the definite implication of a new one to take its place."<sup>45</sup> The ultimate Primitivistic standard for behavior is deceptively simple: happiness is the object of life and is to be achieved through fulfillment of the basic life drives. O'Neill is not convinced that such a moral pattern would eliminate all human conflict and suffering.

The theological and ethical controversy in Strange Interlude is comparable, in many respects, to that of the period. Scientific and materialistic progress was responsible for the skepticism, agnosticism, and atheism which were popular among the intellectuals in the eighteen-nineties and penetrated the popular mind during the nineteen-twenties.<sup>46</sup>

The revolution in religious philosophy was largely due to the impact of science. Those studies which dealt with evolutionary thought (paleontology, comparative zoology, geology) and problems of human behavior (psychology, endocrinology, sociological studies of primitive societies) were particularly disquieting. The most profound effect was that

---

<sup>45</sup>Winther, Eugene O'Neill, pp. 138-39.

<sup>46</sup>A poll taken the same year and in the same city that Strange Interlude opened indicated that one fourth of the New York University students did not believe in God (Wish, Society and Thought, II., 449).

fixed immutability as a philosophical idea was almost completely discredited. So many "constant" factors were discarded or underwent revision that other negations and affirmations formerly accepted as infallible were subjected to skeptical inquiry, including the dogma of theology. Sin, for example, is a meaningless concept if behavior is totally determined by heredity and environment. And a consciousness of spatial magnitudes and man's relative obscurity tended to reduce for many, as for Nina in Strange Interlude, the reasonableness of a personal God. Both science and materialism enjoyed the added advantages of succeeding "in a way that could be seen, touched, tasted, and experienced."<sup>47</sup> In a world dominated by things, the traditional religious beliefs began to appear at best esoteric or hypothetical and at worst mythical or pernicious.

O'Neill, in Strange Interlude, considered some of the same problems which appeared in the controversy between the Modernists or Liberals and the Fundamentalists. The Protestant Church, in defense of its traditional philosophy, or at least asserting its position of importance as a social institution, reacted in two basic ways. The Modernists, who can be roughly equated with the Primitive and Scientific-Materialistic forces in the play, attempted to reconcile the new ideas and norms of social behavior with orthodox theology. Their attempts to more meaningfully identify God--as the first cause, as absolute energy, as idealized reality, as a righteous will working in creation, as the ideal and goal toward which all that is highest and best is moving--were confusingly various and ambiguous. O'Neill's attempts in Strange Interlude to redefine God as a kind of primitive life force and a creative energy is

---

<sup>47</sup>Hoffman, The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade, p. 271.

probably related to this theological problem of the nineteen-twenties. "Practical ethics," concomitant with the altered concept of the Deity, was a fashionable theme in the pulpit during the period. Such a system of ethics was more relativistic than absolute, being based upon a standard of general benevolence rather than specific law. This is the view that seems to be advocated in Strange Interlude. Although O'Neill is openly hostile to strict Puritan ethics, he is also aware of the basic weakness in a relativistic system. Since no man can foresee the ultimate effect of any action or moral choice, benevolent intent alone is a tenuous guide. When man creates a pattern of ethics to suit each situation he is assuming supernatural responsibility.<sup>48</sup> However, O'Neill does apparently conclude, along with the Modernists, that man has no choice but to be his own guide in ethical matters. Modernism, attempting to satisfy the skeptic's arguments by reasoning from scientifically demonstrable rather than traditional authority, was forced to "whittle down its creed to almost nothing at all"<sup>49</sup> during the nineteen-twenties. Although the extreme position of Modernism was later largely modified, it produced, especially in urban areas, a permanently altered theological philosophy and attitude toward the church.

In reaction to the skepticism of the period, Fundamentalism took a position which was dramatically opposed to Modernism. All rational thought in a rational age was antithetical to the Fundamentalists' unyielding emphasis upon Biblical literalism. The controversy between the position of the skeptic and that of the Fundamentalist was popularly

---

<sup>48</sup>In Strange Interlude, Nina accuses Darrell of having "aided and abetted God the Father in making this mess. I hope it'll teach you not to be so cocksure in the future." (p. 564) Darrell later says of Nina, "you've got to give up owning people, meddling in their lives as if you were God and had created them" (p. 650).

<sup>49</sup>Allen, Only Yesterday, p. 201.

demonstrated in the Scopes trial at Dayton, Tennessee, in the summer of 1925. John Thomas Scopes, a high school science instructor, in apparent cooperation with the American Civil Liberties Union, allowed himself to be apprehended in the act of teaching the theory of evolution. The statement that he read to his students ("Animal forms may be arranged so as to begin with simple one-celled form and culminate with a group which included man himself") was in violation of a state statute which made it unlawful "to teach any theory that denies the story of Divine creation of man as taught by the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals."<sup>50</sup> The trial itself, in which the basic issues of Scopes's guilt and academic freedom were largely forgotten, is not particularly important. It is socially significant in that the proceedings attracted national attention and the contest was popularly conceived as a battle between religion and science. Neither William Jennings Bryan for the prosecution nor Clarence Darrow for the defense made any theoretical contribution on the subject. Fundamentalism, a largely rural movement, controlled most of the Protestant denominations in the South. As an indication of their strength, Robinson expresses the opinion that, at the time of the trial, fifty million Americans were Biblical literalists.<sup>51</sup>

The assault of skepticism and Modernism caused the Fundamentalists to regress in their theological thinking. God was redefined as the harsh and vengeful Deity of the Old Testament. It is this conception of God ("God the Father") which Eugene O'Neill identifies with Puritanism in Strange Interlude rather than the more beneficent Creator described in

---

<sup>50</sup> Robinson, Fantastic Interim, p. 120.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

the New Testament. The Fundamentalists also tended, during the decade, to emphasize the strict observation of an absolute code of ethics. O'Neill's condemnation of this static concept of morality and the consequent prudery and bigotry associated with Fundamentalism is suggested in Strange Interlude.

Oscar Cargill discovers in Strange Interlude a more definite theology than is probably present. Life is conceived in the play, according to Cargill, as a hedonistic dedication to sensually stimulating experience and death as the self-annihilation of satiation.<sup>52</sup> This is probably an oversimplification. For Nina, the character who most adequately represents this philosophy, life has been a frustrating and somewhat painful ordeal and exhaustion is a better descriptive term than satiety for the nirvana-like state she attains at the conclusion of the play. Cargill regretted that O'Neill could "not resist complying with the ultimate demands of that audience for the theology it wanted."<sup>53</sup> The statement is accurate to a point. The young, who in the earlier part of the decade had cynically adopted the philosophy of hedonism and ethical relativism, were by 1928 mature enough in experience and years to begin raising questions about the validity of that deceptively simple formula. Strange Interlude possibly anticipates this revolution. In any case the play is more appropriately a reflection of the theological confusion of the period rather than a persuasive case in defense of a particular system.

### 3. The Confusion of Hedonism

I want you to be happy! (p. 547)

Be happy, dear! You've got to be happy! (p. 680)

---

<sup>52</sup>Cargill, Intellectual America, p. 708.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

Mrs. Evans and Nina, the two mothers in Strange Interlude, both postulate happiness as a guiding principle for their children. In view of their knowledge of the illusory quality of happiness, the advice seems strangely optimistic. Mrs. Evans, after a lifetime of sacrifice and fear, incongruously formulates a hedonistic ethical standard characteristic of the nineteen-twenties: "Being happy, that's the nearest we can come to knowing what's good . . . the rest is just talk!" (p. 546). Nina's "I shall be happy!" (p. 571) becomes in the end "I'm sick of the fight for happiness!" (p. 619). The progression from the one point of view to the other exposes happiness as largely an illusion and greatly modifies what little meaning remains with the idea. The first thing Nina, and presumably the audience, learns is that happiness is transitory: "Black . . . in the midst of happiness . . . black comes" (p. 580). Nina has had two kinds of experiences which brought a degree of happiness, that of possession and that of erotic pleasure. The insatiable need to dominate the men of her life is suggestive of the Adlerian concept of basic motivation and neurosis. Alfred Adler believed that unfortunate toxic elements in the social environment could arouse a sense of insecurity which was compensated for by a striving for power. This "masculine goal," as he termed it, is particularly descriptive of some of Nina's traits. The urge to power is roughly equivalent to Freud's sex drive. Nina also found a measure of happiness through erotic pleasure and fulfillment of the maternal drive, both included with the Freudian conception of the libido or sex motive. Nina's possessive desire and sexual-maternal energy are both fundamental sources of pleasure, but not necessarily of happiness. Darrell could separate the two and say, before he became possessed by the hedonistic illusion, that "this talk of happiness seems to me extraneous"

(p. 568). He and Nina both discover that the quest for happiness as a life value is not without its illuminating internal conflicts. A sense of guilt and honor and the inexplicable desire to sacrifice are opposed by the more elemental desires which would unite them and destroy Sam. The apparent fact that "we must all be crooks where happiness is concerned" (p. 493) and that "happiness hates the timid" (p. 568) does not prevent both from sacrificing themselves in order to perpetuate Sam's happiness. The implications to be drawn from O'Neill's dramatic analysis of happiness are twofold. First, happiness as a standard or value in life is an illusion. Second, happiness is often experienced by one at the cost of sacrifice and pain in another. What degree of happiness the characters, aside from Sam Evans, experience in the play is in keeping with O'Neill's philosophy as expressed in a newspaper interview:

Sure I'll write about happiness if I can happen to meet up with that luxury . . . but happiness is a word. What does it mean? Exaltation; an intensified feeling of the significant worth of man's being and becoming? Well, if it means that--and not a mere smirking contentment with one's lot--I know there is more of it in one real tragedy than in all the happy-ending plays ever written.<sup>54</sup>

The happiness myth was a prominent illusion in America during the nineteen-twenties. Historically the situation was one to stimulate the birth of a hedonistic philosophy. The war's disillusionment produced a loss of faith in the values which formerly provided a sense of stability. The generation which most directly experienced the horrors, loneliness, and boredom of the war was naturally most affected. More general in their influence were the new doctrines which became common knowledge during the

---

<sup>54</sup>From an interview recorded by Malcolm Mollan, and published in the Philadelphia Public Ledger (January 22, 1922), Clark, Eugene O'Neill, pp. 96-97.

period. The ideas which required such radical revisions of man's conceptions of himself and his universe were perceived as challenges to all traditional values. The optimistic prosperity of the decade, increased leisure, a greater urge toward self-expression, the high value placed upon anything connotative of youth, and numerous other interrelated factors combined to emphasize experiences which brought a direct sense of pleasure rather than those pursuits which created a more permanent, if less emotionally intense, impression of fulfillment and happiness. The decade was not without real social and cultural progress, but there was an inordinate tendency to "follow the crowd, take up the new toys that were amusing the crowd, go in for the new fads, and savor the amusing scandals and trivialities of life."<sup>55</sup>

The belligerent hedonism of "the lost generation" is symbolic of the spirit of the nineteen-twenties. Mark Sullivan quotes a passage from Malcolm Cowley's Exile's Return which is a clear, if possibly extreme, statement of the militant view:

It is stupid to pile up treasures that we can enjoy only in old age, when we have lost the capacity for enjoyment. Better to seize the moment as it comes, to dwell in it intensely, even at the cost of future suffering. Better to live extravagantly, gather June rose-buds, "burn our candle at both ends."<sup>56</sup>

Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Edna St. Vincent Millay reflect a similar primitivistic hedonism.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup>Allen, The Big Change, p. 77.

<sup>56</sup>Quoted in Sullivan, Our Times: The Twenties, p. 391.

<sup>57</sup>See especially Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises (1926), Fitzgerald's This Side of Paradise (1920), and Millay's pronouncement, which became a motto for many during the nineteen-twenties, "my candle burns at both ends . . ."



Happiness is not an unreasonable object in life. Aristotle was aware in the Rhetoric of this obvious and fundamental human motive.<sup>58</sup> As an end which excludes all other values and which seeks immediate satisfaction it is an illusion. Nationally the narrow vision produced by the illusion helped create a situation which produced very painful consequences, a depression and a war which lasted, together, from 1929 to 1945. Individually the illusion proved so devastating--witness the sharp rise in insanity and suicide during the nineteen-twenties--that historians could detect a restoration of other more stable values and a return to a more moderate attitude toward happiness in the depression years of the nineteen-thirties.<sup>59</sup>

Eugene O'Neill's Strange Interlude is a comprehensive dramatic analysis of the deceptiveness and internal inconsistencies of simple hedonism. It is a principal theme of the play and an important persuasive purpose of the author. The particular significance O'Neill's view held for the decade enhances its value as social criticism.

#### 4. The Fiction of Heroism

Romantic imagination! It has ruined more lives than all the diseases! Other diseases, I should say! It's a form of insanity. (p. 587)

---

<sup>58</sup>"It may be said that all men, individually and the aggregate, have some aim, with a view to which they choose or avoid; and this may be summarily described as Happiness, with its parts." Aristotle, Rhetoric, i.5. 1360b 6-7, trans. Jebb, p. 18.

<sup>59</sup>Robinson, (Fantastic Interim, p. 207,) discusses the statistical incidence of neurosis, psychosis, and suicide during the decade. A major thesis in Frederick Lewis Allen's The Big Change is that the defiant and direct personal hedonism of the nineteen-twenties became transferred into a collective search for happiness which demanded vision, sacrifice, and moderation.

It is thus that Darrell, disgusted with the heroic image of Gordon Shaw which Nina nurtures, condemns but cannot himself escape its perverted influence.

Gordon, presumably engaged to Nina, is dead before the play begins. The circumstances of his death (as a war hero "brought down in flames . . . two days before the Armistice," p. 487), the nature of his personality ("Gordon's proud spot, fairness and honor!," p. 492), and "his good looks and prowess in sport" (p. 491) prepared the way for his strange deification. The romantic personification is largely a product of Nina's frustration. Gordon had represented, for Nina, escape from Father domination and fulfillment of the sexual-maternal drives. The sudden frustration of these needs transmutes the real into the ideal. Through a variety of compensatory acts Nina attempts to regain a lost lover and all that he represented. The result is the life of neurotic adventure chronicled in the play. Nina could have escaped neurosis had she been able to realize that Gordon, the romantic image, was an illusion. The object of her desires, symbolized by Gordon, might have been achieved through someone else. This nearly happens when she marries Sam Evans, but the complication and the trauma of discovering the hereditary insanity in his family permanently subverts her adjustment. The illusion is revived with greater force, symbolized by Nina's writing "Gordon's biography." No man is capable of fulfilling the promise of the legend. The ideal is momentarily achieved when Nina completely possesses, for a short time, the lives of four men--husband, lover, father surrogate, and son. All of the major characters must reckon with the illusion of Gordon the hero and the lives of three are in one way or another blighted by it.

The fictional image of Gordon is responsible for much of the irony

in the play. Evans, unaware that his son is a product of his wife's extramarital promiscuity, is infected with the heroic illusion to such an extent that he can say, "I want him /my son/ to justify the name of Gordon and be a bigger star than Gordon ever was, if that's possible" (p. 601). Darrell, the actual father tortured by the mockery of the rowing race, says to Evans, "We've got to beat these Gordons, Sam!" (p. 662). This signifies nothing for the uncomprehending Evans. Darrell, aware that the Gordons embodying all the heroic virtues in an adulatory age will inevitably prevail, hopelessly corrects himself: "Slip of the tongue! I meant Gordon! Meant Gordon, of course! Gordon is always meant--meant to win! Come on Gordon! It's fate!" (p. 662)

Nina loses the Gordon image twice, once to death and once to love. While her illusion may or may not be destroyed through emotional exhaustion and age, much of the original image is parodied in her son. Gordon Evans, the living counterpart of the legend, embodies the American concept of perfection in young manhood. Possessing all the extolled virtues and skill, he remains empty, spiritless, and dull. In Strange Interlude O'Neill is questioning not only the status of the hero but also the standards by which society judges one.

Nina's deification of Gordon Shaw was paralleled during the decade by a national tendency to create public heroes. The inordinate degree of attention they received and the unusual factors influencing their selection was the result of various circumstances. The development of mass communication (e.g., radio, chain newspapers, news services) and mass entertainment (e.g., movies, professional and collegiate athletics, antics of exhibitionists), both of which facilitate the creation of heroes, is especially associated with the nineteen-twenties. The successful tabloids

of the period discovered a phenomenon which eventually became a widespread practice for all forms of public communication and entertainment. By concentrating coverage upon a specific person or incident, a sense of intimate association was created which stimulated greater public interest. Flagpole sitters, screen stars, athletics, and marathon dancers attained national prominence and heroic proportions. By way of example, Floyd Collins, an obscure young Kentuckian, was trapped and finally died in a cave he was exploring. For more than two weeks national attention was focused upon the tragedy with myopic intensity to the exclusion of much that would be more likely to affect the general welfare. A North Carolinian mine disaster of less than a month later, which trapped seventy-one and killed fifty-three, attracted scant public attention. This tendency to create a popular image or illusion which was completely unrelated to the realities of either the character or situation may have been a reaction to the then popular practice of "debunking" historical figures in the public mind. Related to this process of "debunking" was the influence exerted indirectly by the political and business scandals of the period upon the choice of heroes. With reference to this, Mark Sullivan notes that, "some American types formerly treated with deference, even in some cases awe, found themselves, by the end of the 1920's, occupying pedestals lower than those to which they had been accustomed."<sup>60</sup> It was not a statesman who reached the zenith of hero worship but Charles A. Lindbergh. Harvey Allen compares his public reception with a vast religious revival and the unswerving fealty extended to him as a symbol that for many

---

<sup>60</sup> Sullivan, Our Times, p. 412.

"Lindbergh was a god."<sup>61</sup> Stripped of its emotional connotations the Lindbergh feat was simply a long airplane flight by a capable young man. The spiritual starvation of the American people had created a situation in which hero worship was rampant and irrational. These national heroes, aside from being symptoms of an historical condition, became images which influenced very basically the values and behavior of society. O'Neill apparently recognized the effect of such figures' social values in his objection to the predominant image. Oscar Cargill summarizes, from the point of view of 1941, one critic's personal appraisal of the relation between the criticism of the heroic image in Strange Interlude and hero worship of the period: "The skill with which O'Neill brings home the fact that Gordon Shaw, despite his athletic prowess and Apollonian features, must have been a good deal of a wooden image is immeasurably satisfying to one who is tired of handsome football heroes and war aces and is looking for deeper riches of character."<sup>62</sup>

##### 5. The Perversion of Business

His [Evans'] kind are inheriting the earth . . . hogging it, cramming it down their tasteless gullets!" (p. 594)

It is undoubtedly O'Neill speaking through Marsden who here condemns the brash and insensitive businessman, the decade's dominant figure.

The business of America in the nineteen-twenties was business.

The national illusion of "this adolescent country" (p. 601) is represented

---

<sup>61</sup>Allen, Only Yesterday, p. 221. By way of comparison Allen reports that in the New York welcome 1,800 tons of confetti were swept from the streets as opposed to only 155 tons for the premature Armistice celebration of November 7, 1918. The city spent \$71,000 for the Lindbergh greeting.

<sup>62</sup>Cargill, Intellectual America, p. 707.

in Strange Interlude by Sam Evans, an "overgrown boy" (p. 511) engaged in the advertising "game" (p. 602). His illusion of himself is never shaken once he becomes the self-confident businessman. Evans does succeed. He eventually acquires most of the material symbols of business triumph. O'Neill's apparent attitude is that in this case it is not that the illusion is unattainable, but rather that the form success takes is itself an illusion. This illusion of success infects the others. Darrell and Marsden, made wealthy through backing Evans, are forced to redefine their life's work as hobbies, emphasizing the subordinate position of creative and scholarly activities to that of business.

Evans, with his superficiality and jovial arrogance, is a caricature rather than a character, suggesting the depersonalizing effect of the business ideal. The implications from O'Neill's dramatic analysis of the illusion of the business ideal are these: first, material success and the pursuit of business in general destroys the deeper intuitive qualities necessary to a sensitive personality; second, success is often based upon the sacrifice and failure of others, hence the term self-made man is a misnomer. These conclusions and the businessman symbol for materialism are also important in several of O'Neill's earlier plays, notably Fog, Beyond the Horizon, The Hairy Ape, The Great God Brown, and Marco Millions.

The business ideal was to an historically unequalled extent the dominant spirit in American between 1921 and 1929. No human institution had ever performed such miracles as this remarkable method of production, exchange, and transportation. Motivated by the accepted realities of the profit system, the institution appeared capable of providing the necessities and luxuries for one hundred and twenty million people. The fact

that three-fourths of this number were economically insecure did not suggest to many that the promises of the system, as it was, were illusory. The tradition of unlimited opportunity maintained the faith in business even among those who received an obviously inequitable proportion of the wealth.<sup>63</sup> There were, of course, many for whom the "business civilization of the 1920's was not the true emanation of the idealistic American spirit, but a temporary triumph of a pecuniary culture."<sup>64</sup> Eugene O'Neill was of this group. In Strange Interlude he is concerned not so directly with the social and cultural values of the system as he is with its influence upon human personality. Sam Evans, the businessman, is the only one of the three major male characters who completely "succeeds" and who never questions the validity of his ideals. Although O'Neill apparently intended to thereby demonstrate more effectively the illusory quality of those ideals, Evans' success is an equally satisfactory conclusion in terms of the climate of the period, with its almost mystical attitude toward prosperity in the business world. According to Allen, "business had become almost the national religion of America."<sup>65</sup> The association of business with religion, one manifestation of Allen's generalization, was characteristic of the decade. By way of example, Bruce Barton's The Man Nobody Knows was the best-selling non-fiction book for two successive years, 1925 and 1926. Jesus, this book taught, was "a great executive," "would be a national advertiser today," and was "the founder of modern business."<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup>Robinson, Fantastic Interim, p. 18.

<sup>64</sup>Wish, Society and Thought in Modern America, II, 414.

<sup>65</sup>Allen, Only Yesterday, p. 181.

<sup>66</sup>Bruce Barton, The Man Nobody Knows (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925), pp. 1, 124, and 159.

Business once had been considered less dignified and distinguished than the learned professions. During the decade it was considered highly complimentary for a clergyman to be called a good businessman and university deans and presidents were commonly referred to as business executives. "Business," in short, "was the typical and preferred activity of the United States, an activity so deep-rooted and all embracing that it had become almost a synonym for life itself. Indeed, the struggle for existence, once biological in import, now referred almost exclusively to the battle for survival in the business world."<sup>67</sup> In Strange Interlude, Sam Evans embodies a number of illusions characteristic of a decade monopolized by the business ideal: the success myth, the advertising mirage, the "booster spirit," and the ideal of materialistic security.

The Horatio Alger spirit of the previous century was even more irrational in the nineteen-twenties when the tradition of unlimited opportunity was, except for those equipped by very special ability, rapidly becoming an empty promise. Technological expansion, subsequent consolidation of business and industry on all levels, and the concentration of wealth in a few hands was immobilizing the individual's ability to change his economic status. The rumor of sudden fortunes made, lured the hopeful to speculate in Florida real-estate and Bull Market stock. The deceptive quality of these means for success was dramatically demonstrated in the summer of 1926 and winter of 1929.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Robinson, Fantastic Interim, p. 15.

<sup>68</sup> Allen, Only Yesterday, (pp. 315-316), remarks that faith in the stock market was so great in the late nineteen-twenties that "even the rebellious intellectuals were there: loudly as they might lament the depressing effects of standardization and mass production upon American life, they found themselves quite ready to reap the fruits thereof."



Modern advertising based upon lavish display and the manipulation of social motives originated in the nineteen-twenties. Advertising, philosophically and practically, sought to create illusions. This mirage creating business was a menace to intellectual and moral balance. "Advertising," says Robinson, "created a world of desire so unattainable by two-thirds of the population that all but the strongest minds were dangerously cloven and all but the stoutest incomes wrecked by the attempt to straddle the gap."<sup>69</sup>

The prosperity and demands of business created a shallow personality typified, according to Wish, in the "booster spirit" of the Kiwanis, Rotary, Lions and Chamber of Commerce.<sup>70</sup> The most eloquent satirizer of this business personality is, of course, Sinclair Lewis. The "go-getter," "human dynamo," "mixer" and the man who could "sell himself" and "put his message across" described in Lewis' novels is deserving of T. S. Eliot's appropriate epithet, "The Hollow Men."<sup>71</sup>

The fruits of business success are necessarily material. Eugene O'Neill is much too rational and honest to condemn all materialistic motivation as false or as the basic reason for the superficiality of man and society in the nineteen-twenties. Sam Evans' wealth evidently brings him a sense of fulfillment on his own terms. For Marsden and Darrell, who would emphasize other ends in life, economic security in abundance is a debilitating influence. Critics of American society have, in great

---

<sup>69</sup> Robinson, Fantastic Interim, p. 103.

<sup>70</sup> Wish, Society and Thought in Modern America, II, 443.

<sup>71</sup> Sinclair Lewis ridicules the business personality in Babbitt and Main Street. T. S. Eliot's poem, "The Hollow Men" (1925) was in part similarly inspired. See T. S. Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952), pp. 56-59.

numbers, described the narrow horizons which strictly material objectives impose upon men. During the decade in question the materialistic philosophy was of particular prominence. "The acquisition of money became the guiding obsession of the age. The possession of it conferred privileges, immunities, and pleasures in the form of rich houses, fast cars, much clothing, desirable women, and the accumulation of one's fellows. Lack of money was the only crime."<sup>72</sup>

#### 6. The Failure of Science

This is my pet doctor, Charlie. He couldn't be happy in heaven unless God called him in because He'd caught something! Did you ever know a young scientist, Charlie? He believes if you pick a lie to pieces, the pieces are the truth! (p. 522)

Nina's reference to Dr. Edmund Darrell is indicative of the playwright's attitude toward science, one which will be developed as the action of Strange Interlude progresses. First, the false pride which O'Neill finds so objectionable in the human species is intellectually epitomized in the scientist. And second, O'Neill was unmitigatedly opposed to a scientific or rationalistic concept of truth. Consequently it is with a jaundiced eye that the playwright views the experimental physician.

Darrell is described in the stage directions as a kind of prototype of the scientist: "his manners cool and observant, his dark eyes analytical. He has come to consider himself as immune to love through his scientific understanding of its real sexual nature" (p. 515). Ultimately love and erotic frustration and the consequent personality disintegration contrive to destroy Darrell's illusion and demonstrate the vulnerability of scientific rationality as a personal philosophy. Darrell

---

<sup>72</sup>Robinson, Fantastic Interim, p. 97.

eventually denies the creed of the rationalist in his conclusion that "thinking doesn't matter a damn! Life is something in one cell that doesn't need to think!" (p. 651) In spite of O'Neill's reservations toward Primitive hedonism and Puritan ethics as absolute guides in human affairs, it is inferred that either would be better than science, which is an unattainable and hypothetical position.

Early in the play Darrell prescribed marriage and children as a remedy for Nina's neurosis. An unforeseen factor, the hereditary insanity in her husband's family, interferes. This initial failure of science to solve a human problem demonstrates a fundamental flaw in the method. To be valid, scientific planning requires that all the factors operative in any situation be known. This is seldom possible in the area of human affairs. Darrell, romantically attached to Nina and at the same time feeling himself at fault because of the failure of his advice, is an eager accomplice when Nina suggests that she have a child by a healthy father. He urges the plan of action in a scene which is a parody of the scientific point of view. "In full possession of the facts" and "in the interest of Science" (p. 567), Darrell and Nina decide that they can dispense with "irrelevant moral ideas" (p. 569) and mate like "guinea pigs" (p. 568). While their scientifically sanctioned relationship achieves the immediate end of providing Nina with a normal child, it does not achieve the original objective of alleviating her neurosis. The experiment and its failure were undoubtedly further calculated to demonstrate the inadequacy of science in the realm of human relationships.

O'Neill's acceptance of the psychoanalytic concept of personality is not incompatible with the view that science is largely invalid as a personal and social guide. Psychoanalysis, like art, is intuitively

derived. Science is generally rational. A strictly rational world would, as Plato's Republic suggests, be alien to art. The position of the artist, and of O'Neill in particular, with regard to science is not so easily defined. He apparently accepts the deterministic orientation basic to all scientific thought. (A cause and effect pattern is emphasized in Strange Interlude and in all of O'Neill's major plays.) He would deny, however, that science is capable of discovering or manipulating any appreciable number of the factors which influence human behavior.

In a larger but related sense, O'Neill seems instinctively unwilling to accept as the supreme force in life the blind powers of physical, chemical, and electrical law. The clearest suggestion of such a point of view is contained in one of Nina's speeches: "I tried hard to pray to the modern science God. I thought of a million light years to a spiral nebula--one other universe among innumerable others. But how could that God care about our trifling misery of death-born-of birth? I couldn't believe in Him, and I wouldn't if I could! I'd rather imitate His indifference and prove that I had that one trait at least in common!" (p. 523) In short, O'Neill did not accept the popular belief that science would eventually create the millennium and that in the interim it could comprehend and prescribe cures for all of man's psychological, social, and philosophical ailments.

The invasion of the public mind by scientific ideas in the nineteenth-twenties was historically unprecedented. Reacting with awe, enthusiasm, and suspicion, people suddenly became conscious of the accumulated theory and fact of the past half century.<sup>73</sup> The word "science" became a

---

<sup>73</sup> Darwinian theory and the planetismal hypothesis, for example, had been current for over fifty years but were popularly received with the enthusiasm normally accorded a recent discovery.

shibboleth and the phrase, "science teaches us," as a prefatory statement, silenced all argument. Although a similar popular credibility of science has persisted to our own day, the decade was unique for its unquestioning reliability upon any proposition which bore a scientific label. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, in 1929, suggested something of the prestige of science during the period: "Science has become the arbiter of the generation's thought, until to call even a prophet and a seer scientific is to cap the climax of praise."<sup>74</sup> O'Neill, who thought of himself as something of a poet and of the theater as the temple of a new religion, must have been particularly irritated by this attitude. The status of science was the result of various circumstances. The latter part of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century was a time of great progress in applied and theoretical science. The First World War served as an impetus for both science and modern industry. A marriage of the two introduced the public to numerous products which suddenly revolutionized their living patterns. It was during the nineteen-twenties, for example, that the automobile became a common possession, a national highway system was constructed, and electrification and telephone service were expanded to include virtually all urban areas. Also influential in American life were the theoretical concepts of science, especially those which challenged traditional philosophy and social mores. Many of these ideas, Einstein's theory of the relativity of space-time and Freud's speculations concerning the nature of personality, for instance, were capable of faddish

---

<sup>74</sup>Quoted in Allen, Only Yesterday, p. 199.

interpretation.<sup>75</sup> As a result, many scientific hypotheses acquired the popularity of a cult.

An ebb in the irrational enthusiasm over science was inevitable. Confusing contradictions challenged the impression that science was infallible. A case in point is the incompatibility of Watson's concept of environmental determinism and the hereditary determinism of East and Wiggam, both popularly discussed during the period. It was also becoming apparent that science might not be an entirely beneficent force. The monotony of the assembly line, growing competition between man and machines, unsettling social and philosophical effects of such "scientifically" derived ideas as eugenics and Economic Darwinism, and the natural ebb which follows every excess of enthusiasm combined to create a new impression. The utopian view of science predominant at the opening of the decade gave way toward the end to a growing sense of disillusionment. Eugene O'Neill clearly suggests this shift of opinion in Strange Interlude. The "modern Science God" was found not to be a wholly satisfactory ultimate authority. The rejection of "irrelevant moral ideas" (p. 569) resulted in a moral chaos. Unwilling to resist the current of new ideas and inventions and believing that they would ultimately work for good, many intellectuals nevertheless voiced reservations. Darrell's conclusion that the scientist should never carry his "experiments as far as human lives" (p. 622) recalls the reappraisal of science that took place in the nineteen-twenties.

---

<sup>75</sup>Einstein's theories were interpreted as "scientific" evidence in support of mental telepathy, immortality, and transmigration of the soul. And "the Narcissus complex of this individualistic era encouraged numerous charlatans . . . to set themselves up in business as psychologists or psychiatrists" (Wish, Society and Thought, II, 481).

## 7. The Ordeal of Art

All the twenty odd books I've written have been longwinded fairy tales for grown-ups--about dear old ladies and witty, cynical bachelors and quaint characters with dialects, and married folk who always admire and respect each other, and lovers who avoid love in hushed whispers! That's what I've been, Nina--a hush-hush whisperer of lies! (pp. 657-58)

Charles Marsden's confession and the numerous allusions in Strange Interlude to the man's relation to his art suggest yet another important theme. The artist enjoyed a special prominence during the nineteen-twenties, when self-expression was both a religion and an obsession. The novel in particular was in vogue. Between 1919 and 1929 the number of new titles issued by American publishers almost doubled, from 5,741 to 10,187. A large part of this increase can be attributed to the growing popularity of the novel. Book clubs like the Literary Guild, founded in 1926, and the Book of the Month Club, founded a year later, gained a wide reading and national publicity for the author. Popular taste, always the principal arbiter, expressed a preference for the conventional romantic tales, presumably represented by Marsden's polite novels.

Although more is involved, O'Neill's central concern is with the writer's integrity. The writer's serious dedication to his art, as well as comments in the play, suggests that O'Neill objected to what H. L. Mencken termed the "esthetic pose," the appearance of a prophet without the message. Marsden, instead of revealing life through his books, escapes it. He says of himself, "I've never married the word to life!" (p. 624). Darrell is Marsden's most penetrating critic. (The natural philosophic enmity which exists between the rational scientist and the intuitive artist is explored by O'Neill as a means for dramatically analyzing their mutual illusions.) His description of Marsden is probably

accurate: "his novels just well-written surface . . . no depth, no digging underneath . . . afraid he'll meet himself somewhere . . . one of those poor devils who spend their lives trying not to discover what sex they belong to!" (p. 516).

This matter of artistic integrity was an important issue in literary thought during the period. Ezra Pound wrote:

If an artist falsifies his report as to the nature of man, as to his own nature, as to the nature of his ideal of the perfect, as to the nature of his ideal of this, that or the other, of god, if god exist, of the life force, of the nature of good and evil, if good and evil exist, of the force with which he believes or disbelieves this, that or the other, of the degree in which he suffers or is made glad; if the artist falsifies his reports on these matters or on any other matter in order that he may conform to the taste of his time, to the proprieties of a sovereign, to the conveniences of a preconceived code of ethics, then that artist lies. If he lies out of deliberate will to lie, if he lies out of carelessness, out of laziness, out of cowardice, out of any sort of negligence whatsoever, he nevertheless lies and he should be punished or despised in proportion to the seriousness of his offence.<sup>76</sup>

Clearly Marsden represents that stream of literature characterized by reticence, optimism, and traditional form, while the pattern emerging during the nineteen-twenties was marked by its frankness, pessimism, and experimental form. O'Neill, with his naturalistic dialogue, penetrating study of human desires and frustrations, tendency toward negation, and restless experimenting, probably shared many of the literary values of novelists like Ernest Hemingway, Theodore Dreiser, Thomas Wolfe, John Dos Passos, and Sherwood Anderson. The same factors which stimulated a literary renaissance during the decade also created a climate favorable for the dilettante and untalented. The choppy exotic style of Ben Hecht

---

<sup>76</sup>"The Serious Artist," New Freewoman (October 15, November 1, and November 15, 1913), cited by Hoffman, The Twenties, pp. 165-66.



and the bizarre poetic excursions of Gertrude Stein attracted lesser imitators. The traditional reticence toward a frank literary treatment of sex was replaced in some cases by an almost adolescent fascination with the subject. Marsden's remarks in Strange Interlude, "to the devil with sex! . . . our impotent pose of today to beat the loud drum on fornication! (p. 488), may have been an indication of O'Neill's attitude toward authors who capitalized upon confused or distorted tastes in order to achieve a brief but enthusiastic popularity (e.g., Warner Fabian, Victor Marguerite, Hugh Carver, and Elinor Glyn).

It should be noted that Marsden is never convinced that his novels are of cosmic importance but recognizes his literary motivation for what it is, an extension of his dream life and a form of sublimation. The variety of emotional experience in Strange Interlude, to which Marsden is both spectator and participant, acquaints the novelist with life and alters his conception of the artist's mission. This is Marsden's substitute for the war that he missed. (He was, ironically, one of the "hired choir of liars!", p. 496, in the press bureau whose job it was to maintain romantic illusions about the war.) As Nina said of Marsden: "Well the war is over. Coming back safe from Europe isn't such an unusual feat now, is it?" (p. 496) Although O'Neill was not an active participant in World War I, he seems to share the disdain of those American writers who were for those who never experienced its shock to dignity and security.

Strange Interlude clearly contains an appeal for greater integrity in literature and literary taste. Less apparent but impossible to ignore is the impression that O'Neill preferred the literature of the nineteen-twenties stimulated by the war and marked by a frankness, pessimism, and search for new forms of expression.

C. Summary

The rhetorical critic of drama is concerned with those aspects of the themes which can be abstracted by the audience from the context of the play and can potentially influence their attitudes and behavior. Strange Interlude is significant for the insights it provides into O'Neill's concept of the underlying unity of all man's personal and social dilemma and for the meanings it holds for the nineteen-twenties. O'Neill is most immediately conscious of the "sickness of today," a suffering produced by internal tension and external disorientation. His search for the ultimate causes of this suffering led him inevitably to the conclusion that it lay in the estrangement of man and God. Modern man, emerging into the Scientific-Materialistic Stage in his development, is beyond the solace of either Primitive innocence or Puritan pride. Aware of the self-effacing truth of the former status and the egocentric need for the latter, he is beset by unrelenting tension and suffering. The O'Neill hero, like modern man, attains nobility through struggling with unalterable forces and unsolvable dilemmas. The more superficial and specifically directed themes are projections of this underlying unity which, in spite of its obscurity, is probably the most consequential idea the play contains.

Strange Interlude derives a particular rhetorical significance from its contemporaneity. An aura of somnolence and change, tremendous trivia and social revolution, reaction and counter reaction, all characteristic of the nineteen-twenties, hovers over the play. Of principal interest rhetorically are seven specific themes of Strange Interlude: the confirmation of psychoanalysis, conflict of theologies, confusion of hedonism, fiction of heroism, perversion of business, failure of science, and ordeal of art.

Eugene O'Neill is considered a major literary popularizer of psychoanalytic thought and this reputation was largely acquired through Strange Interlude. Psychoanalytic influences are everywhere apparent in the play: as important factors in the conception of the underlying unity; as a more evident specific theme; and as a significant force in the development of plot, character, and even dialogue. The willingness of the audience to interpret the play in light of a Freudian-Jungian bias undoubtedly emphasized this connotation. Strange Interlude reflects the philosophical conflict and mental disquietude that accompanied the revolution in religious thought. The traditional theological concepts were found inappropriate for the modern world. The play embodies one of O'Neill's most virulent attacks upon the illusion of Puritanism, symbolized in "God the Father." At the same time he cannot wholly embrace the opposing realities of the Primitive "God the Mother." In the course of Strange Interlude hedonism is exposed as a deceptively simple formula. The play is a comprehensive dramatic analysis of the illusory qualities and internal inconsistencies of the most characteristic philosophic value system of the decade.

O'Neill critically examines a series of dominant images of the nineteen-twenties and their social implications. He condemns a hero worship that was rampant and irrational and takes issues with the standards for this deification. He portrays the businessman as brash and insensitive and the business ideal as a perverted influence. O'Neill is skeptical of the scientist and his approach to human problems. The playwright objects to another false prophet of the decade as well, the artist dilettante. Strange Interlude contains ideas of immediate and transcendent significance which make the play an important social document and emphasize its rhetorical functions.

#### IV

##### DRAMATIC FORM IN STRANGE INTERLUDE

The dramatic elements in Strange Interlude are a part of the rhetorical enterprise, the means for the expression of persuasive ideas necessarily functioning as rhetorical devices in both a generalized and specific sense. The form and its aspects must first demonstrate an essential dramatic quality and interrelatedness appropriate to attaining the dramatic experience, which is fundamentally emotional and non-directed in character. A play must, in short, be dramatic before it can be rhetorical, and any factors which contribute to the success of a play ultimately enhance its persuasive effectiveness. When certain devices or qualities of the play are unusually well suited for projecting the themes, then the dramatic form is significantly rhetorical in a specific way. This chapter contains an analysis of several such adaptive aspects of Strange Interlude's dramatic form.

##### A. The Rhetoric of Plot

The rhetorical effectiveness of plot is totally dependent upon the attitude of the audience. If they are of the opinion that the most significant determinant of thought and behavior is human experience and if they accept the plot of Strange Interlude as meaningfully reasonable, then the foundation for the rhetorical function of plot is laid. If the plot is interpreted as providing sufficient motivation and justification

for the actions and ideas of the characters and if these impressions influence the audience's perception of their own relation to the world, then persuasion has been achieved. Eugene O'Neill has created a plot capable of arousing and maintaining these attitudes.

The story of Strange Interlude is Nina's. A woman of passionate temperament is inhibited and dominated by the sterile philosophy of her father. Gordon Shaw, her fiance, represents fulfillment and escape but is killed in the war. Nina gradually realizes that it was her father's influence that prevented the marriage or at least the physical consummation which would have lessened the intensity of her loss. Frustrated sexually and maternally, guilty with a sense of having failed her fiance, and recoiling from the anathema of Puritanism, Nina attempts to find expiation and fulfillment through masochistically sacrificing herself physically to wounded war veterans. When this fails, the guilt and frustration increase. At the advice of Dr. Darrell, she marries a man who lives on the surface of life, Sam Evans, and attempts to escape introspective suffering through becoming a wife and mother. Nina's adjustment is prevented by her mother-in-law's disclosure that the Evans family is cursed with hereditary insanity and her insistence that she must have a secret abortion. Although sacrificing herself to make Sam happy, Nina is confronted by both her own maternal frustration and her husband's fear of sterility. As an answer to the dilemma, she arranges to secretly have a child by another man, as Mrs. Evans had suggested. Dr. Darrell, the accomplice, and Nina fall in love but cannot marry without destroying Evans' happiness. Darrell goes abroad in self-imposed exile. Nina achieves a degree of contentment with her husband and the young son he believes to be his. Through her relationship with four men, Marsden (a father

surrogate), Darrell (her lover), Evans (her husband), and Gordon (her son), Nina eventually attains a momentary sense of the complete fulfillment of feminine desires. Gradually she loses them, Darrell through the waning of passion, Evans in death, and Gordon to another woman. Only Marsden remains and Nina, exhausted by the "fight for happiness" (p. 619), turns to him as a symbol of the security and peace of childhood.

The rhetorical implications of Strange Interlude, vaguely suggested in this brief synopsis, can best be interpreted in terms of four aspects of the plot: its deterministic orientation, its reasonableness, its conflict, and its crises and incidents.

#### 1. Deterministic Orientation

Modern drama is a contradiction in terms. It tends to emphasize character over plot and yet it acknowledges life experiences as the principal determinant of human personality. Philosophic determinism, which is basic to Eugene O'Neill's world view and dramatic conceptions, implies that man is a creation not of the will but of environmental influences and instinctual drives. Since many of the biogenic and psychogenic needs are aroused, directed, and modified by external factors, the playwright of today, even more than the Greek or Elizabethan, is conscious that his characters are motivated and justified by events of the plot. Clearly what people do--that is to say, plot--is largely dictated by what they are--character. However, at some point something happened to set both in motion.

Nina, as the girl who cuddled in her father's lap before she was five, may have possessed character, but it is not apparent in the dramatic sense until Gordon's death produced frustration, guilt, and indignation.

The motivational energy for the plot was provided when her natural female impulses were so long stifled in the sterile atmosphere of parental dominance. But it was her "association with the Gordons" (p. 681) which aroused and accentuated the emotions that became the substance of Strange Interlude. The Nina who dominates the play is a woman possessed with desires incapable of fulfillment. In O'Neill's tragic theory the Fates of Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides are represented by philosophic determinism--in this case forces in the environment and drives within the individual animated by frustration. However, Nina does not attain the stature of a tragic character in her struggle for the unattainable objectives of belonging, fulfillment, or expiation. Abandoning the "fight" (p. 619) before it is decided by death or attained in life, Nina turns to a father surrogate, regresses psychologically to a state of infantile dependence, and surrenders to oblivion.

Gordon's death before the play opens is the first link in a chain of subsequent events. (Drama must have a beginning and, unlike life, disregards that continuity stretching backward into obscure infinity.) This inciting event, which derives much of its force from Nina's inhibited earlier environment and is reinforced by the disclosure of the hereditary insanity (a kind of deus ex machina to save the dramatic problem from premature resolution), is both a creator of its preceding incident and a maker of character. Nina's guilt and frustration are products of this life experience. Her consequent attempts at adjustment, which ultimately involve her in an adulterous liaison, are also products of circumstances. Often each effect becomes in turn a cause in the chain of events. The deterministic implication in Strange Interlude, that characters are largely what the plot allows them to be or forces them to be, is important to the

rhetoric of the play. If the audience accepts the state of affairs as one which justifies Nina's attitudes and actions, then they must agree that situations do exist which require deviations from the conventional codes of behavior. The idea of ethical relativism has thereby been persuasively communicated.

O'Neill carefully prepares the way for Nina's action. Mrs. Evans, who had been confronted by the same problem of the hereditary insanity in her husband's history, tells Nina,

I used to wish I'd gone out deliberate in our first year, without my husband knowing, and picked a man, a healthy male to breed by, same's we do with stock, to give the man I loved a healthy child . . . and maybe my husband would feel without ever knowing how he felt it, that I wasn't afraid and that child wasn't cursed and so he needn't fear and I could save him. (p. 545)

Later Darrell and Nina justify their extramarital affair on the ground that Nina must have a child in order to preserve her own and her husband's well being. As Darrell states the problem, "This woman's duty is to save her husband and herself by begetting a healthy child!" (p. 568). A healthy child by Sam is evidently impossible, this leaving the alternative which Nina and Darrell take. In these two instances causal relationships are repeatedly implied, and an event is determined if it has a cause. Whether that cause is apparent or difficult to disentangle because of the complexity of the organism and of the environment is not immediately relevant to a definition of what constitutes determinism in the human organism. Nina is directed not by a Will but by instinctual drives and, even more implicitly, emotional influences and is thereby justified in her attitudes and consequent actions. Also, through this the audience may have been stimulated to accept determinism as a belief or scientific postulate.

The clearest reference to a deterministic scheme of human



development, and a source of Strange Interlude's "case history" atmosphere, is found in two speeches of Darrell's. His diagnosis is a fairly complete summary of Nina's neurosis.

Nina has been giving away more and more to a morbid longing for martyrdom. The reason for it is obvious. Gordon went away without--well, let's say marrying her. The war killed him. She was left suspended. Then she began to blame herself and to want to sacrifice herself and at the same time give happiness to various fellow war-victims by pretending to love them. It's a pretty idea but it hasn't worked out. Nina's a bad actress. She hasn't convinced the men of her love--or herself of her good intentions. And each experience of this kind has only left her more a prey to a guilty conscience than before and more determined to punish herself! (p. 517)

Darrell's prescriptive advice is based on the same deterministic conceptions.

That's just what she needs now, someone she cares about to mother and boss and keep her occupied. And still more important, this would give her a chance to have children. She's got to find normal outlets for her craving for sacrifice. She needs normal love objects for the emotional life Gordon's death blocked up in her. Now marrying Sam ought to do the trick . . . I think his unselfish love, combined with her real liking for him will gradually give her back a sense of security and a feeling of being worth something to life again, and once she's got that, she'll be saved! (p. 519)

The mild tendency toward stereotyped characterizations, evident in Strange Interlude, can be attributed in part to O'Neill's philosophic determinism. Darrell, a two dimensional "scientist type" early in the play, is what he is because he has assumed the patterns of thinking and acting characteristic of his profession. The scientist's role, and the same can be said for those of most of the other characters in Strange Interlude, is the product of a special set of circumstances. Catastrophe ensues when the characters fail to adjust but maintain this self-image until it is shattered by the sheer weight of factors in the environment

which make it inappropriate. Every man is, to a degree, a stereotype. The common stock of social experience, creating people of similar motives, values, and frustrations, enables the playwright to create characters which elicit from the audience the response: that man and I are one.

An audience, aware of the deterministic influence of the social environment upon human beings, aware also of a similar relation between plot and character, is inclined to acknowledge the relevance of the ideas of Strange Interlude to their own lives. The readiness with which the audience of the nineteen-twenties interpreted the play as psychoanalytic suggests that they were perfectly willing to accept O'Neill's deterministic orientation, psychoanalysis being the most significant doctrine of scientific determinism developed in the twentieth century. Plot so interpreted is the motivation and justification for the values of the characters. The extent to which the audience accepts the ideas derived from plot as personally meaningful is dependent upon the reasonableness of plot and its specific relationship to the ideas themselves. The rhetorical implications of the plot of Strange Interlude is due in large part to O'Neill's deterministic philosophy and theory of tragedy.

## 2. Reasonableness

The reasonableness of dramatic action is influenced by four aspects of the plot: its basic proposition, its development, its relation to life, and its inner consistency. The reasonableness and deterministic orientation of plot are the two general conditions affecting its rhetorical significance.

The basic proposition is the unifying principle of the drama; it is the problem that the play seeks to solve. William T. Price considers

the dramatic proposition as having three clauses: "first, the conditions of the Action; second, the cause of the Action; third, the result of the Action."<sup>1</sup> The proposition of Strange Interlude might be stated thus: "A sensitive, sensuous, and strong willed woman is engaged to a man who represents fulfillment of her feminine needs and escape from paternal dominance; he is killed in the war. What will be the effect of his death upon the woman and her objectives?" This question suggests the problem to be worked out in the course of the play. In order for the plot to be rhetorically meaningful, the basic proposition must be clear and acceptable to the audience. The opening interior monologue of Strange Interlude, which in some ways resembles the lengthy prologues of Plautus and Euripides, explicitly states the proposition and includes most of the necessary antecedent information--time, place, characters, what has gone before, and the present situation. The interior monologue is, in this case, an efficient expositional device. Through it, O'Neill can avoid the less effective necessity of stating the dramatic proposition in the ordinary dialogue of the play. In Strange Interlude the problem is apparent from the outset, unlike many plays in which the proposition is created out of circumstances described in the early action of the play. At any rate, due to the form and immediacy of its expression, the dramatic proposition is unusually clear in Strange Interlude. The basic proposition must be acceptable to the audience. Ordinarily this is the cause of the action, the initial incident of the plot. (The plot is, of course, not confined to the stage action of the play.) The death of Nina's fiance, an army pilot

---

<sup>1</sup> William T. Price, The Analysis of Play Construction and Dramatic Principle (New York, 1908), cited by Barrett H. Clark, European Theories of the Drama (New York: Crown Publishers, 1947), p. 487.

the dramatic proposition as having three clauses: "first, the conditions of the Action; second, the cause of the Action; third, the result of the Action."<sup>1</sup> The proposition of Strange Interlude might be stated thus: "A sensitive, sensuous, and strong willed woman is engaged to a man who represents fulfillment of her feminine needs and escape from paternal dominance; he is killed in the war. What will be the effect of his death upon the woman and her objectives?" This question suggests the problem to be worked out in the course of the play. In order for the plot to be rhetorically meaningful, the basic proposition must be clear and acceptable to the audience. The opening interior monologue of Strange Interlude, which in some ways resembles the lengthy prologues of Plautus and Euripides, explicitly states the proposition and includes most of the necessary antecedent information--time, place, characters, what has gone before, and the present situation. The interior monologue is, in this case, an efficient expositional device. Through it, O'Neill can avoid the less effective necessity of stating the dramatic proposition in the ordinary dialogue of the play. In Strange Interlude the problem is apparent from the outset, unlike many plays in which the proposition is created out of circumstances described in the early action of the play. At any rate, due to the form and immediacy of its expression, the dramatic proposition is unusually clear in Strange Interlude. The basic proposition must be acceptable to the audience. Ordinarily this is the cause of the action, the initial incident of the plot. (The plot is, of course, not confined to the stage action of the play.) The death of Nina's fiance, an army pilot

---

<sup>1</sup> William T. Price, The Analysis of Play Construction and Dramatic Principle (New York, 1908), cited by Barrett H. Clark, European Theories of the Drama (New York: Crown Publishers, 1947), p. 487.

shot down over France "two days before the Armistice" (p. 487), is the event in Strange Interlude which precipitates the action. An audience, recalling the First World War of ten years before, the perils of flying, the tragedy of all death and the particular irony of this one, undoubtedly accepted it without question.

The reasonableness of the plot for the audience is further enhanced if it develops before their eyes so that it can be followed without effort. The adage "seeing is believing" is appropriate. An audience is more impressed, with certain obvious exceptions (e.g., murder), by a plot developed principally in stage action. Strange Interlude covers a period of twenty-seven or twenty-eight years and all the major crises in the lives of four people. O'Neill, although he does project the important incidents in stage action, clearly cannot depend wholly upon it for the development of the plot. Nor could Strange Interlude, which relies upon passing time, the aging process, multiplicity of incident, and so forth, for its effect, be brought into accord with the requirements of the Unities. In spite of being told about such important parts of the plot as Nina's disastrous failure to find expiation through her masochistic experience at the veteran's hospital, rather than observing them at first hand, audience interest in the play is apparently not appreciably weakened. The greater length of the play may have enabled the playwright to include more of the story. Most important, however, is O'Neill's technical skill in the matter of careful exposition. The interior monologue is, as in the case of the basic proposition, a useful device for describing the parts of the story not expressed in stage action. Generally each act begins with a review of the events which have taken place since the preceding one ended. The device is an effective method for pointing out the important incidents

of the plot as they occur and for reviewing the unfolding story. Another factor contributing to the audience willingness to accept the plot, although parts of it are not projected in stage action, is the structure of the individual acts. Each one is, like the one-act play, an almost integral whole, having a climax and resolution. Individually they stand more as separate units than is usually the case in even the typical three-act play. The effect is one of scenes in a pageant, and the audience is willing to have the parts of the plot, not represented by the stage action, supplied by some other form of exposition. The plot of Strange Interlude retains its clarity, meaningful emphasis, and interest-evoking movement.

The two remaining major sources of reasonableness for a dramatic plot, especially important from a rhetorical standpoint, are its relation to life and its inner consistency. Both are implied in Aristotle's statement that the dramatist represented "what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity."<sup>2</sup> The plot in order to function rhetorically must be viewed by the audience as bearing some kind of relationship to life. The plot is a form of generalization on life. It is a law of drama that nothing shall exist or happen in the plot that cannot conceivably or, better, commonly happen in actual existence. This is not to suggest that drama reproduces life, since even the most Naturalistic play is a stylized representation, or that the audience compares every part of the plot with the latest authoritative evidence about life. In Strange Interlude the audience probably does not consider the possibility that through marriage the hereditary insanity of the Evans's had become diluted and largely nullified. Nor does it occur to a modern audience

---

<sup>2</sup>Aristotle, Poetics, ix. 1451a 38-39, trans. Butcher, p. 35.

that Nina could have resorted to artificial insemination instead of an extramarital affair and thereby remained ethically more conventional. An audience aware of these possibilities could not accept Nina's behavior as the inevitable consequence of her circumstances. This incident in the plot would not, in that case, support the validity of ethical relativism. The audience enters the theater with a positive desire to accept what the author wants them to believe, their critical faculties in part subjugated to the pleasure they anticipate.

Immediately related to this is a second law of drama, requiring that the plot maintain a logical inner consistency. The audience demands a clear and complete pattern of cause and effect which surpasses even that of ordinary life. Each incident in the plot must be clearly motivated by preceding events and the characters should respond in essentially the same fashion to similar situations. In Strange Interlude, there are instances in which the actions of the characters appear to lack both sufficient motivation and consistency. The question cannot be fairly considered without reference to the audience of 1928 and to the earlier discussion of the relation of dramatic plot to life. Nina is neurotic. She is, consequently, a reasonably irrational character. However, the voraciousness of her emotional appetite may seem inexplicable to a modern audience. Recalling the enthusiastic reception of psychoanalysis and the popular discussion it stimulated during the nineteen-twenties, it is probable that Nina's behavior would have been acceptable at that time. Undoubtedly an audience familiar with concepts like inhibition, traumatic shock, guilt complex, obsession, oedipus complex, could accept her behavior more readily than one less knowledgeable or at least less newly conscious of psychoanalysis. Similarly, an audience must accept as fact the primacy of the sex drive

if the characterizations are to seem reasonable. Nina's character is based largely on this premise: her basic needs are sexual (and maternal), her neurosis is a product of sexual frustration, her guilt is a result of having avoided sexual union at a crucial time, and even her various attempts to expiate her guilt and alleviate frustration are sexual. The idea that Evans' fear of sterility is sufficient reason for the disintegration of his career is unacceptable unless the audience recognizes the psychoanalytic interpretation of sexual motives. Likewise, the ethical confusion which allows Darrell to become a lover to the wife of his devoted friend is partially explained by the sexual motive. Biases fundamental to the play's conception and granted by the audience of the time, particularly psychoanalysis, justify any internal inconsistencies that Strange Interlude may appear to contain.

The reasonableness of the plot contributes to the rhetorical effectiveness of Strange Interlude. The basic proposition is clearly and immediately expressed. Although the plot is not projected wholly in stage action, it is sustained by O'Neill's skill with other forms of exposition. In terms of the audience of the late nineteen-twenties, the plot is both related to life and logically consistent. Both the question of reasonableness and that of the deterministic interpretation are matters which pertain more generally to the rhetorical effectiveness of plot. The specific relation between the plot and the ideas contained in Strange Interlude is the subject of the following discussion.

### 3. Conflict

Conflict is the clash of antagonistic personalities, ideas, drives, essential to an effective dramatic plot. The play is the solution of a



problem. Without the dynamic pressure of alternatives and incompatibles--that is, conflict--the dramatic problem is nonexistent. As a rule, the emotions are stirred to the pitch of drama only through conflict. Conflict denotes a strife in which there is uncertainty concerning the outcome. Frequently, in modern as well as classical tragedy, the clash is between the characters and their inevitable fate. When the outcome is so unalterably foreordained, the term struggle is more descriptive.

In Strange Interlude the fates of the characters are decreed by an indifferent God, the deterministic influence of the biological and environmental past. They are all victims of forces over which they have no control: Nina of neurotic frustration, Darrell of erotic desire ("her body is a trap! . . . I'm caught in it! . . . she touches my hand, her eyes get in mine, I lose my will!," p. 587), Marsden of an oedipal complex, and so forth. Their lives are dominated by illusory self images and profoundly influenced by such matters of seemingly trivial consequence as the chance appearance of another character. The characters can only struggle with destiny. This deterministic representation of life contains implications for the entire intellectual content of the play. However, the struggle of man with fate, elemental as it is, is not so rhetorically significant as the conflicts in Strange Interlude associated with issues of the nineteen-twenties.

Strange Interlude possesses conflict that is both internal, the tension produced by opposing motives within the individual, and external, antagonism between two or more individuals. The interior monologue is an effective device for emphasizing internal human conflicts. On the external level, O'Neill seldom resorts to a simple clash of personalities. Although manifest through characters, the conflict is generally one of

attitudes.

Fundamentally, Strange Interlude is a three-way conflict between the Primitive, Puritan, and Scientific-Materialistic approach to the problem of pride and belonging. The separate ideas and conflicts of the play, as well as its characterizations and incidents, are ultimately derived from these three principal forces. At a more apparent level, Strange Interlude contains four related major conflicts: God the Mother and God the Father, absolute and relative ethical values, hedonism and sacrifice, and Nina and the personal illusions of her three men.

The conflict between the feminine and masculine personification of the Deity is implied in Act I, explicitly stated in Act II, and helps unify the total play. The subterfuge, suspicion, and accusations that pass between father and daughter are largely reducible to this theological conflict. Marsden's inopportune appearances on occasions when Nina and Darrell were at the point of taking steps to legitimize their relationship derives much of its force from the revival of the conflict. Nina's reference to "God the Mother" or "God the Father" is an indication of the relative force of the two at any given moment and their connotative meanings. In periods when feminine needs are satisfied the first is dominant; when obstacles to fulfillment produce frustration the second is dominant. Much of the plot was structured with a view to emphasizing the theological conflict. Although an aura of inconclusiveness surrounds the outcome, which finds Nina reverting to her childhood submissiveness to "God the Father", the feminine Deity appears to emerge as the most reasonable, the masculine as the most potent in modern society.

The conflict between a relative and absolute system of ethical values is an important aspect of the plot. In Act I Nina rejects the inhibitory ethics of her father. In Act III Mrs. Evans supplies the

rationale for a relativistic view, realizing too late that such a view would have been the salvation of her husband; Nina is in a similar position by Act IV, the only alternative to a relaxed ethical consciousness being catastrophe for herself and her husband. The remainder of the play is an examination of the consequences of Nina's apparently justified adultery. Nina approaches the issue from the position of instinct and Darrell from that of reason, both struggling to integrate their ethical and compassionate natures with the necessities of the situation and their sexual needs. Since neither the absolute nor the relative system survives as unreservedly better, the ethical conflict of Strange Interlude offers little help for the ethical confusion of the nineteen-twenties. The relative system is based on logical though tenuous grounds and the absolute is thoroughly illogical. O'Neill's treatment of the plot demonstrates clearly and effectively the internal inconsistencies of a rigid code of ethical values. Nina's husband, the audience is encouraged to believe, can be saved from unhappiness, failure, and eventual insanity only through her adultery. Unlikely though such a dilemma may be in fact, the situation is highly persuasive. However, a relaxed ethical attitude is not completely satisfying since it fails to provide for Nina's happiness as it does for Evans'.

Related is the conflict between hedonism and self-sacrifice. Nina seeks fulfillment and expiation first in masochistic sacrifice, her experience at the veterans' hospital. This failing, she turns to marriage and attempts to find release through a mixture of the hedonistic satisfaction of sexual-maternal drives and the sacrificial duties of being a wife and mother. The conflict develops into a paradox when Nina discovers that, because of the Evans's family history of insanity, she must sacrifice

in order to preserve her husband's happiness or destroy her husband in order to attain personal pleasure. The irony of the situation emphasizes the conclusion that hedonism and sacrifice are not conflicting alternatives. The fulfillment of strictly hedonistic objectives is frequently possible only through the sacrifice of another person. Nina and Darrell's life of torment enables Evans to enjoy a life of uninterrupted pleasure. Also, Sam's mother and then his wife discover that sacrifice can ultimately produce a degree of self-satisfaction, invalidating the idea that a hedonistic abandonment of irksome and painful responsibility is the only source of happiness.

O'Neill has used the conflicts in the feminine and masculine view of life to demonstrate the illusory quality of certain self images and related social values. The multiplicity of plot incident in Strange Interlude is intended to project the facets of feminine need and create a series of illuminating conflicts between Nina and the three principal male characters. At the climax of the play, at the end of Act VI, all three are subordinated to Nina's will and the conflict appears to have been resolved in favor of the feminine law of the universe. Nina, who even at this moment is not the perfect embodiment of the Primitive life force associated with the female since she ignores inevitable and continual change, is eventually forced by circumstances to relinquish her dominant possessiveness. She does, however, represent a kind of natural truth which does prevail. Nina's husband, Sam Evans, is significantly a businessman. In the process of acquiring material security the more sensitive dimensions of his personality are destroyed and his perceptive capacities dulled. He becomes a "vulgar boor!" (p. 642). His insensitivity is in conflict with Nina's super sensitiveness. Nina's lover,

Edmund Darrell, is a scientist. His rationality is in conflict with Nina's impulsive and intuitive nature. The clash is demonstrated in the plot by Darrell's repeated vain attempts to escape Nina's possessiveness. Darrell's falling in love, his erotic frustration, and finally the disintegration of his professional objectivity are evidences of the illusory quality of his rationality. Charles Marsden, a father surrogate for Nina, is a dilettantish novelist. His aversion to life, his inhibitions, and his sterile censoriousness are in conflict with both Nina's avowed life impulses and Darrell's skeptical philosophy.

Plot derives much of its interest and rhetorical significance from conflict. O'Neill effectively projects the conflicts through the plot structure of Strange Interlude. Moreover, the conflicts are almost wholly of an ideological nature, a level is clearly established in the play. The relation of conflicts of the play to contemporary issues undoubtedly enhanced the excitement; the conflicts aroused and certainly emphasized the persuasive function and meaning of Strange Interlude.

#### 4. Crisis and Incident

The plot and the specific incidents that compose it function rhetorically in two ways. First, an interested audience is capable of perceiving the implicative significance in the bare events of the play. The plots of most dramas are allegorical, and the spectator commonly looks for "the moral of the story." Second, incidents provide a reasonable opportunity for the characters to abstract and examine ideas. As has been suggested, plot is the context from which ideas emerge. It is motivation and justification for both the explicit statement of ideas and for the behavior of characters in the play.

Incident which relates to those moments in the play when "modification is necessary to procedure"<sup>3</sup> is appropriately termed crisis. The crises of a play, because they are usually emphasized, intensely emotional, and involve a situation which requires a character to make some choice or inaugurate some action, are frequently rhetorically significant. Typically, there are three stages in a crisis: the situation in which relatively immediate change is inevitable, the considered alternatives, and the choice. If the audience accepts the circumstances requiring modification as lifelike, and the final decision as dictated by a rational appraisal of the situation on the part of the character, then the crisis has potentially exerted a persuasive influence. The plot of Strange Interlude pivots on a series of crises. Each act contains one or more such climatic moments. Nina's dominant position at the end of Act VI is the central crisis toward which the play builds and from which it recedes. Since each act follows a similar pattern most of the incidents in the play refer directly to the crises. Much of the play's interest, clarity, and general rhetorical effectiveness can be attributed to this condition of the plot. A review of the principal action of Strange Interlude, act by act, demonstrates the relation between incident and idea.

Act I is largely introductory. It establishes the tense and introspective tone; introduces Nina and Marsden, who will be united when the play comes "full round," and Professor Leeds; and it supplies antecedent information necessary to understanding the play. Gordon's death, or more specifically the connotations of his death, has precipitated a neurotic reaction in Nina. Her decision to leave home and her father's resistance

---

<sup>3</sup>F. H. O'Hara and M. H. Bro, Invitation to the Theater (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), p. 103.

to the plan create a situation which stimulates each to express his views. It is implied in the dialogue that more is involved than simply a willful daughter and a possessive father. Two approaches to life, the Primitive and Puritan, emerge and are vaguely defined. Nina's leaving is a symbolic rejection of her father's ideals and the inauguration of a search for other sources of expiation and fulfillment, and other philosophic standards. It is only in retrospect that the full meaning is apparent.

The basic events in Act II are the return of Nina after her father's death, the disclosure of her unsuccessful attempts to assuage her suffering through a series of sacrificial affairs with hospitalized veterans, and her acquiescence to Marsden's advice that she marry Evans. Here Darrell and Marsden are brought together for the first time. As they will do frequently in the course of the play, the rational scientist and the intuitive artist each analyze the other's personal illusions. Seeking Marsden's assistance, Darrell describes Nina's "case" to him. This summary of Nina's intensified neurosis is the most overt reference to psychoanalysis in Strange Interlude. Once suggested, the idea accumulates apparent corroborating evidence from a variety of sources. Nina's inability to feel any kind of emotional reaction on the occasion of Professor Leed's death induces her to examine the situation from her detached position. Her theorizing firmly establishes the underlying philosophic significance of the play: life values are false, man is possessed by illusory self-images, and "God the Father" is a comfortless nonentity. Like the Eastern mystics who feigned madness in order to safely criticize prevailing ideas, Nina's neurosis excuses her lack of inhibition and explains her oracular response.

By Act III Nina, who has married Sam Evans and is expecting a

child, has achieved a degree of emotional stability. Mrs. Evans' disclosure of the hereditary insanity which makes it impossible for Nina to allow herself to have this or any future child by Sam appears to condemn her to permanent frustration. Mrs. Evans, referring to her own experience with the family curse, advises Nina to secretly have a child by a normal, healthy male. The relativistic ethical code she postulates justifies adultery on the ground that it would enable both Nina and her husband to attain the hedonistic ideal of "happiness."

The plot of Act IV clearly contains intended rhetorical implications. Both Nina and her husband Sam are deteriorating, she from a resurgence of maternal frustration, accentuated by the recent abortion, he because he fears he is sterile. In order to preserve her husband's self-respect, career, and presumably even sanity, Nina must have a child by a healthy father. The only other alternative, that of divorce, would destroy Sam. Left alone with Darrell, who has been invited there by the solicitous husband, Nina reviews the entire situation. Darrell, who had advised the marriage as a cure for Nina's neurosis, is a reluctantly willing partner in the arrangement. Both parties are directed by sexual desire as much as by humanitarian motives, but Nina's behavior and Darrell's reference to "irrelevant moral ideas" (p. 569) are apparently justified by circumstances. Since the plot develops much as Mrs. Evans suggested it should, and hence is explicitly foreshadowed, the audience is willing to accept Nina's hedonistic motives and ethically relativistic means as justifiable in view of her moral responsibility to Evans. The circumstances forcefully demonstrate the inadequacy of a rigid, conventional ethical code since Nina is in the position of either having to destroy her husband in order to remain virtuous or sin in order to save him.



By Act V Nina, now in love with Darrell, has become contemptuous of her husband, forgetting that his salvation had originally prompted the adultery. She insists that they marry, regardless of the effect divorce would have upon Evans' sanity. Confronted by the fallibility of science and the collapse of his self-image, and aware of an ethical consciousness he once condemned, Darrell chooses a self-imposed exile. Nina, who had for the moment wholly embraced hedonistic principle, is forced again to find satisfaction in sacrifice, this time domestic. Before leaving, Darrell tells Evans that he is an expectant father.

Act VI finds Evans contented and successful and Nina intensely happy with her young son, Gordon. Darrell returns from Europe, his career and personality having suffered. He intends to expose all and force Nina to divorce Sam and marry him but is dissuaded by a variety of pressures--Marsden's suspicion, Evans' innocence, and Nina's insistence that he remain her lover. By the end of the act, Nina is a triumphant incarnation of Primitive truth. Possessing the converging desires of a husband, lover, father surrogate and son, her emotional appetites are wholly satisfied. Although the dramatic conflict is temporarily suspended, the situation contains a fatal flaw. It cannot remain static. The rhetorical significance of the climax is apparent.

By Act VII the waning phase of the plot's development is well advanced. Time and age alone have been sufficient to destroy Nina's brief period of dominance. Eleven years have passed and the characters, now celebrating Gordon's birthday, are radically changed. Nina has attempted to maintain possession of her source of fulfillment, but from her remarks it is evident that she is beset by exhaustion and glimpses her inevitable failure. Young Gordon, who ironically hates Darrell and is suspicious of

his mother's relationship with him, is closer to Evans. The interludes of passion which had bound Darrell and Nina together are now rare. Even the worshiping Evans is more conscious of his business and his son's affection than of Nina. Marsden is gradually emerging as the most important of the men in Nina's life. The process of losing her hold on all but Marsden is the basic matter of the last three acts. It symbolizes the submission of the feminine principle to the masculine, the inevitable defeat of Primitive truth of nature by the Puritan and Scientific-Materialistic forces of all that goes by the name of civilization. The act is marked by self-analysis and self-accusation by the characters. Darrell and Marsden, in particular, critically examine themselves and each other, mercilessly exposing the illusory qualities of their existence. The business ideal has exerted a particularly destructive influence upon both, destroying the essential nature of their life's work by converting their careers of scientific investigation and writing into mere hobbies. Evans' materialistic success is accompanied by a brash superficiality, made apparent throughout the act. Nina is still imprisoned by the heroic myth, now transferred to her son. The act contains very little action. Gordon's threatening to tell his father of his suspicions about Darrell and Nina is a crisis mechanically created for the sake of interest.

Act VIII takes place on the Evans' yacht near the finish line of a regatta in which Gordon is entered. The race symbolizes both the play and life. The business ideal and heroic illusion associated with the Gordons and with the social values of the nineteen-twenties seem "meant to win" (p. 662). Nina has clearly been replaced by young Gordon in her husband's affections. She is in the process of losing her son to another woman, Madeline, a more decisive loss than that of the previous act when

his affections became centered upon Sam. The social and personal values represented by Darrell and Marsden lie scattered in the wake of the Gordons' victories. Darrell, however, in interfering with Nina's desperate attempt to break the engagement between Gordon and Madeline, demonstrates his independence from her debilitating possessiveness. And Marsden, introduced by Nina's confession to a life he has suppressed in his polite novels, repudiates his former illusions. When at the end of the act, Sam, in a crescendo of parental pride over his son's victory, suffers a stroke, the old order is restored. Nina again becomes the sacrificing wife; Darrell and Marsden revert to the supporting roles of friends.

By Act IX Evans is dead. Gordon, who has long suspected that his mother has loved Darrell and only stayed by Evans out of a sense of duty, tells the two that they are now free to marry. Gordon, resentful of the relation he suspects exists between his mother and Darrell and incensed at Darrell's attitude toward the research gift granted in Evans' will, strikes his actual father. (Even in death the materialism of business dominates.) The moment of final suspense is passed when Gordon flies away ignorant of his true parentage. Darrell proposes to Nina as a matter of form since love is long dead; neither seriously considers such a union. Marsden, who has long nurtured a proprietary paternal interest, assumes possession of Nina, who has now regressed into a state of spiritual somnolence overlaid with childlike impressions of the pre-Gordon Shaw years. Marsden's Puritanism reasserts its dominance and subdues Nina's Primitive energy. The last act completes the interlude which was begun in the first. The heroic image of Gordon, the illusion which left a trail of human wreckage chronicled in Strange Interlude, is passed on to another woman and the ingredients are present for the repetition of the plot.

The basic mechanics of the plot are simple but contribute to its rhetorical effectiveness in a general way. In each act but the first and last all the principal characters are brought together. The conflicts, essential to the development of the theme, are actively maintained in those face-to-face situations. Physical action is relatively insignificant. The plot relies for its meaning upon what is said, including thoughts expressed through the interior monologue, rather than what is done. This enables O'Neill to bring a character on or off stage at his convenience and in most instances the outcome of the story does hinge upon these appearances. The interior monologue, an efficient expository device, is a factor which enables the playwright to represent only those parts of the story which illustrate his ideas most effectively.

The general pattern of the plot has been adversely criticized. Oscar Cargill contends "that in plot Strange Interlude is the sheerest melodrama anyone with taste will admit."<sup>4</sup> The qualities which may have elicited this and similar comments--the episodic quality, multiplicity of incident, and completeness of story--are also qualities that are rhetorically important. The sheer quantity of incident, recounting the confusion of suffering, ecstasy, and decay that is life, effectively suggests that "our lives are merely strange dark interludes in the electrical display of God the Father!" (p. 601). Each of the series of events is intended to illustrate some quintessential characteristics of people and ideas. The plot is particularly suited to describe Nina's philosophic quest which involves a series of attempts to expiate her guilt through self-sacrifice and fulfill her desire through possession. Even more apparent is the effectiveness of the plot as a means for exploring the

---

<sup>4</sup>Cargill, Intellectual America, p. 705.

ethical problem. The playwright has constructed a number of situations which apparently justify the relaxation or violation of traditional ethical standards.

The plot of Strange Interlude is an effective device for persuasion. Its deterministic orientation emphasizes the importance of the plot, its reasonableness contributes to the audience's willingness to accept plot as motivation and justification for the attitudes and behavior of the characters, and its specific conflicts and incidents project the ideas--either directly or through providing characters with opportunities to abstract and examine them.

#### B. The Rhetoric of Character

Character functions rhetorically in two ways. First, the characters possess a symbolic and expositional value, that is, they are representatives of and spokesmen for ideas. And second, the audience tends to identify with the characters and thereby becomes empathetically involved with the issues of the play. Eugene O'Neill has created in Strange Interlude characters who effectively project ideas and who possess a form of ethos capable of producing an attitude in the audience useful to persuasion. In no other play is O'Neill so concerned with human motives, the basis of character. The form, especially the interior monologue, length, and variety of the plot, is symptomatic of his intent to extensively develop dramatic character.

The sources for characterization in Strange Interlude demonstrate its relation to ideas. The characters are initially extensions of O'Neill. From this personal reference point--the common foundation for most creative interpretation but especially for O'Neill's--he constructed his characters

from two other major sources, social archetypal images (the pattern-like qualities of the businessman, scientist, artist, which can be termed popular illusions or self-images) and psychological archetypal forms (the Primitive, Puritan, and Scientific-Materialistic oriented types). O'Neill's tendency to schematize or stereotype the characters is in part a product of his interest in archetypes, or the universal level of human experiences, and not simply a matter of dramaturgical ineptitude. These sources of character and the diagrammatic qualities of character construction contribute much to the rhetorical meaning and effectiveness of Strange Interlude. In any case, the impressionistic character forms do not nullify O'Neill's belief that man's suffering and salvation are largely private struggles. The subjective nature of the problem and the introspectiveness of the characters create problems for the playwright's rhetoric. Although much of the personal maladjustment which besets the characters is a product of the social environment, they seldom strike out against the institutions at fault. In this, O'Neill probably influences the more perceptive members of his audience to a great degree and clearly demonstrates a philosophic sophistication which separates him from the less subtle, propagandistic playwrights. The internal nature of the problem does place an intellectual burden upon the audience. They must relate the inner suffering of the characters with social causes in order to derive from Strange Interlude any positive social criticism.

An analysis of the symbolic value of characters and their status as objects for identification will demonstrate the rhetorical implications of character in Strange Interlude. The first refers to the relation between ideas and people in the play and the second to the association between characters and the audience.

## 1. Symbolic Value

Strange Interlude is the story of four people during twenty-seven or twenty-eight eventful years in their lives.<sup>5</sup> They are representative personality and professional types of the nineteen-twenties and the major crises in their lives are in part intended to raise questions related to those paramount during the period. All nine of the characters, including Gordon Shaw who does not appear but is an extremely influential psychological phantasm, are symbolically significant in the play. None are simply mechanical necessities of the plot.

George Pierce Baker has noted that "all ethical drama gets its force by creating in an audience the feelings toward the people in the play held by the author."<sup>6</sup> There are no villains or heroes in Strange Interlude in the ordinary sense. None of the characters survive unscathed, except perhaps Gordon Evans and Madeline, and all are treated with sympathy. The association of Puritan ideals with an ineffectual and possessive old man who is out of touch with life, and of Primitive impulses with an attractive young woman possessed with an inordinate passion for life undoubtedly imposes upon the two ideas, Puritanism and Primitivism, a meaningful inferior-superior position. The characters O'Neill created to symbolize ideas are suitable because of qualities inherent in their roles and also because of their personal views. Clearly the character who represents ideas can accordingly possess greater or lesser relative value as an object for identification.

---

<sup>5</sup>The chronological development of the characters is an important aspect of the play. Nina is twenty when the play opens and her approximate age during each of the proceeding acts is twenty-one, twenty-two or three, twenty-three, twenty-five or six, thirty-seven, forty-seven, and forty-eight.

<sup>6</sup>Baker, Dramatic Technique, p. 43.

Nina Leeds is one of Eugene O'Neill's most memorable character creations and is the dominant figure in Strange Interlude. Before her appearance it is suggested that she suffers from a manic-depressive form of neurosis. Until released in the last act by exhaustion and the cessation of emotion, Nina oscillates between the extremes of ecstatic fulfillment and agonized frustration. More is involved than the pattern of her neurosis, however. She is an excellent representative of the psychological condition peculiar to O'Neill's characterizations. The ruling state is one of tension, occasionally relieved by moments of aggressive action aimed at possessing the objects of desire or by contrasting periods of inner calm associated particularly with satisfaction of the sexual-maternal drives. Nina is described in Act I as "strained, nerve-racked, hectic, a terrible tension of will alone maintaining self-possession" (p. 495). This dominant condition is a product of conflicting motives, of needs for which there is no fulfillment, and of guilt for which there is no expiation. Nina is the product of frustration. The only child of a possessive widowed father, she became belatedly and suddenly conscious of the whole range of mature feminine needs. Nina's confusion, undoubtedly intense, abated when Gordon Shaw, who represented fulfillment and escape, entered her life. Natural need, accentuated by the early inhibitions of her home life and by the frustration of Gordon's death, has now created a woman of insatiable emotional appetite. It is principally through this that Nina becomes symbolically valuable to the play. Barrett Clark describes her as a "superwoman" and Edwin Engel as "Everywoman."<sup>7</sup> She is both. Nina is unquestionably abnormal, but the abnormal is, after all,

---

<sup>7</sup>Clark, Eugene O'Neill, p. 175; Engel, Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill, p. 200.



normal propensities which have been disproportionately emphasized.

Nina symbolizes the Primitive forces. Her extreme femaleness embodies the basic instincts for life-preservation. Too much affected by the ethical influence of the heroic image and the resurging Puritanism of her father, Nina is not, except for brief moments, a perfect symbol of the Primitive God, "God the Mother." Her passionate energy for possessing life and the intensity of her sexual-maternal drives are, however, clearly representative of the Primitive impulse. It is the guiding principle in her life, the underlying force antagonistic to Puritanism.

Her psychological development during the play parallels the psychoanalytic patterns to such an extent that some critics, Oscar Cargill for example, refer to the characters (i.e., Nina, Marsden, Darrell, and Evans) as "not human beings but prescriptions."<sup>8</sup> Both Nina and Marsden are, either by intent or coincidence, modeled on Freudian-Jungian forms and were accepted by the audience as support for a psychoanalytic conception of human personality. Nina's neurosis, in particular, was too diagrammatically classic to escape being interpreted as psychoanalytic by a generation imbued with the idea.

Nina's Primitivism is the rationale for her hedonistic and relativistic ethical views. Happiness is her dominant motive and what little she achieves is largely through a denial of any but the most relative ethical standards. Having been seriously hurt through the influence of the absolute laws of her Puritan father, Nina's amorality is apparently justified. Most significant for the period is the ethical confusion she symbolizes--the illusory nature of happiness and the means of obtaining

---

<sup>8</sup>Cargill, Intellectual America, p. 706.

it and the inescapable influence of traditional ethics.

Nina's life is the most complete expression of the destructive power of the romantic ideal in any of O'Neill's plays. The heroic illusion of Gordon Shaw represents for Nina satisfaction of all needs and escape from all aversions. No mortal is capable of fulfilling this image, an image that ultimately bears little relation to the lost lover, and Nina is doomed to relatively permanent neurosis. The irrational and unreal nature of the illusion is demonstrated in Act VI when the promise of the ideal is temporarily achieved through Nina's possession of four men to satisfy the separate aspects of feminine need. Like all illusions, hers is a will-o'-the-wisp, enticing the beholder away from reality.

Nina is one of O'Neill's most articulate characters. Her reference in Act II to the various conceptions of the Godhead, and particularly to the masculine and feminine personifications of the Deity, establishes the theological significance of the play and her personal Primitive orientation. Nina's allusions to "God the Mother" and "God the Father" are important to maintaining the basic ideological conflict in Strange Interlude. Her analyses of the illusory self-images of Darrell, Marsden, and Evans are significant. For example, in contrasting their approach to life Nina says of Darrell, "Did you ever know a young scientist, Charlie? He believes if you pick a lie to pieces, the pieces are the truth!" (p. 522); and of Marsden, "Have you written another novel lately? But, stop to think, you're just the one who couldn't know what I mean. With you the lies have become the only truthful things." (p. 522)

Dr. Edmund Darrell enters the play as a neurologist. Edwin Engel emphasizes this as evidence "that O'Neill did not intend to make of Strange Interlude a Freudian tract."<sup>9</sup> It is an interesting coincidence

---

<sup>9</sup> Engel, The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill, p. 213.

that Sigmund Freud also began his career as a neurologist. While Darrell is not a psychoanalyst and the play is not a tract, the fact remains that the doctor functions much as a psychoanalyst. His description of Nina's "case" and his advice to her in Act II are probably the principal cues to the play's being interpreted by the audience as a psychoanalytic drama.

The doctor, "his manner cool and observant, his dark eyes analytical" (p. 515), is a parody of the scientist. Twice Darrell attempts to manipulate human destiny, once through his recommendation that Nina marry Sam and then in the "experiment" (p. 567) in which he fathers Nina's child. Both are failures and, after suffering personally and professionally, he vows not to "meddle again with human lives" (p. 655). The implication is that science, while it may improve the physical environment, offers little for the solution of man's personal and social dilemmas. Darrell's loss of faith in science and the destruction of his personal illusion produces a change in the scientist's philosophic perception of the world. Darrell's view of life as "something in one cell that doesn't need to think" (p. 651), expressed toward the end of the play, is evidently a denial of the rationalist's creed.

Darrell and Evans are representatives of the third stage in the social development of man, the Scientific-Materialistic. Both are capable, at least, of perceiving the conflict between Primitive truth and Puritan pride. Darrell is more conscious of the Primitive forces in life and Evans of the Puritan. Darrell, who considers himself "immune to love because of his scientific understanding of its real ~~sex~~ual nature" (p. 515) and independent of "irrelevant moral ideas" (p. 569), is eventually possessed by both, neither capable of dominating his prideful rational will. The consequent inner tension is representative of modern man's condition.

After the loss of his personal self-image, Darrell is especially qualified to describe the destructive influence of "romantic imagination" (p. 584). He is conscious of the effect of the Gordon myth upon Nina and upon everyone else in the play. The ironies inherent in his relation to Evans reinforce his comments about the business ideal. Darrell's rational views are a contrast with Marsden's intuitive approach to life, and this basic difference underlies much of what he has to say concerning the dilettante novelist.

Charles Marsden, a writer of polite novels, is one of the most interesting dramatic characterizations in any of O'Neill's plays. Marsden embodies a number of psychoanalytic forms that are much too evident to have been the product of simple coincidence. In the opening speech of Strange Interlude, an interior monologue, Marsden suggests the psychosexual basis of personality through his reference to "modern sex yahoos" (contemporary novelists who emphasize sex), "my sex life among the phantoms!" (the sexual nature of his own dreams with reference to Nina), "eunuchs parading with the phallus" (the emasculated generation's obsession with sex), the guilt stemming from an adolescent experience in "that house of cheap vice" (pp. 487-88), and his oedipal attachment to his mother. His character is developed along the lines established in this opening speech. The Oedipus complex is especially important. It is suggested that his novels are a sublimation of his sexuality. His artistic dilettantism is an illusion, being his means of escaping rather than expressing life. When he declares himself ready to write his "first real novel," the basic theme is to be "this is life and this is sex" (pp. 657-58). Marsden's effeminate qualities, in contrast with Darrell's masculinity, are a product of his sexual inhibition. In any case, Marsden is extremely important as a

representative of the psychoanalytic theme of Strange Interlude.

After Professor Leeds's death, Marsden assumes the legacy of Puritanism. From Nina's point of view he is a kind of reincarnation of both her dead father and "God the Father," the Puritan Deity. Marsden is, throughout the play, the "blackness" (p. 580) which inhibits the natural course of passion. It is largely his influence which prevents Darrell and Nina from marrying during Acts V and VI. Marsden battles with the Primitive impulse both within himself and wherever else it appears in the play. At the end Nina, "weary with life" (p. 682), is at last dominated by Marsden.

Marsden as the novelist is naturally more articulate than the other people and as an outside party, not directly associated with the triangle, is an excellent character through whom O'Neill can comment upon the persons and action of the play. Marsden's artistic intuition contrasts with the scientific and materialistic rationality of Darrell and Evans. He describes Darrell as "perspiring with the effort to stay cool" and as possessing "the diagnosing eye they practice at medical school" (pp. 515-16); he exclaims, "I think you doctors are a pack of God-damned liars and hypocrites" (p. 582). Evans, and business in general, he describes as "inheriting the earth . . . hogging it, cramming it down their tasteless gullets" (p. 594).

Sam Evans is the man Nina marries in order to live a "surface life" (p. 528) and avoid painful introspection. And he is well qualified to function thus. He begins the play with "the right stuff in him to succeed" (p. 519), and eventually he does succeed. When Nina says before marrying Evans that "it would be a career for me to bring a career to the surface" (p. 528), she does not anticipate all the sacrifices that this will entail. Evans' success is ironically purchased through great

suffering on the part of the other characters. The extroverted materialist which results is almost unbelievably stupid. He never suspects that his son was the result of his wife's promiscuity. He accepts Darrell and Marsden at face value, never comprehending their inner selves nor their true relation to his life. Evans is one of the four men Nina requires to fulfill her illusion of Gordon, the heroic image. One of the most forceful ironies of the play is the impression it conveys that Gordon, had he lived, might have become a Sam Evans.

Evans represents the destructive effect of the business ideal upon the personality of the businessman and those whose lives he touches. Embracing acquisitiveness with the seriousness and enthusiasm of a novice, he blandly ignores the eternal problems of thinking men and makes them seem like unredeemable neurotics. O'Neill, through Evans, manages to state this theme in spite of the ambiguousness of the businessman's apparent triumph over the pain of deeper living and the illusory qualities of his own life values. The playwright's subtlety is here very evident. The businessman, characteristic of the boom years of the nineteen-twenties, succeeded materially; the rhetorical effectiveness of the character depends wholly upon the perceptiveness and values of the audience. If they accept Nina's appraisal of Evans as a "fool" (p. 638) and "vulgar boor" (p. 642), in spite of his achieving all the conventional manifestations of success, then O'Neill's estimate of the businessman has been emphatically established.

Gordon Shaw, the man, died months before the play opens. Nonetheless Gordon, the "memory," a "ghost," a "myth," an "obsession," is a leading character in the play. As long as Gordon was alive, Nina's conception of what he represented was subject to the tests of reality. Once

dead, his image became a symbolic object capable of gratifying all needs. The basic needs in Nina's life to which Gordon offered the promise of fulfillment were escape from the sterile and inhibiting atmosphere of paternal dominance and satisfaction of the sexual-maternal drives. Strange Interlude is the chronicle of Nina's attempts to regain the promise of Gordon through a variety of compensatory acts. The Gordon myth is the most destructive illusion of the play since through Nina it adversely affects the lives of numerous persons.

Gordon is many things in the play. His death is the traumatic shock which gives birth to Nina's neurosis (suggesting the play's psychoanalytic motif) and the exciting force which sets Strange Interlude in motion. His memory, strangely enough, is one of the Puritan forces Nina must combat. When Nina learned of the hereditary insanity in her husband's family it was this memory which prevented her from divorcing Evans. She thinks: "Lived fair . . . pride . . . trust . . . play the game! . . . who is speaking to me . . . Gordon!" (p. 544) (These are Evans' ideals as well.) The Gordon myth serves to emphasize the true nature of the illusory self-images the others live by, fully as romantic, irrational, and perverse as Nina's obsession.

The raw materials for the modern hero were all present in Gordon Shaw. He was a "football hero" and "war ace," possessed a "wonderful athlete's body," and lived by the strictest precepts of "honor," "duty," and "courage." His heirs, Sam Evans and young Gordon, will demonstrate that these noble attributes do not in themselves make man heroic.

Gordon Evans is a reincarnation of Gordon Shaw. O'Neill's stage description of the character is worth quoting since Gordon Evans, Gordon Shaw, and Sam Evans are one, though Nina never realizes that the husband

she holds in contempt is a mature version of both her lost lover and her son:

Gordon is over six feet tall with the figure of a trained athlete. His sun-bronzed face is extremely handsome after the fashion of the magazine cover American collegian. It is a strong face but of a strength wholly material in quality. He has been too thoroughly trained to progress along a certain groove to success ever to question or be dissatisfied with its rewards. At the same time, although entirely an unimaginative code-bound gentleman of his groove, he is boyish and likeable, of an even, modest, sporting disposition. (p. 666)

Darrell's estimate that "he's only a well-muscled, handsome fool!" (p. 673) is probably accurate. He symbolizes the emptiness of the decade's heroic ideal.

Professor Henry Leeds, although dead before Act II begins, is important to the intellectual content of the play. Much of his character is suggested by his library-study, a "cosy, cultured retreat, sedulously built as a sanctuary where, secure with the culture of the past at his back, a fugitive from reality can view the present safely from a distance, as a superior with condescending disdain, pity, and even amusement" (p. 485). Nina's father is more than simply outmoded parental authority. His morality and strict philosophy constitute a Puritan view of life. Marsden, Leeds's symbolic successor, perpetuates his values. Nina struggles with these forces until, overcome by exhaustion, she can no longer resist the Puritan legacy of her "fathers" (p. 496).

Leeds's symbolic value is not clearly evident in Act I. Nina's later references to "God the Father" and to her own father ("Black . . . in the midst of happiness . . . black comes . . . again . . . death . . . my father . . . comes between me and happiness! . . .," p. 580) clarify his ideological significance for the play.



Mrs. Evans, Sam's mother, is another parental figure who frustrates the normal pattern of life. In telling Nina about the hereditary insanity, Mrs. Evans' basic function in the story, she establishes a number of specific ideas which are important for the play. Her suggestion that Nina have a healthy child by someone other than Sam is a clear defense of a relativistic ethical view. The hedonistic motives which direct some of Nina's later actions are expressed in Mrs. Evans' pronouncement, "Being happy, that's the nearest we can ever come to knowing what's good" (p. 546). She introduces a third and apparently conflicting factor which will figure importantly in the ethical confusion of the play, that of sacrifice. Mrs. Evans implores Nina, in this connection, to "give her life to Sammy" (p. 546). Her references to the disinterestedness of God, understandable in view of her life experience, contributes to the conception of an impersonal Deity common to both theological views of the play.

Madeline Arnold's position is much like Nina's shortly before the play began. And it is significantly ironic that Nina, who was once in a position similar to that of Madeline's tries desperately to break the young couple's engagement. She is an expression of her father's inhibitory and possessive Puritanism. Aggressively feminine, Madeline could have become another Nina had her Gordon crashed. And the play, one cycle in the life of the human race, might have begun again.

The characters of Strange Interlude are not ideological manikins. However, they do implicitly represent ideas and explicitly state views of themselves and each other; as such, they are potentially effective rhetorical devices. If the audience not only perceives the relation between characters and ideas but also makes an identification with the characters, then persuasion has clearly resulted.

## 2. Identification

Identification is defined by Kimball Young as a "method of putting oneself in the place of another in imagination or activity, often going so far as to result in a sense of oneness with the other person."<sup>10</sup> This perception on the part of the audience of their relation to characters in the play is rhetorically significant since the identification process "involves a genuine tendency to become, in major or minor respects, like some person or group of persons."<sup>11</sup> It is a fundamental means of achieving communication-persuasion on a very basic level and is common to all forms of discourse, but especially to drama.<sup>12</sup> Although identification is chiefly an emotional reaction, it does establish an atmosphere in which ideas can be more readily transferred. Identification may take various forms, but it is rhetorically most significant in drama when the audience associates the intellectual content of the play with the characters and is so involved with those characters as to assume aspects of their emotional sets, attitudes, patterns of conduct, and ideas generally. When used ego-defensively, identification is symptomatic of neurosis; ordinarily it is a perfectly normal, even instinctive tendency, basic to learning. The degree to which an audience identifies itself with the characters of a play largely determines the extent to which they can perceive

---

<sup>10</sup>Young, Social Psychology, p. 561.

<sup>11</sup>Sappenfield, Personality Dynamics, p. 293.

<sup>12</sup>Kenneth Burke (Rhetoric of Motives, p. 48) considers identification the basic process in rhetoric: "We might well keep it in mind that a speaker persuades an audience by use of stylistic identifications; his act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify itself with the speaker's interests; and the speaker draws on identification of interests to establish rapport between himself and his audience. So there is no chance of keeping apart the meanings of persuasion, identification and communication."

the ideas as growing naturally, logically, and persuasively out of the situation.

The audience identifies with those characters in which they see themselves. O'Neill has, with moderate success, created characters in Strange Interlude who possess the basic qualities necessary to their becoming objects for identification. The businessman, doctor-scientist, minor novelist, and college professor occupy positions of prestige. Such careers probably attracted many of the most competent men and women of the nineteen-twenties and excited the adulation of the rest. An audience is more inclined to identify with persons of a higher social standing than with a lower. Strange Interlude is relatively unique in this respect; many of O'Neill's plays are peopled with farmers, seamen, prostitutes, and others from the bottom rungs of the social ladder.

O'Neill uses profession as a means of delineating character. The businessman is popularly supposed to be gregarious, acquisitive, opportunistic; the scientist, rational, singleminded, brilliant; the novelist, unpredictable, arty, imaginative; the professor, pedantic, bookish, withdrawn; and the idolized young man, handsome, athletic, determined. Perhaps certain traits are imposed upon characters through the training and patterns of thinking associated with a particular career, or possibly careers attract specific types. In any case these generalizations about the relation of profession and personality, unsupported by fact though they may be, are important social prejudices. Through assigning a character a profession, the playwright also endows him with personality. In Strange Interlude the professions of the characters, which can be termed social archetypal images, are related to their fundamental motives, classified according to whether they are Primitive, Puritan or Scientific-

Materialistic, and are termed psychological archetypal images as well. For O'Neill these professions are not only meaningfully recognizable forms for his audience but imply deeper meanings. A part of his social criticism is directed at the perversion of business, the failure of science, and the ordeal of art. On a more fundamental level, these professions are related to distinct conflicting and irreconcilable attitudes toward life symbolized in the Primitive, Puritan, and Scientific-Materialistic oriented personality types. Nina has not been considered in the scheme at this point although she might well have been. She mentions making a "career" (p. 528) of being a wife and mother. Her sex and career do suggest certain personality qualities which emphasize her symbolic meaning for the Primitive forces in life. Undoubtedly these same factors enhance her identificational value for the audience. The passage of time in the play, which enables the playwright to develop personality chronologically, also contributes to the characters' significance as objects for identification.

More important to identification than either personality or profession are the problems of the characters. The people in Strange Interlude confront many of the active personal and public issues of the decade. Like the audience, the characters of the play represent serious divisions in basic philosophy. They looked, by implication at least, to psychoanalysis as a way out of their religious and moral confusion. Unable to distinguish reality from illusion even in the area of personal values, the characters were skeptical and disillusioned. Although the experiences and problems of the characters were intensified for the purposes of drama, most were common to the audiences that saw the play.

In summary, Nina and her struggle are central to the drama. She possesses physical attractiveness, vitality, and the characteristic needs

associated with the female of the species. Most women are required to play a variety of roles and Nina's attempt to maintain those of wife, mother, daughter, and lover undoubtedly recalled familiar desires and dilemmas for women in the audience.

The symbolic and identificational functions fulfilled by a single woman required four male characters. The principal men of the play represent distinct major types in modern American society. Early in the play, Darrell is masculine, objective, decisive, intelligent, and an entirely capable man and scientist. His inner conflict--a three-way tension between the rational, moral and instinctive--is in one form or another a common experience. The novelist, Marsden, is charming, appealing, and inquisitively friendly. His effeminate, introspective, and intuitive nature contrasts with the personalities of Darrell and Evans. The problems he struggles with are those of guilt, inhibition, and life fear. Evans is the dominant type of the nineteen-twenties, an embodiment of most of the decade's ideals. Throughout most of Strange Interlude, the businessman's extroverted confidence and tangible objectives are an incongruous contrast to the introverted anxiety and illusory purposes of the other characters. To identify with this untroubled, good-natured, jovial, and simple creature to such a degree that the irony of his position is missed would distort much of the thematic significance of the play. This is unlikely. Unquestioned success was an identifying mark without which the businessman of the period would have been unrecognizable, and clearly contributes to the symbolic significance of the character. Young Gordon, an idol for a hero worshipping age and thoroughly devoid of any truly noble human qualities, is his counterpart.

The characters of Strange Interlude are typical of the great

middle class which forms the majority of theater-goers. Such audiences, therefore, could identify themselves with the professions, personalities, and problems of the characters in Strange Interlude and ultimately with the ideas they symbolized. Audiences observing themselves reflected in the familiar characters of the play should not avoid contact with the ideas.

### C. The Rhetoric of Dialogue

The two most basic definitional requirements of drama are that it be composed entirely in dialogue and projected in stage action. Functionally, dramatic dialogue differs from ordinary conversation in that it is an expository device created to advance the action and reveal information about situation, character, and theme. Moreover, it is overheard by the audience rather than heard. Neither the conventional exchange of speech between characters nor their vocalized thoughts in Strange Interlude are directed to the audience. The explicitness of language, as compared to such other forms of exposition as setting, action, tempo and mood, makes it the most useful and basic means for persuasion.

Many critics are of the opinion that Eugene O'Neill was, for various reasons, an inadequate dialogist. Joseph Wood Krutch, who believes this is his greatest weakness, attributes this inadequacy to his inability to achieve dialogue equal to the demands of character and situation. While a good speech may accompany some particularly moving scene, what is desired "is something not merely good but something incredibly magnificent."<sup>13</sup> Krutch's estimate, and it is one commonly made, ceases to be particularly meaningful as a judgment of O'Neill's dramaturgy when he indicts the age rather than the artist: "But no modern is capable of

---

<sup>13</sup>Krutch, "Introduction," O'Neill, Nine Plays, p. xxi.

language really worthy of O'Neill's play, and the lack of that one thing is the penalty we must pay for living in an age which is not equal to more than prose." Edwin Engel characterizes his dialogue as "not only strained and turgid, but awkward, inarticulate, banal."<sup>14</sup> The artistic success of Ah Wilderness!, O'Neill's only comedy, suggests that the playwright was capable of writing that was swift, unpretentious, and extremely well suited to the people and situation of the play.

The popular success of Strange Interlude suggests that any undesired effects imposed by dialogue were minor. Indeed, since the interior monologue is the most striking aspect of the play, dialogue probably contributed significantly to the audience appeal. The poetic language also influenced the play's effectiveness as a vehicle for ideas, and deserves special analysis. In every other respect the dialogue of Strange Interlude is conventional.

### 1. Interior Monologue

O'Neill is quoted as having stated in explanation of the interior monologue, "Everything is a matter of convention. If we accept one, why not another, so long as it does what it's intended to do? My people speak aloud what they think and what the others aren't supposed to hear."<sup>15</sup> The device resembles both the aside and the soliloquy but should not be confused with either. O'Neill used the conventional aside in A Wife for a Life, written in 1913. And in The Emperor Jones, Gold, The Hairy Ape, The Great God Brown, Marco Millions, Lazarus Laughed, Dynamo, and Days Without End, the soliloquy is utilized in one form or another. Its use

---

<sup>14</sup>Engel, The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill, p. 299.

<sup>15</sup>Clark, Eugene O'Neill, p. 171.

in The Emperor Jones is unusual. This play is an expressionistic study of Jones's personal terror projected as a kind of extended soliloquy. The Hairy Ape, characterized by long, soliloquizing speeches, is a more typical example of O'Neill's use of the device.

The interior monologue device in Strange Interlude is moderately unique, both in O'Neill's literary work and in dramatic history. Edwin Engel notes that Alice Gerstenberg (Overtones, 1913) and Elmer Rice (The Adding Machine, 1923) utilize a similar device but suggests that O'Neill's form is more a combination of their techniques than it is comparable to either.<sup>16</sup> Many critics attribute the development of the technique to O'Neill's interest in novelistic structure. This need not have been the case although he clearly achieves much of the novelist's freedom. The same impulse which directed the Greek dramatists to use the mask and chorus, the Elizabethans the soliloquy, and American writers of melodrama the aside probably stimulated O'Neill, an insatiable experimentalist, to seek means of providing a dimension then absent in the conventional modern play. (O'Neill uses both the chorus, in Lazarus Laughed, and the mask, in The Great God Brown, as well as the soliloquy and aside.)

The Theater Guild, in the 1928 production of Strange Interlude, distinguished the interior monologue from conventional dialogue by these means: The speaking character momentarily "froze" in position and, whenever possible, all physical action on stage halted. A momentary pause preceded each interior monologue. The inflectional tones of the interior monologue approximated but did not entirely follow the pattern of ordinary speech. While at times emphatic and varied, the tones generally

---

<sup>16</sup>Engel, The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill, p. 225.



retained the colorless quality of vocalized thoughts since they were not directed to anyone on stage or to the audience. This contrast between the two modes of dialogue and the speech pattern in which the interior monologue was delivered tended to increase the tempo of the play, creating the theatrical illusion of rapidly passing time.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the device created production problems since many of the interior monologues are lengthy and approximately one third of the dialogue is cast in this form. In most cases the interior monologue is most heavily relied upon in the opening moments of each act. As the act gains dramatic momentum, ordinary dialogue predominates .

Contemporary critical reactions to the interior monologue were varied. Gilbert Seldes, writing in the Dial, contended that the merits of Strange Interlude were almost entirely spoiled by "technical infelicitities" and that O'Neill was "too good a dramatist to have to use the asides."<sup>18</sup> Approval was much more in evidence. A critic in the Saturday Review of Literature called Strange Interlude the "first truly successful play using double voice" and Robert Littell of the New York Post wrote

---

<sup>17</sup>This first hand account of the production technique is from a lecture of the late Prof. E. J. West, Department of English, University of Colorado. The differences between the delivery of conventional dialogue and interior monologue must have been slight since a contemporary critic, George Jean Nathan ("The Idea and Comedy," American Mercury, XIV /May, 1928/, 120, quoted in Jordan Yale Miller, "A critical Bibliography of Eugene O'Neill," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of English, Columbia University, 1957/ p. 562) wrote: "Asides have gotten rid of infantile stage directions of 19th Century which suggest sotto-voice asides, etc. The full and articulate speech is much to O'Neill's credit."

Gilbert Seldes, "The Theater," Dial, LXXXIV (April, 1928), 348, quoted in Miller, "A Critical Bibliography of Eugene O'Neill," p. 561.

that it "made conventional style seem flat and two dimensional."<sup>19</sup> Brooks Atkinson's estimate of the interior monologues' contribution is probably the most reasonable. At times, he writes, they are "the very stuff" of drama while in other instances they are used unnecessarily.<sup>20</sup> Charles Brackett, writing in the *New Yorker*, compared O'Neill's use of the "stream of consciousness" technique unfavorably with that of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.<sup>21</sup> The comment invites analysis. When Strange Interlude appeared the stream of consciousness technique was a common feature of the novel. Several contemporary novelists, notably James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Waldo Frank, Sherwood Anderson, Conrad Aiken, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner, frequently utilized varieties of this form. Two things must be remembered about the technique. First, precedent for the interior monologue is to be found in the theater where it existed long before the novel existed as a literary form. And, second, even within the traditions of the novel, the technique is not a unique development of a few writers in the twentieth century. Dostoevsky's House of the Dead, Charles Dicken's Pickwick Papers, Herman Melville's Moby Dick, and even James Fenimore Cooper's Spy all use the technique.<sup>22</sup> The interior monologue is, however, particularly associated with James Joyce, who in turn

---

<sup>19</sup>"Strange Interlude," Saturday Review of Literature, IV (March 3, 1928), 641 and Robert Littell "Strange Interlude," New York Post, January 31, 1928, both quoted in Miller, "A Critical Bibliography of Eugene O'Neill," p. 557.

<sup>20</sup>Brooks Atkinson "Strange Interlude Plays Five Hours," New York Times, January 31, 1928, quoted in Miller, "A Critical Bibliography of Eugene O'Neill," p. 557.

<sup>21</sup>Charles Brackett "Not at Their Best," New Yorker, III (February 11, 1928), 24, quoted in Miller, "A Critical Bibliography of Eugene O'Neill," p. 559.

<sup>22</sup>See Harry Levin, James Joyce (Norfolk, Conn., New Directions Books, 1941), pp. 91-93.

acknowledged his debt to a novel by Edouard Dujardin. Dujardin wrote in definition of the technique as used by himself and Joyce:

The interior monologue, in its nature on the order of poetry, is that unheard and unspoken speech by which a character expresses his inmost thoughts (those lying nearest the unconscious) without regard to logical organization--that is, in their original state--by means of direct sentences reduced to syntactic minimum, and in such a way as to give the impression of reproducing the thoughts just as they come into the mind.<sup>23</sup>

The interior monologues of O'Neill and Joyce are not comparable. The use of the interior monologue in Strange Interlude is seldom so subterranean as to parallel the stream of consciousness technique in Ulysses. If the interior monologue in Strange Interlude had been that "flux of undifferentiated experience"<sup>24</sup> of the novel, most of its rhetorical value would have been sacrificed. O'Neill had other purposes in mind when he conceived the play, and the effectiveness of the technique should be judged in terms of those purposes.

As in the case of standard dialogue, the interior monologue has as its purpose the exposition of situation and character and, through these, theme. The device contributes to the development of the situation in the following three ways: (1) It is a means for describing actions which happened before the play began or between acts; thus Marsden, in his opening speech, informs the audience of Gordon's death and Nina's reactions (pp. 486-88). (2) It is a device for reviewing past action for the purpose of interpreting the present action of the play; Darrell, in Act VII, reviews the major incidents of the developing relationship between himself, Nina, and Evans since Act IV (p. 620). (3) It contributes

---

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, p. 90.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, p. 87.

directly to the dramatic situation, providing suspense through conflict and dramatic irony; the clash between Marsden, the intuitionist, and Darrell, the rationalist, is expressed through the interior monologue (p. 516). The interior monologue is also used in three ways to reveal character development: (1) The characters analyze their own motives and reactions at numerous points throughout Strange Interlude; in Marsden, a highly introverted individual, this self-analysis is characteristically emphasized (pp. 486-88 and 629). (2) The device is a means for the introduction of characters in preparation for their entrances, as in the case of Nina and Professor Leeds who are described in Marsden's speech at the opening of the play (pp. 486-88). (3) Moreover, it is a device by which one character can describe another; Darrell's description of Marsden and his novels in Act II is one example (pp. 516-17).

In the direct exposition of theme, the interior monologue is both explicitly and implicitly a useful rhetorical device. Frequently ideas are couched in this form. Marsden's comment, "we must all be crooks where happiness is concerned! . . . steal or starve!" (p. 493), and Nina's "the only living life is the past and future . . . the present is an interlude . . . strange interlude in which we call on past and future to bear witness we are living!" (p. 646) are random cases in point.

Eleanor Flexnor recognized the implicit rhetoric of the interior monologue: "the conception of psychological cause and effect as action in itself, and therefore directly within the realm of theater, just makes its appearance in O'Neill's Strange Interlude."<sup>25</sup> The psychoanalytic reputation of the play and any persuasive influence it had in that respect

---

<sup>25</sup>Eleanor Flexnor, *American Playwrights, 1918-1938* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938), p. 172.

are largely attributable to the interior monologue. The dialogue cast in this form is much like the free association of the psychoanalyst's couch; even when it does not attain such a depth, it is marked by an absence of much censorship of the superego. In either case, if the audience accepts the interior monologue in Strange Interlude as realistically comparable to people's unvoiced thoughts, then the psychoanalytic conception of personality is reasonable.

Marsden's interior monologue which opens the play is one of the few instances in which the technique attains the level of free association:

How perfectly the Professor's unique haven! . . .

Primly classical . . . when New Englander meets Greek! . . .

He hasn't added one book in years . . . how old was I when I first came here? . . . six . . . with my father . . . father . . . how dim his face has grown! . . . he wanted to speak to me just before he died . . . the hospital . . . smell of iodoform in the cool halls . . . hot summer . . . I bent down . . . his voice had withdrawn so far away . . . I couldn't understand him . . . what son can ever understand? . . . always too near, too soon, too distant or too late! . . .

What memories on such a smiling afternoon! . . . this pleasant old town after three months . . . I won't go to Europe again . . . couldn't write a line there . . . how answer the fierce question of all those dead and maimed? . . . too big a job for me! . . .

But back here . . . it is the interlude that gently questions . . . in this town dozing . . . decorous bodies moving with circumspection through the afternoons . . . their habits affectionately chronicled . . . an excuse for weaving amusing words . . . my novels . . . not of cosmic importance, hardly . . .

but there is a public to cherish them, evidently . . . and I can write! . . . more than one can say of these modern sex-yahoos! . . . I must start work tomorrow . . . I'd like to use the Professor in a novel sometime . . . and his wife . . . seems impossible she's been dead six years . . . so aggressively his wife! . . . poor Professor! now it's Nina who bosses him . . . but that's different . . . she has bossed me, too, ever since she was

a baby . . . she's a woman now . . . known love and death  
 . . . Gordon brought down in flames . . . two days before  
 the armistice . . . what fiendish irony! . . . his wonder-  
 ful athlete's body . . . her lover . . . charred bones  
 in a cage of twisted steel . . . no wonder she broke down  
 . . . Mother said she's become quite queer lately . . .  
 Mother seemed jealous of my concern . . . why have I never  
 fallen in love with Nina? . . . could I? . . . that way  
 . . . used to dance her on my knee . . . sit her on my  
 lap . . . even now she'd never think anything about it  
 . . . but sometimes the scent of her hair and skin . . .  
 like a dreamy drug . . . dreamy! . . . there's the rub!  
 . . . all dreams with me! . . . my sex life among the  
 phantoms! . . .

Why? . . . oh, this digging in gets nowhere . . . to the  
 devil with sex! . . . our impotent pose of today to beat  
 the loud drum on fornication! . . . boasters . . . eunuchs  
 parading with the phallus! . . . giving themselves away  
 . . . whom do they fool? . . . not even themselves! . . .

Ugh! . . . always that memory! . . . why can't I ever for-  
 get . . . as sickeningly clear as if it were yesterday  
 . . . prep school . . . Easter vacation . . . Fatty Boggs  
 and Jack Frazer . . . that house of cheap vice . . . one  
 dollar! . . . why did I go? . . . Jack, the dead game  
 sport . . . how I admired him! . . . afraid of his taunts  
 . . . he pointed to the Italian girl . . . "Take her!"  
 . . . daring me . . . I went . . . miserably frightened  
 . . . what a pig she was! . . . pretty vicious face under  
 caked powder and rouge . . . surly and contemptuous . . .  
 lumpy body . . . short legs and thick ankles . . . slums  
 of Naples . . . "What you gawkin' about? Git a move on,  
 kid" . . . kid! . . . I was only a kid! . . . sixteen  
 . . . test of manhood . . . ashamed to face Jack again  
 unless . . . fool! . . . I might have lied to him! . . .  
 but I honestly thought that wench would feel humiliated  
 if I . . . oh, stupid kid! . . . back at the hotel I  
 waited till they were asleep . . . then sobbed . . .  
 thinking of Mother . . . feeling I had defiled her . . .  
 and myself . . . forever! . . .

"Nothing half so sweet in life as love's young dream,"  
 what? . . .

Why does my mind always have to dwell on that? . . . too  
 silly . . . no importance really . . . an incident such  
 as any boy of my age . . . (pp. 486-88)

Here the audience is able to overhear the private thoughts, ideas, im-  
 pulses, images, fantasies of Marsden without his exercising any kind of

critical or conscious direction over them. Of course, his reverie does possess a degree of order, a result of the ideas having been associated in previous experience. Since his remarks are not superintended by the ego, the use of the interior monologue enables the audience to know a great deal about Marsden that could ordinarily be disclosed only in a much longer passage of conventional dialogue. Thus, the interior monologue potentially serves as a device for compressing the expression of ideas. However, in attempting to suggest free association O'Neill is frequently forced to become more repetitious and less selective than necessary in conventional dialogue. Often the consequent inefficiency offsets any advantage.

The interior monologue technique is also a means for observing the conflict of motives which underlies the overt words and actions of the characters, an idea basic to psychoanalysis. Nina says to Evans at one point, "Don't get excited. It's bad for your high blood pressure" (p. 644). She thinks immediately afterward, "If only he'd die," then "Oh, I don't mean that . . . I mustn't" (p. 644). This is just one of the clearer and less significant examples of the id-ego-superego conflict evident in the characters of Strange Interlude. Much of the "true" action of the play is available to the audience only through the interior monologue. Freud once stated in this connection, man is "a cauldron of seething excitement."<sup>26</sup>

The id-ego-superego conflict, which the interior monologue is well suited to express, ultimately raises the larger conflict in the play of the Primitive, Puritan, and Scientific-Materialistic forces. Nina's

---

<sup>26</sup>Freud, New Introductory Lectures, p. 104.

pregnant reveries in which she aligns herself with the Primitive is couched in the interior monologue form:

There . . . again . . . his child! . . . my child moving  
in my life . . . my life moving in my child . . . the  
world is whole and perfect . . . all things are each  
other's . . . life is . . . and the is is beyond reason  
. . . questions die in the silence of this peace . . .  
I am living a dream within the great dream of the tide  
. . . breathing in the tide I dream and breathe back my  
dream into the tide . . . suspended in the movement of  
the tide, I feel life move in me, suspended in me . . .  
no whys matter . . . there is no why . . . I am a mother  
. . . God is a Mother . . . (pp. 573-74)

And much of the clash of her Primitive impulses with Puritan restrictions is projected by this technique: "Black . . . in the midst of happiness . . . black comes . . . again . . . death . . . my father . . . comes between me and happiness!" (p. 580). Although not so clearly stated, the identification of Leeds and Marsden with Puritan forces and Darrell and Evans with the Scientific-Materialistic forces is largely accomplished in the interior monologue. This basic conflict of the play involves an ethical and a theological question as well, to which the technique adds an expositional dimension. Much of Nina and Darrell's struggle of conscience in Acts IV, V, and VI with regard to their love in relation to Evans' happiness is projected in the interior monologue. The theological conflict is seldom attended to so directly in the device but it is clearly present in a speech of Marsden's:

Darrell! . . . and Nina! . . . there's something in this  
room! . . . something disgusting! . . . like a brutal,  
hairy hand, raw and red, at my throat! . . . stench of  
human life! . . . heavy and rank! . . . outside it's  
April . . . green buds on the slim trees . . . the sad-  
ness of spring . . . my loss at peace in Nature . . .  
her sorrow of birth consoling my sorrow of death . . .  
something human and unnatural in this room! . . . love  
and hate and passion and possession! . . . (p. 581)

The interior monologue symbolizes the facade modern man has



interposed between himself and the world. The tragic meaning surrounding Strange Interlude involves the inability of the characters to separate the real self from the illusory self image and the destructive compulsion to maintain at any sacrifice the prison of the false mask. The interior monologue is an excellent device for demonstrating the existence of an inner level of being which is different than and often in conflict with the outer man. Cases in point are Nina's repeated references to Gordon, which are evidences of the power of the heroic myth, and Marsden's self-confession ("I've never married the word to life! . . . I've been a timid bachelor of Arts, not an artist! . . . my poor pleasant books!." p. 629), which comes long before any public admission of his literary superficiality.

Many of the interior monologue passages tend to be redundant and contribute little that could not have been just as effectively accomplished in conventional dialogue. However, for a story which spans twenty-seven or twenty-eight years and contains so many incidents, it is a convenient and efficient expositional device, one which functions rhetorically. It is further useful in this connection as a means of achieving clarity and meaningful emphasis, enabling the audience to more easily derive ideas from plot and character. The implicit relationship between the interior monologue and the themes is evidence of O'Neill's interest in adapting dramatic form to the content of the play. George Jean Nathan appreciated this when he wrote that Strange Interlude "could have been written no other way."<sup>27</sup> Undoubtedly the interior monologue contributed to the persuasive effectiveness of Strange Interlude quite apart from the conventional expositional function of dialogue. The interior monologue is the

---

<sup>27</sup> George Jean Nathan "Judging the Shows," Judge, XCIV (February 18, 1928), 31, quoted in Miller, "A Critical Bibliography of Eugene O'Neill," p. 559.

most striking rhetorical formal device of Strange Interlude and clearly contributed to the novelty and excitement of the play for the audience.

## 2. Poetic Language

A basic ingredient of the interior monologue and a feature of the comparatively realistic conventional dialogue is the poetic language of Strange Interlude. Poetry is very much a part of the plays' rhetoric.

John Gassner offers a useful definition:

A poetic play may be a play written in metrical poetry, a play written in imaginative, intense and vivid prose, or a play imaginatively organized to afford a 'poetry of theater.' The last, through the shape and sequence of the episodes, the visual possibilities of the background and action, and the style of production and performance required by the author's conception of his subject matter.<sup>28</sup>

Strange Interlude, although not verse drama, may be regarded as a poetic play. It achieves the poetic principally through the breadth and reach of O'Neill's imagination and theatrical sense but also because of a special verbal beauty. O'Neill's poetic conceptions are generally more noteworthy than his powers of expression. It is significant that neither Marco Millions nor Lazarus Laughed, his most characteristically poetic plays, was a commercial success. (And it cannot be said that the theater public was hostile toward the genre; in productions of the poetic plays of Yeats, Jeffers, Anderson, Auden, Spender, Fry, Eliot and MacLeish the response was occasionally enthusiastic.) While neither of these is in any sense a complete artistic failure, it may indicate that the poetic propensity in O'Neill is not one of his major attributes as a dramatist.

---

<sup>28</sup>John Gassner, The Theater In Our Times (New York: Crown Publisher, 1954), p. 19.

In a letter to A. H. Quinn in 1925, O'Neill admitted disappointment concerning this aspect of his critical reputation: "But where I feel myself most neglected is just where I set most store by myself--as a bit of a poet who labored with the spoken word to evolve original rhythms of beauty where beauty isn't."<sup>29</sup> O'Neill's first published imaginative work was a romantic poem, reminiscent of Kipling, published in the Pleiades Club Year Book for 1912. During the same year he wrote twenty-eight poems, largely humorous and journalistic, for a column in the New London Telegraph. Other poems appeared in the New York Call (1914), New York Tribune (1915), and The Masses (1917). Barrett Clark describes these early poetic efforts as containing "a great deal that is callow, an occasional touch of vulgarity, and but few signs of any literary gift."<sup>30</sup> The relation between these early poems and the poetic expression in O'Neill's plays is slight. The descriptive term "poet" is frequently applied to O'Neill; Strange Interlude exemplifies his poetic expression. His imaginative and intuitive powers have been demonstrated in connection with his conception of theme and elsewhere. The language of O'Neill's poetic expression, an important dimension of his dramatic art and rhetoric, remains to be considered.

Certain basic metaphors and images in Strange Interlude contribute significantly to the play's rhetorical meaning and effectiveness. Harold Walley has noted that the psychological effect of the metaphorical expression of ideas is to transfer such images bodily from the spoken word into the consciousness of the hearer, linguistic imagery acts as both a

---

<sup>29</sup>Quoted in Quinn, A History of American Drama, II, 199.

<sup>30</sup>Clark, Eugene O'Neill, pp. 64-65.

powerful stimulant upon the imagination of an audience and at the same time supplies it with a ready-made store of mental images."<sup>31</sup> These mental images or metaphorical descriptions are rhetorically effective in that they clarify the ideas of the play and become, as Weller Embler contends, "a statement of identity, that is, a statement of fact."<sup>32</sup> Consequently, man's view of life is determined in large part by the mental images he accepts as factually representative. Certain of these metaphors are particularly fundamental and universal. The personification of God as a male has undoubtedly influenced the depths of Western man's being. O'Neill projected the basic conflict in Strange Interlude--between Puritan and Primitive--in terms of the contrasting metaphors of "God the Father" and "God the Mother." Nina, who represents the Primitive forces, lays the foundations for the conflict that will be the focal point during the remainder of the play:

The mistake began when God was created in a male image. Of course, women would see Him that way, but men should have been gentlemen enough, remembering their mothers, to make God a woman! But the God of Gods--the Boss--has always been a man. That makes life so perverted, and death so unnatural. We should have imagined life as created in the birth-pain of God the Mother. Then we would understand why we, Her children, have inherited pain, for we would know that our life's rhythm beats from Her great heart, torn with the agony of love and birth. And we would feel that death meant reunion with Her, a passing back into Her substance, blood of Her blood again, peace of Her peace! Now wouldn't that be more logical and satisfying than having God a male whose chest thunders with egotism and is too hard for tired heads and thoroughly comfortless? (pp. 524-25)

---

<sup>31</sup>Walley, The Book of the Play, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup>Weller Embler, "Metaphor and Social Belief," Language, Meaning Maturity, ed. S. I. Hayakawa (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953), p. 128.

The repeated allusion to God the Father and God the Mother are an indication of the status of the conflict. The Masculine Deity is hostile to life and happiness. Mrs. Evans, whose life has been one of undeserved sadness, refers to God as "Him" (p. 546). Nina accuses Darrell of having "aided and abetted God the Father in making this mess" (p. 564). And when she triumphantly possesses the sources of her happiness at the climax of the play, Nina knocks on wood "before God the Father hears my happiness!" (p. 616). Nina identifies herself with the Feminine Deity when her maternal instincts are fulfilled in Act V: "I am a mother . . . God is a Mother" (p. 574). From then until the end of the play Nina's reiterated appeals to God the Mother remind the audience of the play's underlying conflict, Puritan at war with Primitive. In the end the Puritan God the Father, symbolized by Marsden, dominates. And the metaphor from which the play takes its name concludes the "war with life" (p. 669): "our lives are merely strange dark interludes in the electrical display of God the Father!" (p. 681).

The schism between the two metaphors (metaphor in this case is as much an object of the persuasion as the means for expression), which symbolizes the basic conflict between Puritan and Primitive, is emphasized through the use of numerous subsidiary contrasting images. The rhetorical function of this imagery is obvious. O'Neill associates pleasing images with the Primitive idea and unpleasant ones with the Puritan, and through equating other relatively neutral images with one side or other of the conflict he has succeeded in giving them connotative values. O'Neill relies heavily upon image-evoking words associated with life and death. Nina's libidinal drives and Primitive theology are characterized in such terms as "life," "health," "love," "happiness," "future," "sensual,"

"living," "birth," "passion," "lust," "youth." Opposed is the Puritanism of Professor Leeds and Marsden, symbolized by words like "dead," "sickness," "insanity," "rot," "mourning," "past," "Dead Languages," "tomb," "numbness," "Funeral," "age." (In this case the reference is often to actual events and hence is more literal than poetic.) The end effect of these repeated poetic associations is clearly important to the play's persuasion.

Important, too, is O'Neill's use of what can be called thermal and chromatic imagery. The Primitive aspects of life are alluded to by the use of terms connotating heat and by warm colors, the Puritan forces, by cold and cool colors. In the most meaningful passages this thermal imagery is mixed with symbolic references to the lateness of the day. Marsden declares:

My life is cool green shade wherein comes no scorching  
zenith sun of passion and possession to wither the heart  
with bitter poisons . . . my life gathers roses, coolly  
crimson, in sheltered gardens, on late afternoons in  
love with evening . . . roses heavy with after-blooming  
of the long day, desiring evening . . . my life is an  
evening . . . Nina is a rose, my rose, exhausted by the  
long, hot day, leaning wearily toward peace . . . (p. 669)

And later he tells Nina:

We'll be married in the afternoon, decidedly. I've already picked out the church, Nina--a gray ivied chapel, full of restful shadow, symbolical of the peace we have found. The crimsons and purples in the windows will stain our faces with faded passion. It must be in the hour before sunset when the earth dreams in afterthoughts and mystic premonitions of life's beauty. (p. 679)

Frequently each of these three types of imagery--those associated with life and death, and thermal and chromatic imagery--is used separately. Nina figuratively describes Marsden as sitting "beside the fierce river, immaculately timid, cool and clothed" (p. 496), and the sanitarium for

crippled soldiers where Nina goes to expiate her guilt is, in Marsden's words, a place of "heat and humidity" (p. 503). "Black" is repeatedly referred to in connection with the Puritan powers in the play. Twice when Nina feels her happiness threatened she uses the term to express her vague fears: "I knew it! . . . Out of a blue sky . . . black! (p. 540), and more explicitly, "Black . . . in the midst of happiness . . . black comes . . . again . . . death . . . my father . . . comes between me and happiness!" (p. 580). (Also, Marsden, who has assumed the Puritan legacy of Professor Leeds, wears black mourning dress in Acts V and VIII.)

O'Neill uses many of the conventional poetic devices based on a similarity in sound: alliteration in such phrases as "Prophetic Professor!" (p. 506), "prurient purity!" (p. 582), and "Sanctum Sanctorum" (p. 486); and assonance in "dreamy drug . . . there's the rub" (p. 487). He suits sound to sense through onomatopoeia in passages like "his voice like a fatiguing dying tune droned on a beggar's organ" (p. 498). More apparent and rhetorically important is O'Neill's employment of apostrophe, epithet, and metaphor. Nina's appeal to her personal deity, "O Mother God, please let me hate him!" (p. 590), and Darrell's anguished cry, "Oh, God, so deaf and dumb and blind! . . . teach me to be resigned to be an atom!" (p. 680) are typical examples of O'Neill's frequent use of apostrophe. Marsden's dialogue in Strange Interlude is more characteristically poetic than that of the other characters. His reference to Nina's "thin body and pale lost face . . . gutted, love-abandoned eyes!" (p. 490) and his allusion to thoughts as "damn pests! . . . mosquitoes of the soul . . . whine, sting, suck one's blood" (p. 534) exemplify O'Neill's abundant use of epithet.

O'Neill's choice of metaphors and the manner in which he uses poetic language as a means for subtly influencing the emotions of the

audience with regard to specific ideas demonstrates the conceptual powers of the poet and the persuasive competence of the rhetorician. When the poetic language substitutes concrete images for otherwise abstract ideas (like God) it strengthens Strange Interlude immeasurably; when it occasionally becomes what Barrett Clark termed "purple patches" and "fine" writing,<sup>33</sup> it defeats the purpose of poetry and impedes communication. O'Neill is often repetitious to the point of redundancy, the poetic sections of dialogue are occasionally disconcerting interludes in the action, the imagery is inclined to be unrelated to any idea or dramatic purpose, and frequently the poetry is self-conscious.<sup>34</sup> This tendency, if it exists, is here not so evident in specific passages as it is in the general impression that the play could have been shorter and that O'Neill's poetic impulse is somehow at fault. Nevertheless, in Strange Interlude it is clear that the poetic language serves to clarify the ideas and stimulate the emotional involvement of the audience.

#### D. Summary

The dramatic form of Strange Interlude is clearly capable of arousing and maintaining audience attention. More significant rhetorically are the qualities and functions of plot, character, and dialogue that are specifically adapted to projecting the ideas of the play.

Plot is the context from which ideas emerge and to which they refer for meaning, and it provides opportunities for the characters to abstract and examine ideas from their experience. The deterministic

---

<sup>33</sup>Clark, Eugene O'Neill, pp. 110 and 116.

<sup>34</sup>See, for example, Flexnor, American Playwrights, p. 277; Gassner, The Theater in Our Times, p. 23; and Engel, The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill, p. 299.



orientation and reasonableness of Strange Interlude's plot emphasize this inherent rhetoric. The conflicts as well as the crises and incidents of the plot have an ideological basis. Furthermore, parts of the plot provide motivation and justification for the consequent actions and ideas of the characters.

Character is a catalytic agent through which ideas implicit in the plot are made explicit for the audience. The characters are, in other words, representatives of ideas and spokesmen for ideas (e.g., Nina's Primitivism, Marsden's and Professor Leeds' Puritanism, and Darrell's and Evans' Scientific-Materialism). This symbolic value of the major characters in Strange Interlude is clearly important to the play's rhetoric. Also, through identifying with the characters, who are particularly associated with the nineteen-twenties, the audience is empathetically involved with issues rising from the plot.

The rhetorical function of dialogue is obvious. However, in addition to its basic explicitness, the dramatic dialogue of the play possesses qualities suited to communicating the meaning of the play to an audience. The interior monologue is both the most striking aspect of Strange Interlude and a dialogue form clearly derived from a theme central to the play, psychoanalysis. The poetic language, especially the basic metaphors of "God the Mother" and "God the Father," is fundamental to the play's effectiveness as a vehicle for ideas. Strange Interlude is persuasively effective because O'Neill was sensitive to his audience and was inventive in the matter of creating an expressive dramatic form.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Critics have tended to overlook the persuasiveness of Eugene O'Neill's poetic expression. If rhetoric be defined as the art of persuading through language, it is apparent that he was in a significant sense a rhetor. Specifically this study has attempted to demonstrate that O'Neill was motivated by a persuasive purpose and that the dramatic forms functioned in such a way as to accommodate the ideas to the audience.

O'Neill's persuasive intent is not at once evident. He avoided publicity and public statements for the most part. His limited commentary about his message is notable for its inarticulateness and obscurity. O'Neill never aligned himself officially with any reform group or movement. Had he associated with some concrete program for social reform, it would undoubtedly have given an impression of greater substance and specificity to his views and thereby increased the recognition of his rhetorical purpose, as it did in the case of Shaw and socialism or Odets and organized labor. He ultimately lost faith in political and economic plans for social improvement and sought to modify the spiritual point of view. O'Neill was oriented toward the individual rather than some hypothetical mass of people. His motives and messages spring from personal realms of being. Thus his persuasive purpose shares with his poetic impulse a biographical and subjective origin.

It is nevertheless clear that he considered his mission a persuasive one. The undeviating and uncompromising manner in which O'Neill approached his task emphasized its seriousness and purposiveness. O'Neill's persuasive intent is most clearly demonstrated in the plays themselves, and here Strange Interlude is especially representative. The idea content is manifest. Further, the ideas are important to the dramatic experience, an integral part of the action and conflict. The themes are not simply issues suggested by the particularities of situation but are ideas that recur throughout O'Neill's career. The presence of an implicit philosophic pattern that organizes the specific themes into a coherent whole suggests the significance of the idea content. And the contemporaneity of his themes emphatically demonstrates O'Neill's persuasive purpose.

This study was concerned with those aspects of the themes which can be abstracted by the audience from the immediate context of Strange Interlude and can presumably influence their attitudes and behavior. Strange Interlude is significant by comparison with O'Neill's other work for the insights it provides into the underlying unity of the more specifically contemporary themes. O'Neill is most immediately conscious of "the sickness of today," a suffering produced by internal tension and external disorientation. The ultimate cause of this condition is discoverable in man's racial development. The natural harmony of the Primitive Stage is gradually replaced by the self-consciousness of the Puritan Stage. Modern man, entering the Scientific-Materialistic Stage, is beyond the solace of either Primitive innocence or Puritan pride. Aware that the earlier two stages are incompatible, he is beset by unrelenting tension and suffering.

Strange Interlude derives a particular rhetorical significance

from its contemporaneity. This play was largely responsible for O'Neill's reputation as a major literary popularizer of psychoanalytic thought. It embodies one of his most virulent attacks upon the illusion of Puritanism. In the course of the play hedonism, the most characteristic value system of the decade, is exposed as a deceptively simple formula. O'Neill critically examines a series of dominant images of the nineteen-twenties and their social implications. He condemns a hero worship that was rampant and irrational. He portrays the businessman as brash and insensitive and the business ideal as a perverting influence. O'Neill is skeptical of the scientist and his approach to human problems. And he objects to another false prophet of the decade, the artist dilettante.

The assumption that Strange Interlude contains ideas which are successfully transferred to the audience suggests that dramatic form per se is "one of the available means of persuasion." Drama is an effective device for arousing and maintaining audience attention. In Strange Interlude certain specific dramatic elements are utilized to achieve particular rhetorical ends. Plot is the context from which ideas emerge and to which they refer for meaning, and it provides opportunities for the characters to abstract and examine ideas from the context of their experience. For instance, Nina's traumatic experience and subsequent neurosis explain her departure from the ethical norm and invite Darrell's psychoanalytic interpretation of her condition. The deterministic orientation and reasonableness, or rational acceptability, of Strange Interlude's plot emphasizes this inherent rhetoric. The conflict as well as the crises and incidents of the plot have an ideological basis and undoubtedly influence audience attitudes. The fundamental conflict, for example, is a

theological clash of Primitive and Puritan. Also, circumstances create a dilemma for Nina which demonstrates the unreasonableness of an absolute system of ethics; she must commit adultery in order to save her husband or remain loyal and be responsible for his ruin.

Character is the symbolic vehicle through which ideas implicit in the plot are made explicit for the audience. The characters are, in other words, representative of ideas and spokesmen for ideas. This symbolic value of each of the major characters in Strange Interlude--Nina's Primitivism, Marsden and Leeds's Puritanism, Darrell and Evans' Scientific-Materialism--is clearly important to the play's rhetoric.

The rhetorical function of dialogue is obvious. The dialogue of Strange Interlude possesses qualities suited to communicating the intellectual meaning of the play to an audience. The interior monologue is both the most striking aspect of Strange Interlude and a form of dialogue clearly derived from a theme central to the play, psychoanalysis. The poetic language also influences the play's effectiveness as a vehicle for ideas, especially the metaphors "God the Mother" and "God the Father." On the basis of this study of the play's rich idea content and imaginatively appropriate forms of expression, it must be concluded that O'Neill attained a high degree of persuasion in Strange Interlude.

This study has several implications for the relation which exists between the arts of rhetoric and drama. It clearly demonstrates that some plays are not only documents of social history but inevitably a means of influencing thought and behavior. In the case of many playwrights this may take the form of active persuasion, contributing and modifying ideas; with others, such as O'Neill, the rhetorical purpose is not so primary. At the very least, however, all drama exerts a form of tacit persuasion

and has some effect upon manners and customs. The nature and degree of this influence cannot be known. All that the critic can do is observe what ideas are present in the play, estimate the forcefulness of their expression, and suggest certain parallels that appear to exist between the drama and its immediate social scene.

Drama by its very nature possesses rhetorical qualities. The poetic and rhetorical functions of language, if elsewhere separable, are certainly fused in the case of drama and, hence, are not antagonistic. Both are developed simultaneously. It is when they become dissociated that the persuasive motives of the playwright appear as inharmonious ingredients. Critics frequently attribute the failure of such a play to its persuasive purposes, when in fact it is the lack of dramatic skill rather than the rhetorical intent that is to blame.

The management of ideas is much different in drama than in other forms of rhetorical discourse, such as deliberative oratory. Conflict is necessary in drama. And here the conflict of ideas, rather than, as in oratory, traditional forms of proof is emphasized. The playwright can deal with a problem without proposing a definite solution, while the orator commonly defends an alternative or presents a plan of action. This does not mean to suggest that the playwright can come to no such clearly defined conclusion. In fact, if O'Neill falters as a rhetorician, it is in the matter of proposing a solution. His pessimistic conclusion that the larger problem confronting man has no solution is a tribute to his awareness of the complexities of the questions of the age, but excludes him from the list of rhetorical dramatists like Shaw, Rice, Lawson, and Odets, whose agitation for social reform leads to a more definite program. O'Neill proposes, as an alternative, that the futile quest for fulfillment

and expiation is an ennobling struggle. Even so, an aura of negation clouds many of the positive implications of his social criticism.

Associated with this indirect approach to the support of ideas in drama (and imaginative literature generally), as opposed to the more direct approach typical of most rhetorical discourse, is the obvious fact that a play, because it is not popularly linked with partisan activity, is often more forceful rhetoric than public address. Expecting to be interested and desiring to become intimately involved with the play to the point of identifying with the characters, and confronted by conflicting ideas tied closely to character and plot, an audience is in a far better psychological state to be persuaded than in most situations where social ideas are being advocated or attacked. What drama lacks in rhetorical efficiency by its indirectness it often compensates for by its subtlety.

An obvious implication for rhetoric is that its function and to some extent its methods are not confined to public address. On the most basic level, any user of language is in varying degrees a rhetor. On a more specific plane, while oratory may have once been the major device for persuasion, it is no longer. Probably the most potent rhetorical instrument in modern society is the advertising or publicity campaign. Several other media, including drama, are on occasion more effective than oratory. It follows that the critical standards associated with rhetoric can be applied to any verbal enterprise that evinces a persuasive purpose. This study has demonstrated that Eugene O'Neill's Strange Interlude exhibits a rhetorical intent and is clearly marked by a commentary directed at the nineteen-twenties.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Plays

- O'Neill, Eugene. Dynamo. New York: Horace Liveright, 1929.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Long Day's Journey Into Night. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1956.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill. New York: Random House, n.d.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Plays of Eugene O'Neill. New York: Random House, n.d.

### Books

- Allen, Frederick Lewis. Only Yesterday. New York: Harper and Bros., 1931.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Big Change. New York: Harper and Bros., 1931.
- Archer, William. Playmaking. New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1942.
- Aristotle. Poetics. Translated with an introduction and notes by S. H. Butcher. New York: Dover Publications, 1951.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Rhetoric. Translated with an introduction and notes by Richard C. Jebb. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909.
- Baker, George Pierce. Dramatic Technique. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1919.
- Barton, Bruce. The Man Nobody Knows. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925.
- Block, Anita. The Changing World in Plays and Theater. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1939.
- Bridges-Adams, W. Looking at a Play. London: Phoenix House, 1947.
- Burke, Kenneth. A Rhetoric of Motives. New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1950.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Philosophy of Literary Form. Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1941.



- Cargill, Oscar. Intellectual America: Ideas on the March. New York: Macmillan, 1941.
- Clark, Barrett H. Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays. New York: Dover Publications, 1947.
- Eliot, T. S. The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952.
- Engel, Edwin A. The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933.
- European Theories of the Drama. Edited by Barrett H. Clark. New York: Crown Publishers, 1947.
- Falk, Doris V. Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1958.
- Flexnor, Eleanor. American Playwrights: 1918-1938. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938.
- Freedley, George, and Reeves, John A. A History of the Theater. New York: Crown Publishers, 1941.
- Freud, Sigmund. New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1933.
- Fromm, Erich. Man for Himself. New York: Rinehart and Co., 1947.
- Gassner, John. The Theater In Our Times. New York: Crown Publishers, 1954.
- Hoffman, Frederick J. Freudianism and the Literary Mind. Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1957.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade. New York: Viking Press, 1955.
- Krutch, Joseph Wood. The American Drama Since 1918. New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1957.
- Language, Meaning and Maturity, Edited by S. I. Hayakawa. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953.
- Levin, Harry, James Joyce. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions Books, 1941.
- Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden. Edited by Allan H. Gilbert. New York: American Book Co., 1940.
- Literary Criticism: Pope to Croce. Edited by G. W. Allen and H. H. Clark. New York: American Book Co., 1941.

- Mantel, Burns. American Playwrights of Today. New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1929.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Best Plays of 1927-1928. New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1928.
- Matthews, Brander. A Study of Drama. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910.
- Mullahy, Patrick. Oedipus, Myth and Complex: A Review of Psychoanalytic Theory. New York: Hermitage Press, 1952.
- Nathan, George J. The Intimate Notebooks of George Jean Nathan. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932.
- O'Hara, F. H., and Bro, M. H. Invitation to the Theater. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951.
- Quinn, Arthur Hobson. A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day. New York: F. S. Crofts and Co., 1945.
- Robinson, Henry M. Fantastic Interim. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1943.
- Sanborn, Ralph, and Clark, Barrett H. A Bibliography of the Works of Eugene O'Neill. New York: Random House, 1931.
- Sappenfield, Bert R. Personality Dynamics. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954.
- Sievers, W. David. Freud on Broadway. New York: Hermitage House, 1955.
- Skinner, Richard Dana. Eugene O'Neill, A Poet's Quest. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1935.
- Sullivan, Mark. Our Times: The Twenties. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935.
- Thonssen, Lester, and Baird, A. Craig. Speech Criticism. New York: Ronald Press, 1948.
- Walley, Harold R. The Book of the Play. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950.
- Wellek, Rene, and Warren, Austin. Theory of Literature. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1942.
- Winther, Sophus Keith. Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study. New York: Random House, 1934.
- Wish, Harvey. Society and Thought in Modern America, Vol. II. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1952.
- Woodworth, Robert S. Contemporary Schools of Psychology. New York: Ronald Press, 1948.

Young, Kimball. Social Psychology. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1944.

#### Articles

Alexander, Doris. "Strange Interlude and Schopenhauer," American Literature, XXV (May, 1953), 213-28.

Basso, Hamilton. "The Tragic Sense," New Yorker, (February 28, 1948), pp. 34-45.

Bryant, Donald C. "Rhetoric: Its Functions and Its Scope," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXIX (December, 1953), 401-24.

Frye, Roland M. "Rhetoric and Poetry in Julius Caesar," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXVII (February, 1951), 41-48.

Grube, G. M. A. "Rhetoric and Literary Criticism," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLII (December, 1956), 339-44.

Howell, W. S. "Literature as an Enterprise in Communication," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXIII (December, 1947), 417-26.

Hudson, Hoyt. "The Field of Rhetoric," Quarterly Journal of Speech, IX (April, 1923), 143-54.

Hunt, Evertt Lee. "Rhetoric and Literary Criticism," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXI (December, 1956), 564-68.

Nethercott, Arthur H. "O'Neill and Freudianism," Saturday Review of Literature, (May 28, 1932), pp. 759-60.

Sayler, Oliver M. "The Real Eugene O'Neill," Century Magazine, CIII (January, 1922), 350-54.

Scanlan, Ross. "Rhetoric and the Drama," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXII (December, 1936), 635-42.

Simpson, George Gaylord. "Views of Life," Time, (January 11, 1960), p. 30.

#### Unpublished Material

Miller, Jordan Yale. "A Critical Bibliography of Eugene O'Neill." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1957.