

“DARKER BROTHER” IN STAGE-CENTER: EUGENE O’NEILL’S QUEST FOR
RACIAL EQUITY IN THREE DECADES (1913-1939) OF AMERICAN DRAMA

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Abstract

Eugene O’Neill, a major American playwright, initiated an inquest in the early days of modernism into the ethnic disparity existing in America with an *avant-garde* approach that in fact included some “historicized bodies” *per se* on stage to dip into America’s most guilt-ridden snag: the treatment of Black by the White America during post-Emancipation US where slavery had long been outlawed and citizenship granted to Blacks so that they could be equated as “Americans.” O’Neill bloomed as America’s foremost dramatist during the first quarter of twentieth century, earmarked in history pages as the most riotous years of racial violence when hundreds of Blacks were killed in mob lynching organized by KKK, in fights with White supremacists, and in shoot-outs with police. He included in his canvas the plight of Blacks in the turbulent twenties, and is credited by critics and academics today for being the first among White authors to deal with the subject which is considered an outstandingly distinct feature for American cultural life.

Eugene O’Neill presents a sensibly realistic picture of what it had been like to be Black in the first three decades of twentieth century in White America, which was at that time seriously affected by the “most lethal virus” called “racism.” His early *One-Acters*, *Thirst* (1913), *The Dreamy Kid* (1918) and *The Emperor Jones* (1920),

demonstrate his knowledge, understanding, and insight into the complexities of the ethnic strife in America. Likewise, his longer, craftier, and canonical plays, *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1923) and *The Iceman Cometh* (1939), showcase characters busy in staving off the double-jeopardy of internalized racism and slashed identity towards achieving true recognition and racial equity. O'Neill's ideas for Black plays, "Honest Honey Boy" (1921), "Bantu Boy" (1927) and "Runaway Slave" (1927), dig up the issue of Blacks' deplorable three hundred years' long existence in America—from their earlier forced uprooting from Africa, through slavery era's dehumanizing oppression, to their new-fangled struggle in modern Prohibition period. These five produced and three conceived but not completed plays form the basis of this thesis and seeks to delve deep into the crux of O'Neill's idea *élan* for racial equality in the United States.

O'Neill's effort to depict the "Negro" as equal to the "White" indeed realistically proved a risky dramatic adventure in the 1920s when racial prejudice against African Americans ran so high that he and his family members were under mortal threats on numerous occasions by the militantly racist group KKK. However, O'Neill was able to develop an "authentic Negro character" for the American stage in an era marked by minstrelsy in theater and Sambo images in narratives—the straightjackets of the "cultural swamp" of White literary imagination.

The five dramas and the ideas for three plays, which this current research focuses on, literally span the entire period of O'Neill's creative years of three decades, and a close look at them will not only bring forth some key aspects of O'Neill's evolution as a foremost playwright of American drama but also the fruition of various modes of racism—scientific, institutional, cultural, and structural—in America that virtually crippled the postbellum modern Blacks who, after migrating to

the ghettos of New York from South at the turn of twentieth century, found themselves on the tightrope of fresh economic, social, and political survival.

O'Neill's interest in "darker brother," their struggles, and the African history seem to radiate from, as this dissertation would probe, his and his parents' own experience of deprivation and discrimination as descendants of Irish immigrants by the snooty Yankee New Londoners. Yet the inevitable "nigger"- "Irish nigger" synthesis can barely be ignored because American history shows both the Africans and the Irish arrived in US as slaves and laborers having been ousted from their respective native lands under duress.

Nonetheless, the casting off by the New Englanders triggered a minority's frustration in O'Neill's memory, troubling him life-long. This helped him form rundown, embittered images on stage through whom he tried to figure out and question how, under a so-called land of democracy, some ethnic groups suffer only because they are migrants, have different pigmentations and accents, even though they are qualitatively equal or superior to majority Whites. O'Neill was critical of such "tyranny of majority," and he condemned his country's greed, pride, and racial intolerance, for he felt it was eating deep into and pulverizing the very fabric of democracy. O'Neill's nameless Mulatto Sailor, street goon Abe, kleptomaniac statesman Jones, unemployed graduate Jim, and fallen businessman Joe—all go through the enigmatic phases of both desirable and "undesirable desires," and though they end up utterly frustrated, since the White societal values treat them as outcasts and outsiders, ask for their fair share in life.