Chapter One

Racial Encounters and Concerns in Eugene O'Neill's Plays

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill (1888-1953) came to Greenwich Village in the fall of 1915 and started experimenting with realistic and expressionistic plays at a time when the cultural imagination of American theater represented binary grasps on matters of African Americans. On general level, minstrelsy facilitated the Whites with the ability to fantasize about the Blacks as they wanted or wished; and on academic level, there existed a state of denial about Blacks for which they were not used as impact-figures in literary scenes of white authors. Thus, O'Neill required a major shift—in context, theory, and technique—to first curve a black character out of slavery-era's slashed identity and postbellum era's minstrel make-ups and then to bring home his message of racial equity for them. The playwright, who had some Black companions as hangouts, just looked at Lower Manhattan despite being harshly criticized later by influential contemporary critic Francis Ferguson for selecting Harlem as setting (Cargill 271-82), for solution and for forging plots of his Black plays, and depicted "faithfully" (Shaughnessy "O'Neill's African and Irish Americans" 149-54) their plights, dilemmas, ambitions, and frustrations.

Van Wyck Brooks and Doris Abrahamson, in their respective seminal works, *The Confident Years: 1885-1915* and *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre 1925-1959*, contend that, besides Black intellectual WEB Du Bois and literati Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, O'Neill was another figure of the first two decades of twentieth century who fully understood Harlem impulses, currents, and concerns. Brooks even goes far to devote a chapter to black intellectual life titled

"Eugene O'Neill: Harlem," regards the playwright as "a major spokesman of it," lauds his "imaginative grasp of contemporary lives," and further adds, "In certain of his plays he stacked the cards against the will by choosing people who were defeated at the outset to write of, dehumanized, disinherited people in slums or on barren farms who were born devoid of every higher impulse" (551 and 553).

It is important to note that Du Bois' famous claim in 1903 wide-opened the fact that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of color line" (*The Souls* 1). O'Neill's plays on Black issues were some of the earliest to address the problems of Blacks at the turn of twentieth century. When Blacks were not even allowed to appear on stage as co-performers with White actors, simply because the white editors or publishers wanted "Uncle Toms, Topsies, good 'darkies' and clowns" (Du Bois "Criteria of Negro Art" 978-985), O'Neill broke such racist jinx and discriminatory convention to emerge as "the first serious American dramatist of any standing to bring characters from all walks of life on the stage noting their origins or race and background with sympathy and understanding" (Gassner 17). Endorsing this courageous contribution of the playwright in American theater and drama, another critic declares: "it was not until Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920), that the Negro became the central protagonist of a drama" (Bigsby *Confrontation and Commitment* 116). Thus, it becomes crystal clear that while portraying black experience on stage to delve into and then dig up the issue of racial justice, O'Neill's objective was fraught with a challenge of developing authentic, realistic or true-to-life characters still unavailable and yet undetermined on stage.

O'Neill's leading critics and scholars, namely Bogard, Bigsby, Engel, Chotia, Ranald, and Manheim implicitly or explicitly commented that O'Neill's characters, either in lesser or in larger degree, conformed to stereotypes. But Pfister, recently in

his *Staging Depth*, contended that O'Neill was actually drawing upon and maneuvering various Irish and Black images from cartoons, paper cuttings, and word-of-mouth legends for his ethnic portrayals, and thus Pfister debunked the fact that the playwright's characters were in fact not giving off antebellum *dejavu* as the earlier critics assumed. He even added a photograph in his book from Yale University's collections showing O'Neill sitting among collected African masks which, according to Pfister, signifies and accentuates the playwright's "deep" thematic concerns with "racism and imperialism" (131). On the other hand, O'Neill's leading biographers and scholars, Sheaffer, Gelbs, and Black among others, cited the issue of playwright's association and socializing with blacks in the 1910s and particularly very close friendship with Joe Smith as the major source and inspiration for themes in black plays. Of late, however, scholars like Floyd and Diggins started taking note, after similar psychoanalytical researches like Pfister, of the intensity of challenges that enveloped O'Neill in 1920s to virtually create black characters particularly suited for stage purpose. Like Pfister and Black, both Floyd and Diggins conceded to the verity that O'Neill's black characters complied with the Black Renaissance ethos of Jazz Age, much to the satisfaction of black intellectual Du Bois and Harlem artist Langston Hughes. Even highly-admired modernist like TS Eliot or a leading Shakespearean scholar of today, Normand Berlin found in O'Neill's black leads moments of rare tragic concentration, grace, and originality of Macbeth and Othello.

Scholars and historians over the years, for instance, Nathan Irvin Huggins, in his fourth chapter of *Harlem Renaissance* titled "Art: The Black Identity" (137-189), Kadiatu Kenneh in the fourth part of his *African Identities: Race, Nation and Culture in Ethnography, Pan Africanism and Black Literature* titled "Crossing Borders: Race, Sexuality and the Body" (136-190), and JP Diggins in chapter seven of his *Eugene*

O'Neill's America: Desire Under Democracy titled "Is you a nigger, Nigger?" (137-156), endeavored to demonstrate how the crises and evolvement of black identity confronted the authors of fiction and poetry in the 1920s. They analyzed the works of poets, dramatists, and novelists writing in the first three decades of twentieth century and explored the comments of contemporary critics and scholars who undertook the difficult task of finding a genuine black portrait in the literary works. Likewise, some recent critics, for example, Carla Kaplan, Eric Lott, or Paul Carter Harrison further probed various aspects of white hegemonic domination that helped establish a complex order of incongruous racial politics.

Huggins feels that the Black, over the centuries, already dropped his old life styles, mannerisms, language, etc. to fit into American business institution of slavery, and thus lost his ethnic link with the past to even "imagine a place where his history begun." On one hand, a Black man's stereotyped projection as a lazy, slovenly, sensual, and a passive human, and at best Uncle Tom-like puritan-bred moral exposure not only put him in direct contrast with the "protestant ethics" and hence left him out of the progress-trend; and on the other hand, American racism denied him the access to American Dream as he was overburdened, after moving to north, with the problems of unemployment and housing restriction. To curve out a suitable and sustainable identity under such cultural and social contexts obviously needed a spirited endeavor. When Booker T Washington and WEB Du Bois with their respective discourses, *Up From Slavery* (1901) and *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), were emphasizing the "collectivity of race" which stood in contrast with Garveyan "segregated future" and urged the blacks to bank upon "bed-rock virtues of America—frugality, industry, temperance, competition," America, at the same point of time, saw racism "formalized—as a fact of American life." Propelled further by

White supremacist writers, such as Lothrop Stoddard, Earnest Sevier Cox, and Madison Grant, who asserted the necessity of white racial purity and dominance, echoing the turn-of-the-century beliefs with eugenic science, KKK's popularity increased with lynching and murdering mania.

Among the Harlem writers, according to Huggins and Kenneh, there prevailed different currents. Pan-Africanist philosopher EW Blyden's and politician Marcus Garvey's influence was felt upon Countee Cullen and Claude McKay who romanticized the primitive Africa. Premier novelists Nella Larsen, James Weldon Johnson, and afterwards Ralph Ellison, however, were exploring the White and Black worlds to try to figure out a link (Huggins 188-89; Kenneh 64-66). This corresponded to Du Bois' racial signifier of "veil" which he construed as standing like the "shadow" and hence a Black should "desire to tear down that veil, to creep through" (*The Souls 214*) that inevitably would bring the latter the recognition and thus solve the enigma of "double consciousness" stemming out of his troubling double existence as a Black and an American. The "veil" perplexes Ralph Ellison's nameless black narrator living in an underground "hole" in New York City almost fifty years later:

> And I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding. (*Invisible Man* 34)

Du Bois' philosophy also echoes in Hughes in a more positive note as the latter, like Du Bois, believed in grinding out Black's future exclusively in America where Africa would be merely a source of inspiration as he once claimed:

> I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro—who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of

> Africa—but I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem. (qtd. in Huggins 179)

O'Neill's plays seem to have conformed to both Du Bois' and Hughes' takes on identity issue. His black protagonists are mired into the "crisis of recognition" (Diggins 142) and give their best shots to merge into American mainstream. Like Du Bois and Hughes, O'Neill was also a sympathizer of the Blacks and the three shared a common bond with and had mutual respect towards each other. In a letter written to Du Bois in April 1924, O'Neill described himself "as one whose own ancestors struggled against intolerance and prejudice" (Halfmann 33). Later when O'Neill was criticized all over America for *All God's Chillun Got Wings* that hit the newsstands, Du Bois came forward to defend the playwright highly-praising him as "bursting through" racial prejudice (Duberman 65-66). In a letter, Langston Hughes also lauded O'Neill's black portrayals. Hughes appreciated "the beauty" O'Neill bestowed upon the blacks in his plays (Rampersad 283).

In line with the above context, the study deals with some selected plays of Eugene O'Neill from the perspective of Harlem Renaissance ethos of 1920s. Further, in order to develop a pattern for theorizing the discourse, recent body of criticisms will be consulted to enable an understanding which so far has been not reached at. On socio-cultural contexts, primarily Patterson's, Roediger's, Barkan's, Nash's, Jones', Jordans's, Fredrickson's, Eleazar's, Dittes', Conrad's, and Binder's seminal works will outline the conceptual foundation of this paper. Yet the discussion will not necessarily confine itself within ontological cultural discourses of Bhaba, Said, and Gilroy. However, since the research involves rigorous empirical approach, probing deep into Black race's continuous drudgery to be elevated to American mainstream, therefore, throughout the discourse, a historical-political dimension has been waged

into discussion where mainly Abrahamson, Aptheker, Blauner, Franklin, Starr, May, McSorley, Nash, Chalmers, Quarles, and Walker would serve to provide both the "root" and the "route" of Black existence in America.

Further, to be in tune with the latest pattern of theory and criticism of the ongoing decade, a new channel of thought would be initiated between Galtung's view of the "triangle of violence" and During's drawing upon racial identity that focuses on "western racism."[1] Black characters in O'Neill's plays suffer both from "visible" or "direct violence" and "invisible" or "cultural and structural violence" where "direct violence reinforces structural and cultural violence" (Galtung). The root of such violence was to enforce hegemony, to fulfill certain "ideological needs" (163) of the dominant group which During explains by drawing a link between Darwinism and scientific racism which later evolved into institutionalized and cultural racism in America that Barkan and Roediger explained to a large extent in their seminal works during 1990s.

O'Neill's coming-of-age black ghetto youths stand perplexed, quite in tune with the Harlem Renaissance anxieties expressed by many the then Black intellectuals, upon crossroads: whether they should tag along the three-century long African culture of community and succor or follow the American one of individualism and strife. In fact, the century began with leading Black intellectual Du Bois' presaging through *The Souls of Black Folk* that the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" would what canonize the race's desire in twentieth century America with an implication that by being "both a Negro and an American" the Black would ask that that the "doors of Opportunity" (2-3) be open before him as equally as to a White American. Most of O'Neill's Black characters (Abe, Jones, Jim, and Joe) gaze at themselves "through the eyes of others." While

they go after white values by abandoning their cultural commitments, their past memory drives them like a bloodhound and conjures up lowly self-hatred. Nonetheless, a lone female character, Hattie, looms large over entire O'Neill canon who not only symbolizes the ethic group's pride by achieving success and recognition under the worst possible phase of modern America's contour of racial oppression but also stands for feminism's strong imprint, the legacy of which inspired many later playwrights like Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson.

Yet the "white quality" which O'Neill's male protagonists adhere to, still leave them out of the societal equation since the conventional standards and dogmas were built for White's success only where the Balck stands as an outsider or pariah. O'Neill goes back to history ("Bantu Boy" and "Runaway Slave") and exhumes that the original sin committed by the country's forefathers by involving themselves in flesh-trading thus considering the Black as a product, a "black ivory," is the sole reason behind White America's inability to treat him as a human being, an equal partner in everyday life. This falsehood and hypocrisy, according to the playwright, is breeding further through racial intolerance, creating hatred and disharmony between the races, and leaving them mentally and psychologically alienated. The solution O'Neill seems to find is in implementing what had already been granted to the Black race through the American Constitution. Behind the demeanor of a Black Irishman, O'Neill seems to have equated himself to what Israel Zangwill, a Jewish-American playwright of the twenties, claimed about the great "Melting-Pot" situation that America promises: "What is the glory of Rome and Jerusalem where all nations and races come to worship and look back, compared with the glory of America, where all races and nations come to labor and look forward" (185)! O'Neill wanted White

America to “look forward” in the true sense of the word by living up to its pledge and treating members of Black race equally.

To delve deep into the *raison d'être* behind such deportment and stand of the playwright particularly on the matter of racial equity, there can be found certain crucial forces and factors which seem to have wrought O’Neill’s racial consciousness and some of these were historical, sociological, political, and experimental. In 1946, the playwright told his son Eugene Jr. that “the one thing that explains more than anything about me is the fact that I’m Irish and strangely enough it is something writers who have attempted to explain me and my work have overlooked” (Bowen 64). He often referred that his surname in Gaelic meant “champion,” and in a letter written to novelist James T Farrell, he mentioned that he was well apprised of the versions of Irish history and particularly the one *The Great O’Neill* by Sean O’Faolain about the legendary O’Neill who ruled the northern Ulster during the time of Elizabeth I (Bogard and Bryer 545 and 569). His *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, a tableau chronicling a migrated (Irish) family’s daily life led on American soil at the turn of the twentieth century, shows, as per stage description, a bookcase comprising of, among other books, “several histories of Ireland” which have been “read and reread” (1.717). Though he never visited the land of his forefathers, according to Arthur and Barbara Gelb, his top autobiographers, he read volumes of Irish history “in his youth” and “was proud over performances by visiting Irish players and felt himself to be all ‘Irish’” (527). All these incontrovertibly suggest that his being an Irish American had a substantial and lasting effect on his work. The fact of the matter is that the dramatist was deeply haunted by the memory of the discrimination his forebears endured in Ireland at the hands of the English and by the social ostracism he and his parents experienced in the hometown of New London from snobbish Yankee

New Englanders. This inveterate racial bias and prejudice of the English against the Irish, and the unremitting rejection and snobbery of the Americans buoyed by the so-called Weberian "protestant ethics" towards the immigrants, led O'Neill to identify throughout his life with the outcasts and victims of injustice.

Notably, the Irish and the Blacks shared a common bond in fate in ceaseless fighting against the authority for being discriminated and deprived in native countries and treated as slaves in America. After migrating to US to escape starvation resulted from potato famine in the middle of nineteenth century, the Irish, vying for jobs in Southern plantations came to be called as "Irish niggers" (Roediger 88) and later the Congress seriously debated upon staving off the influx of the Irish terming them as the most "degenerate" and defective of all "races" (Barkan 199-200). Thus, both "races" of "niggers" have been denied political or democratic liberty in their respective home countries—the Irish starved in famine, suffered from penal laws, got evicted from their land by an indifferent and hostile English monarchy, and the Africans were forced into slave ships by their clan-lords—arrived in the US as slaves, already sold or just to be sold. Both blue color workers carried "an internalized racist stereotype" in them, and for the Irish, who were never actually purchased as slaves, a dread of double onus always choked the psyche: "the fear that to be Irish is to be black and to be black is to be subhuman" (O'Toole). Yank in *The Hairy Ape* and Colonel Melody in *A Touch of the Poet* carry this sense of *dejavu* that lead them to both physical and psychological stripteases.

However, by acquainting himself with the history of Ireland, by interacting with several Irish immigrants, and by first-hand tales from his father about the hardship and despicable treatment the Irish people received in the hands of the British, O'Neill developed a strong antipathy towards them. Irishman's bitter experience

under the English rule had in fact never been a mystery but a proven verity to the playwright as the stage description of *Long Day's Journey into Night* reveals the bookshelf of O'Neill household contained George Bernard Shaw's works (1.717). The senior O'Neill's avatar James Tyrone in the play is as similar a tightwad, rags-to-reaches modern mythical Irish figure dedicated to property buying spree crying poorhouse due to be haunted by poverty and starvation in the past as is Shaw's senior Hector Malone in *Man and Superman*. Interestingly, both James O'Neill and Hector Malone shared a common background story and the latter caps it all when he alleges England of intentionally inflicting famine on Ireland and gives a sad picture of family's forced emigration in 1947 as he answers to Violet's query whether he moved to US due to famine:

> No, the starvation. When a country is full o food, and exporting it, there can be no famine. Me father was starved dead; and I was starved out to America in me mother's arms. English rule drove me and mine out of Ireland. (4.184)

This well summarizes an Irishman's suffering of political ostracism and discrimination at a base level. Fintan O'Toole in his article "What Haunted Eugene O'Neill" published in *New York Review of Books* on 7 November 2007, recounts that during the famine, which Malone considers England deliberately did not help Irish out by supplying food, wiped out a significant amount of population. He picks up, for example, James O'Neill's birthplace, the County Kilkenny, to show how deaths took tool on the Irish:

> In 1841, the population of the County Kilkenny was 202,400. In 1861 it was 124, 500. Between 1845 and 1850—the first five years of James O'Neill's life—there were 27,000 deaths in the county. Those who

> survived usually did so by emigrating, as the O'Neill family did in 1851, bringing with them memories that could not be well expressed in the American artistic world that James O'Neill would inhibit as a leading actor and his son Eugene as the virtual inventor of its serious drama. (O'Toole)

In fact, Irish people had always been "outsiders even in their own ancestral home" and constantly "opposed the authority and the society of their English overlords" (Carpenter 25). Consequently, because of his deep-rooted love for the land of his ancestors, O'Neill took their years of suffering and alienation to heart. Sean O'Casey, one of the great Irish writers, was overwhelmed by O'Neill's "American soul" and contended that the playwright possesses "not only the touch of poet, but also the touch of an Irishman" (Josephson 95). O'Casey further affirmed, conforming to the view of critic George Jean Nathan, that O'Neill had "surpassed him and George Bernard Shaw in plumbing the depths of human emotion" (Diggins 19). Also, many critics and historians testified and endorsed that O'Neill was intensely proud of his Irish lineage; one of them commented that the playwright on occasions loved to state that "only Irish blood flowed in his veins and he identified strongly with the American Irish," and as a result of which, O'Neill, caringly as well as keenly "took to heart [Irishmen's] errors and failings, exposing and attacking them in his plays" (Shannon 260).

While O'Neill was quite bitter and disappointed with the English because of what they did to Irish people, his racial consciousness however was heightened by the rejection and ostracism of Irish immigrants by Yankee New Englanders. As statistics shows, beginning in 1820, of the nineteen million immigrants who entered the United States in less than a hundred years, nearly one quarter were Irish. The figures shot up

after the famine struck in the forties and particularly during the immediate post-famine years: "The all time peak was reached in 1851 when about 216,000 came" (Shannon 28). James O'Neill, the playwright's father, was six when he immigrated to the United States with his parents wearing "red flannel 'skirties'" (Gelbs *Life with Monte Christo* 35). A description befitting the term "Irish nigger," Mary Tyrone, in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, tells her son Edmund about his father's ordeal as a boy: "Your father is a strange man, Edmund … You must try to understand and forgive him, too … His father deserted his mother and their six children a year or so after they came to America … Your father had to go to work in a machine shop when he was only ten years old" (3.786-787).

Worse still, the Irish immigrants were not at all welcomed in the New World: the European Protestants and English Puritans had colonial and religious hatred and antagonism towards them. They were not liked due to their drinking habits, brogues, and were not considered human enough to be socialized with and hence had troubles in housing and in other similar social activities. All these gave them a sense of rootlessness, frustration, and they saw their fate in America posing a parallel predicament as it had been in Ireland.

The English people who left the British Isles for the New World carried with them their endemic hatred of the Irish and when the Irish came here as immigrants, the old hatred surfaced. Carl Wittke narrates that Massachusetts' puritans were opposed to "Irish immigrants," and that the famous preacher, Cotton Mather, in a sermon as early as in 1700, denounced proposals to bring "Irish" to the colony as these would be tantamount to "formidable attempts of Satan and his sons to unsettle [the settlers]." The colonial Irish were generally branded as contentious, turbulent and

completely pugnacious; “whisky was an essential of their social life … and they were frequently charged with intemperance” (Wittke vii).

Although the Irish immigrants spoke English, they spoke with a different accent, i.e., the Irish brogue. Getting rid of the brogue posed the toughest challenge to be assimilated into American mainstream, and this is clearly evident in James Tyrone’s and Con Melody’s cases. In fact, from the outset, the Irish had the consciousness of not belonging to and the sense of alienation from American society. O’Neill remembered them and other victimized and discriminated minorities when he later sympathized more completely with “the hairy ape,” who could never “belong” to American society and “who embodied the psychology of the eternal outsider—of Irishmen and Negro alike” (Carpenter 24).

The Irishman’s staunch adherence to Roman Catholicism, and hence his allegiance to Pope, continued to irritate Anglo-Saxon Yankees who resented the papacy. Irish historian William V Shannon attests that when the Maryland legislature in 1704 levied a head tax on indentured servants from Ireland, the act expressly stated in its preamble that the purpose of the tax was “to prevent the importing of too great a number of Irish papists” (29). To demonstrate their hatred for the Irish and their religion, a Nativist mob burned a convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts in 1834; another mob sacked a Catholic church in Philadelphia in 1844. Yankee employers everywhere in the seaboard cities published advertisements, “No Irish Need Apply” (40). In general, for more than five decades the relationship between the New England Yankees and the Irish was hostile.

O’Neill was able to perceive the psychologically destructive effect of racial injustice and alienation as he grew up seeing his family members including himself undergo its agony. It is said that success, fame, and money constitute a positive

passport to acceptance and respect; yet it did not work to earn social recognition for either James or Ella. Although James O'Neill was able to "suppress his Irish brogue," modeled himself as "an American gentleman" and "had become universally loved and admired in the world of theater to which he 'belonged'," he and his wife "had never been fully accepted by the class conscious society of New London." As a result, the "sensitive young playwright became acutely conscious of this rejection" (Carpenter 24-25). Since he was Irish, a Roman Catholic, and an actor, James O'Neill was not considered suitable to mix with New London's society. According to Virginia Floyd, James O'Neill bought a summer home in New London in the 1880s where he hoped to rest for a few months before setting out for other stage performances. He hardly thought that he and his family would be rejected by supercilious, wealthy New England Yankees "who prided themselves on their puritan lineage." Floyd contends, "What annoyed the Yankees most was the fact that [James O'Neill] refused to settle in East London with other Irishmen; he had bought a home deep in Yankee territory on Pequot Avenue" (*The Plays* 5). Indeed, exactly sixty years later Carl Hansberry, an African American and the father of Lorraine Hansberry, experienced the same housing restriction for moving into a white neighborhood. In the face of severe white hostility and racism, Carl took the case to Supreme Court which received nationwide attention in 1940 as Hansberry vs. Lee and won his rights to stay on. This was dramatized by Lorraine Hansberry in her classic *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) where the middle-class Younger family struggles through American racism. In O'Neill's *A Touch of the Poet* (1957), the difference the hero Cornelius Melody makes between himself and the rich Americans seems an answer to the cynical attitude of the Yankees: "I possessed wealth, position, and an estate compared to which any Yankee upstart's home in this country is but a hovel stuck in a cabbage patch" (3.241). But

even then Cornelius Melody, like his Irish compatriot James O'Neill and Black counterpart Carl Hansberry in real lives, or fictive avatar Mrs. Younger, is still despised.

Moreover, none of the O'Neill's family members could escape the cancer of rejection and snobbery in the hands of racist Yankees. As once O'Neill invited three of his classmates to watch his father's performance, a sister at Mount St. Vincent was shocked to learn that they ventured to visit "wicked theater." She forbade the four to receive communion the next morning. This left a shattering effect on O'Neill since the young O'Neill construed, due to the punishment doled out by the nun, that "his father was wicked in the eyes of the church" (Bowen 18). Recounting a similar trauma that his mother, a convent-bred and lavishly brought up daughter of wealthy Irish parents, went through, O'Neill told his second wife Agnes Boulton that his mother was deeply hurt as she found that girls from wealthy families she had known [at St. Mary's Academy at South Bend, Cleveland] dropped her after she married James O'Neill (Bowen 14). This calls to mind Cotton Mather's disdain for theater who warned his eighteen century fellow puritan ministers of the "powers of darkness" emanated from the "venomous authors" of poetry and "modern plays" which, according to him, did "belong to the catalogue of … cursed library" (Ruland and Bradbury 19-20). As a result of the hatred from townspeople for being Irish and for being sons of an actor, the conjurer of Matherian "powers of darkness," the playwright and his brother Jamie experienced the same ostracism from the community; hence Ella laments her sons' fate in the Protestant Yankee neighborhood in *Long Day's Journey into Night* since her lads are not considered sociable or even picked as dates by girls as latter's parents are indifferent to Tyrones:

> You've never had a chance to meet decent people here. I know you both would have been so different if you'd been able to associate with nice girls instead of—you'd never have disgraced yourselves as you have, so that now no respectable parents would let their daughters be seen with you. (1.739)

Thus, the way the playwright saw the Irish suffering from perpetual inequity, segregation, and detestation in the hands of the antebellum Southerners and postbellum Yankee Northerners, likewise he found the blacks undergoing the similar treatment in the hands of the White America. Hence through most of his plays, O'Neill called upon the American people to be true to their democratic gospel of equality, justice, and liberty for all. The discrepancies between the images America projected, a democracy based on equality and justice, and the reality of what it was, a racially divided land of inequality and bigotry, became more and more apparent to the young O'Neill in his years of apprenticeship as playwright, especially between 1913 and 1920.

In fact, of all minorities who migrated to the United States of America none have received more racial injustice, more disdain and spite, more lynching, more discrimination, and more ostracism than the African Americans. Yet Blacks were among the earliest of settlers in the New World. Furthermore, unlike the Europeans, Blacks did not come to America to look for a better life; they were forced here against their will. Other minorities like the Irish who suffered racial antagonism got gradually assimilated into the American society, but not the African American, whose dark skin was his doom. In a real democracy, O'Neill seems to make out through his black plays, there should be no room for a class or a segment of people to be destined to enduring inferiority based on unalterable physical traits, and hence the focus of this

study will be upon bearing out as to what extent the playwright condemned the drawing of disparity among human beings grounded on prejudice against a particular ethnic group, and in so doing, trumpeted his call for equality by projecting a common lot for all.

In *Thirst* (1913), a one-acter written and staged at the very beginning of O'Neill's dramatic career, the white duo, Gentleman and Dancer, share deck with a Mulatto Sailor on a lifeboat where the latter is cornered to a confined white space after a Titanic-like disaster. All three are waited upon by sharks circling around them in the water. The two white passengers treat the submissive Sailor as though he is a savage, and based on a false doubt born out of racist mind for long harboring hatred, distrust and prejudice against the Sailor, assume that he stole water and sustenance. This wrecks tumult and havoc on the life-raft resulting in everyone's death. *The Dreamy Kid*, the first major drama concerning the plight of blacks in New York ghetto life and the first to have an all-black cast in American theater history, shows an on-the-run African American youth Abe's last hour in life where plainclothes-policemen are seen closing in the raid on him for killing a white man in self-defense as he comes to visit his dying grandmother who tells us that "Dreamy kid" is Abe's moniker given by her after his birth for she thought he would make possible her American dream of black success come true in North. Both plays show how the white society has pinned down the blacks leaving no breathing space for them to exist: in the life-raft the Sailor is squeezed out in a corner and the segregated New York ghetto apartment is encircled by white law-enforcers. This physical incarceration is accompanied by inherent racism of white society led by its pretended scientifically, structurally, and culturally superior agents (Gentleman and Dancer) and institutional formation (police institution) to prevent and nullify Blacks' survival.

The Emperor Jones, highly regarded as the first to stage a Black in an all-American tragic role in US theater history, is arguably the first study of any kind in American literature on internalized racism where the character remakes himself by swallowing up the ultra-pragmatic white core-values of making money under whatever means as long as clicked by success. A political propagandist and a despot, the title character busies himself in kleptocracy, and when his fall nears, he is reminded of his racial identity, his ancestors' pagan land, slave ship voyage and auctions along with his own two homicidal acts. These flashbacks remind him of his sordid past and his hankering after the deceitful ideals of western colonialism in a sort of reenactment of the original sin. In a rare battle-royal with his own memory-lane, aided by *avant-garde* expressionistic stage-set, he finds it hard to maintain his conscious civilized mask (emperor's garb is gradually tearing apart) symbolized by Americanism and the unconscious struggle-within interfaced as Afrocentrism, and dies as an American martyr. Like the protagonists of James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1964) who try to cross racial boundary and "pass" as white and black respectively, Jones here tries to do the same—yet unlike them (and obviously their motives) he is not acting out the mask-roles playing hide and seek for mere voyeurism, but in fact has internalized it deep down in him. His losing control on self and minstrel-show like caricaturing fall at the end irked both white and black critics alike who considered it a mere addition to the already piled up Black stereotypes; yet if we examine Griffin's feeling of "Negroid even into the depths of his entrails" after donning himself up all black and seeing himself in the mirror, we can well understand that even a white sees what automatically inherits the black image from within:

> I looked into the mirror and saw reflected nothing of the white John Griffin's past. No, the reflection led back to Africa, back to the shanty and the ghetto, back to the fruitless struggles against the mark of blackness. (*Black Like Me* 19)

Jones' flight is therefore from his past, from Africa, from an "inferior" Black identity, and O'Neill in his next black play *All God's Chillun Got Wings* seems to further advance the theory of a black's depressing discourse of survival in America: as the unilateral white dominion with its systematic violence cramped, chased down, and killed the blacks, examined previously through the cases of Mulatto Sailor and Dreamy, barring their coexistence and accomplishments—what will come about if the blacks discipline themselves by buying white ethics, values, and standards of life? This might be an important proposition and impossible dream, but this was an undeniable fact among blacks in the 1920s which Harlem Renaissance artists and historians detected (Huggins 204; Gill). This tendency of aping white culture which defined worldly success through material gains, lately termed as "racial cross-dressing" by Eric Lott (241), has been interiorized by O'Neill's three major portraits—Jones in *The Emperor Jones*, Jim in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* and Joe Mott in *The Iceman Cometh*.

A major emphasis will be laid on O'Neill's powerful play *All God's Chillun Got Wings* because here he, as the study would try to verify, propounds his claim for racial equality by presenting a sensitive picture of what it was like to be a Black in the early 1920s in America. In this most highly controversial play till date in US, O'Neill uses miscegenation as a plot-device to more seriously, humanely, and proactively deal with the racial problem in America to demonstrate how it can have a gnawingly debilitating effect on any individual—Black or White—who is caught up in its

complexities. On one hand, people like Edmund Wilson, the Dean of Twentieth Century American Criticism, considered the play "a racial document" of high importance for being "one of the best things yet written about the race problem of Negro and white" (Cargill 464) while on the other, along with KKK, hate groups, and various state and private organs, renowned playwright Augustus Thomas was virtually leading a crusade engaging various groups against the staging of the play since it attempted to "break down social barriers" which, Thomas felt, was better off being "left untouched" (Frenz 42). With this play of "revolutionary nature" (Bigsby 117), O'Neill was, *in actu*, hitting the American psyche; the issue of miscegenation being an anathema, a taboo, the playwright was viewed as standing against the strong wind by violating or challenging an unwritten code or value system.

Jim in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, like O'Neill's other two black protagonists Jones and Joe, wants to cross the racial boundary by "passing" as white in taking up white man's job, the membership at Bar, and in marrying a white lady, Ella. He is, however, in Du Boisian term, "torn asunder" (2) by two conflicting images that fight for his soul—firstly, his white wife Ella is jealous of his success of passing the Bar exam which would, as she fears, elevate him to a superior position to counter her stand, and hence she wants him to stay as a "nigger" or Jim "Crow," an Uncle Tom-like help, provider, and playmate; secondly, his Black radical sister Hattie, wants Jim to pass since it would symbolize as well as pave the way for their race's achievement and pride. Ella initially admired Jim's worth inside as "white" and married him, but she cannot, as time rolls by and while she gradually becomes aware of her social snubbing and alienation for marrying a colored man, pass as a black man's wife other than a typical racist white who cannot have sex with him fearing black reproduction. Thus the relationship suffered since they are ill with internalized

racism and hence it becomes a double failure when it required a double passing—Jim's taking up a white man's gown and Ella's filling in for a black woman. Interestingly, what Jim's mother Mrs. Harris presages while sensing a disaster in her son's marriage, Irene in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) reverberates the exact: "It's easy for a Negro to 'pass' for white. But I don't think it would be so simple for a white person to 'pass' for colored" (206).

Nonetheless, as "an answer to white bigotry" that Ella resorts to in the play, O'Neill presents an element of counter-culture of "black boastfulness" in Hattie (Diggins 153). Hattie is an advocate of rights, a feminist, and a strong-willed, humane, dynamic and "faithfully realistic" portrayal who is always sure of herself. The critics who often accuse the playwright of not delivering colorful and impeccable female portraits similar to Hedda Gabler or Miss Julie like his "great European Masters" or charismatic heroine Blanche Du Bois like his American counterpart Tennessee (Haque 45), unfortunately overlook O'Neill's creation of Hattie. In fact, through Hattie Harris O'Neill projects a careerist woman's climbing social echelon with a sense of pride and dignity for race, the likeness of which is hardly seen in playwright's other important white leads—"dope-fiend" Mary, ultra-materialistic Sara, sexually overcharged and sometimes sinful Abbie and Lavinia, or the underworld woman Anna. Hattie's unparalleled trajectory of feminist and black success, representing the most neglected and deprived class of people living in "double jeopardy" in America (Beale 146), highly influenced and helped evolve Black female portraits of Hansberry, Childress, and Wilson.

All God's Chillun Got Wings starts with showing four pairs of black and white children including Jim and Ella playing together as though kids are frolicking in Eden. The action, however, moves quickly forward depicting them as inhabitants of

psychological hell since now they are grown-ups and "breathe and interact in a culture of sickness" where the culture itself is being "infected by America's most lethal virus: racism" (Shaughnessy "faithful realism" 153), and the entire "neighborhood … itself has become an incubator of the virus" (Shaughnessy *Catholic Sensibilities* 88). The play ends in a reverse-cycle showing the couple's living in denial; since they could not "pass" as white and black couple, they "veil" their adult frustration under an infantile regression where not a scintilla of racial bias in the forms of inferiority or superiority complexes exists.

The Iceman Cometh exposes how even in an ideal American melting-pot situation where characters from various ethnic backgrounds club together—British, Dutch, Irish, Italian, French, etc.—can hardly negotiate with Joe Mott, an African American and a former proprietor of Black gambling house. Here the discussion would show that whiteness has gained such a mythical proportion in American society that even in a multicultural backdrop the black pigmentation causes psychological tremor among the white boarders in Harry Hope's Saloon. As O'Neill's dramatic career evolved, here at the fag end of his artistic career, he projects, moving away from crude naturalism of *Thirst* to a more refined psychological realism in *The Iceman Cometh*, the problem of black's belonging. As the Mulatto Sailor in *Thirst* was cramped with space, humiliated, and threatened to be killed by the white passengers on lifeboat—symbolizing his physical demolition, so Joe Mott in *The Iceman Cometh* is cornered, insulted, and virtually thrown out from Hope's Bar which is at the end-of-the-world, considered a last-ditch hideaway for pipe-dreamers—signifying the destruction of his spiritual hope, if any, he had to cling to the world of lost dreams and dreamers. While Joe Mott, "a descendent of Brutus Jones" (Manheim *New Language of Kinship* 149), does not belong, for like other black protagonists of

O'Neill's canon he "succumbs to racial psychological fate" as "social forces … crush the efforts of blacks to succeed" (Pfister 136) in an American setting, his frustrations place him in "equal footing with other [white] characters" (Shaughnessy "faithful realism" 153).

This analysis, however, deals as much as with other black characters as with Joe Mott, and further goes beyond the existing discourse to prove that Joe Mott, in fact, is rather made not to belong. Retrospectively looking, historians in the immediate post-Civil Rights era probed deep into the problem as to why it took an awful long time for Blacks to make into the mainstream. For instance, Jewish historian Marshal Sklare in his *The Jew in American Society* testifies that anti-Semitism was nothing in the United States *vis-à-vis* their European experience and adds that in America, the Jews, like other immigrants, could go wherever they liked, and moreover "could make their way into the real American community as swiftly or slowly as they themselves chose" (73-79). Robert Blauner, in his *Racial Oppression in America*, considers white Americans' long-standing prejudice against the skin color and enforced slavery were primarily responsible for Black race's prolonged hardship and disillusionment as well as belated upward movement in society: "the Irish, Italians, Jews, and other groups had the advantage of European ancestry and white skins. … But parallel alternatives were not available to the early generations of Afro-Americans … because they were not part of the free labor force" (56). Generally speaking, then, the only group which for so long could not be accepted and assimilated into the American society or given full citizenship rights was the Black. This research would examine how the playwright set out to confront this racial injustice on stage for the first time in American dramatic literature.

O'Neill's ideas for Black plays, brought to readers for the first time by Virginia Floyd with her *Eugene O'Neill at Work: Newly Released Ideas for Plays* (1981), raise some focal points to elucidate how these three plays project a black-cycle covering the entire history of Blacks in America—from their purchase in Africa around seventeenth century, their emancipation in 1863, and their lives under post-slavery, modern US of the early twentieth century where, although they lived free, they had been toiling under inhuman economic, political, and social repression. "Honest Honey Boy" (1921) is reflective of O'Neill's close friendship with Jimmy-the-Priest's roommate and Black gambler Joe Smith at such a time when racial line between the races was drawn sharply. "Bantu Boy" (1927) and "Runaway Slave" (1935) are of slave-narrative genre with anti-slavery, abolitionist tendencies where these plays, to some extent, anticipate antebellum plays: *The Indian Princess* (1808), *The Gladiator* (1831), *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and *The Octoroon* (1859) for projecting heartbreaking scenes of Africans' forced migration, family members' separation through auction, master-servant relationship, speculation and sexual exploitation, double-jeopardy of release, and manipulation of Christian ethics. Interestingly, the psychological crunch which motivates the central character in the second part of "Bantu Boy" to commit infanticide so that the children are not born as slaves, reverberates in Toni Morrison's Sethe in *Beloved* (1987); further the play's idea comes close to what Toni Morrison enunciates in her recent novel, *A Mercy* (2008)—white America's undeniable crime and injustice committed against the Black race, uprooting and enslaving them, a crime tantamount to original sin that was actuated by overriding greed and all-grabbing proclivities.

O'Neill's staged plays and his ideas for black dramas therefore are of high merit, implication, and magnitude. He is generally considered to have "[come] close

as any white could to expressing with exactness the character, goal, and frustrations of blacks" (Floyd *The Plays* 268). The approach and the focus of this study in the selected plays will reach out to dig at the bottom pit of a battered race's suffering, struggle, and claim of justice in three decades of American theater strictly regulated by white hegemonic control.

However, from O'Neill's part, to stage-campaign against racism by drawing upon harsh realities of New York's ghetto life was indeed a tall ask as the then African American portraits in theaters were frequently burlesqued, giving rise to stereotypes and minstrel thespians that showed concocted, false images and aspects of black life. Negating such milieu, O'Neill set out to overwhelm and debunk the on-hand black roles on American stage dominated by minstrelsy, and thus contravened the traditional practices to divulge the pros and cons behind an invisible man's disconcerted identity and status in society. In fact, the search for an "authentic Negro character" had been a tough challenge for artists in American literature as a whole and theater in specific. In April 1924, having examined O'Neill's considerable input during the last eight years of World War I and post-War era, drama critic George Jean Nathan wrote in *Opportunity*, a periodical of the Urban League and social works among Blacks:

> Up to eight or nine years ago, it is doubtful if in the entire range of the American drama was to be found a single authentic Negro character. The Negro of drama was then either of the white wool wig and kidney pain species, given to excessive hobbling, many a "yas, yas, massa, I'se a-comin," and a comic line on his every exit, or of the species that was essentially a mere blacked-up Caucasian minstrel end man, in a cutaway coat three sizes too large for him and a snowy toupee, who

> was rather dubiously transformed into a dramatic character by giving him one scene in which he taught little Frieda and Otto how to say their prayers and another in which he apologetically shuffled into his master's library when the mortgage on the latter's old southern estate was about to be foreclosed by the northern villain and, with tears in his eyes and a quaver in his voice, informed him that, come what might, he would stick to him until he was daid. (Nathan 186)

Nathan's statement fittingly summarizes the deplorable status of blacks on American stage with their first appearance in the American premiere of Isaac Bickerstaffe's and Charles Dibdin's comic opera *The Padlock* (1769). In fact, *The Padlock* is (dis)credited for the earliest of the black depiction in US theater (New York's John Street Theatre), first presented in 1768 in London's Drury Lane. It introduced the comically drunk, profane character of Mungo, later made more famous in US by legendary Lewis Hallam Jr., who clearly suggested the plight and bitterness of his race when he lamented, saying, "Me wish to de lord me was dead" (qtd. in Cockrell 20)!

Such duality of the illiterate, shiftless yet sometimes shifty buffoon and of the shamefully downtrodden appeared frequently in the characterizations of blacks for the next hundred and fifty years. This particular comic stereotype, primarily burlesquing the black life and experience, further brutalized any chance of authentic creative impulse when in 1828 TD Rice introduced the blackface minstrel shows which, in 1840s, Daniel D Emmett carried to extreme buffoonery. It included stereotypes like Jim Crow, representing African Americans as backwoods, uncultured, and coarse figures, a black burlesque of Davy Cockett or Mike Fink; his city counterpart was the almost effeminate Jim Dandy, a blackfaced Yankee Doodle, whose fashionable get up

was in itself parodic (Wilmeth and Miller 319-20; Hart 496). Early American drama and specifically the antebellum plays[2] would present two kinds of characters, termed as stereotypes, frequenting the stage that George Jean Nathan is referring to: one is the commonly available drolly thespian and the other is the sacrificial devotee. The latter was developed within a few years of the rise of minstrelsy, keeping pace with the growing abolition sentiment in the North.

In fact, the minstrel shows forbid the black community any sort of presence on stage for nearly a century. Minstrel thespians, mostly white actors, would blacken up their faces with burnt corks, adorn their heads with fright-wigs to perform slapstick gestures with song and dance that caricatured the black experience as being: "lazy and shiftless, afflicted with a peculiar appetite for watermelon, which is devoured in an equally peculiar manner, a cavernous mouth coming in handy, which, on other occasions, shapes itself into unmatchably funny and slavishly broad grins, or as a funnel for a glass too many of cheap gin, or yet as witness to atrocious incapacities such as twisted pronunciations, meaningless long words, and incomprehensible jabberings" (Olaniyan 13).

The first ever dramatic role of a black in an American play is Zeke in Anna Cora Mowatt's *Fashion* (1845), a comedy in five acts, ripe with malapropisms and farcical intrigues. Here Zeke is "a colored Servant" dressed in oversized "red and blue livery, cocked hat" (312; 1.313). He is a matured culmination of minstrelsy's "blacked-up" (white actor in black face) portraiture aimed at arousing "race humor"—a stage antecedent of "Jim Crow" (Richards 307). To be specific, he is Jim Crow's city counterpart Jim Dandy. The play starts with a skit where he refers to his new dress as "a coat to take the eyes ob all Broadway! … it am de fixins dat make de natural *born* gemmen" (1.313). A gatekeeper cum valet, Zeke is an announcer of

visitor-arrivals who speaks in vernacular and twisted words and whose appointment is justified by his malapropist employer Mrs. Tiffany as such: "I am rather sorry that he is black, but to obtain a white American for a domestic is almost impossible" (1.315). Mrs. Tiffany, like most Americans of the day, not only slanders the black race but also rechristens Zeke's name since it sounds "vulgar" to her liking. When Zeke is called in, besides his job objectives being explained by her, his biblical name of "Ezekiel" meaning "strength is God" is commandingly replaced, leaving him no choice whatsoever even to object or differ with his employer's opinion; Mrs. Tiffany diktats:

> Your name, I hear, is *Ezekiel*.—I consider it too plebian an appellation to be uttered in my presence. In future you are called A-dolph. Don't reply,—never interrupt me when I am speaking. A-dolph, as my guests arrive, I desire that you will inquire the name of every person, and then announce it in a loud, clear tone. (1.313-4)

Apart from being such circumscribed, Zeke serves the purpose of a punch-bag in the play as everyone hurls abuses, in the forms of racist remarks mostly, towards him. When, upon Mrs. Tiffany's advice, Zeke informs Trueman—an all-American Yankee, a stage antecedent of Jonathan, that "Missus say she's not at home," he is violently treated by Trueman who, with "*a stout cane in his hand*" bullies Zeke saying "Out of the way you grinning nigger!" The stage description then reads, giving raw fun to the audience: "Zeke *jumps out of his way as [Trueman] enters*" (1.323). Yet again, Truman intimidates Zeke, launching similar kind of attack later in the play to stir "race humor": "Out of my way; do you want me to try if your head is as hard as my stick" (4.350)? Not by the heroic Trueman only, but Zeke has also been treated almost invariably by nearly all the characters in the play; for instance, he was referred to as

"a nigger in livery" by Snobson, and threatened to be fired by Mrs. Tiffany with dismissing tone. White characters' such maltreatments towards him in the play in the form of slapsticks characterized black roles in early American dramas where they were presented as "perpetually mirthful" caricatures, used chiefly for arousing spontaneous laughter of the white audience at the cost of vilifying the African American ethnicity.

Worse still, even the plays which led serious campaign for the abolition of slavery on stage, George L Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1859), conformed to nearly similar topical fantasy by stereotyping and caricaturing black portraitures. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Haley is not satisfied with the only "article" Tom and asks Shelby to "fling in" the child Harry, Eliza's and George's son, to "settle the business" deal because the kid proved itself to be a good item for speculation; the following scene shows the kid's worth:

> [HARRY *runs in*]
>
> SHELBY (continued): Hulloa! Jim Crow! [*Throws a bunch of raisins towards him*.] Pick that up now. [HARRY *does so*.]
>
> HALEY: Bravo, little 'un! [*Throws an orange, which HARRY catches. He sings and dances around the stage*.] Hurrah! Bravo! What a young 'un! That chap's a case, I'll promise. Tell you what, Shelby, fling in that chap, and I'll settle the business. (1.378-79)

Here, Aiken's use of the word "*throws*" twice in stage direction pulls off zoo imagery: the raisins and the orange could easily be *given* instead of being *thrown* into the ground or air. With this animal imagery, Harry is shown to be relegated first into a chicken (eating off the ground), and secondly into a monkey (plucking off the air)—thus fulfilling the status of a "nigger," presumed a scientifically lower kind, in a white

dominated society where his skin-alikes are referred to as "article" by "sympathetic" masters (Tom and Topsy were called "article" or commodity with good market value by their respective first masters Shelby and St. Clare in 1.2 and in 2.2. respectively). St. Clare treats coarse, uncultured, the little girl from backwoods, Topsy, an infant version of Jim Crow, in the same vein as he asks her to give a minstrel show to please Ophelia:

> ST. CLARE: … And speaking of that puts me in mind that I have made a purchase for your department. There's the article now. Here, Topsy! [*Whistles*.]
>
> [TOPSY *runs on*.] …
>
> ST.CLARE: … I thought she was rather a funny specimen in the Jim Crow line. Here, Topsy, give us a song, and show us some of your dancing.
>
> [TOPSY *sings a verse and dances a breakdown*.] (2.391)

Likewise, the *exposition* of Boucicault's *The Octoroon* serves for an equally farcical show where the "darkies" or black children run about the stage, steal bananas from plate, and finally are ridiculously chased away by old Pete who refers to these kids as "black trash" who were "nebber … born" (1.451). Interestingly, Pete's words echo what Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* said of herself: "Never was born, tell you; never had no father, nor mother, nor nothin'. I war raised by a speculator, with lots of others" (2.392).

Albeit the Jim Crow shows of 1830s and 1840s involved jokingly aping mannerisms of an aged Black in the forms of songs, dances, etc. on stage, these two plays project how choosing the kids for providing Jim Crow entertainment at home not only stands as an appalling instance of waning antebellum values, but also goes on

to show how even the alleged humane Southern masters were so overtly-prejudiced that they were unable to overcome the social plague. The overall literature of the era, even with serious abolitionist tendencies, was found to be "raced."

The title characters of the plays, Uncle Tom and the octoroon Zoe, are indeed the "kidney pain species," to use Nathan's words, created out of bigoted white imagination: very kind, good-natured, naturally obedient, and loyal like a dog to its master. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, when Chole asks old Tom to runaway with Eliza and Harry and escape "hard work and starving" under a new master, Tom replies showing utmost devotion to master Shelby, who is about to trade him to save the estate, "Mas'r always found me on the spot—he always will. I never have broken trust, nor used my pass no ways contrary to my word, and I never will" (1.381). Tom stays back knowing too well that a tough life is beckoning him. In *The Octoroon*, the title character Zoe is a "child by a quadroon slave" who gives vent to her existential frustration saying that out of her whole lot of blood, only "one drop in eight is black—bright red as the rest may be, that one drop poisons all the blood" (2.467). When George, a white and also her fiancée as well as the nephew of her master, offers her to elope with him to get married and thus to getaway from the auction with other slaves to pay off the estate's "old Liverpool debt," she declines. Knowing well that fleeing away would not only help her towards a better life as a free woman but also would pave the way for her marriage with George in North since under Southern state-law she can only be kept as a slave-mistress here, she instead replies with emotion-choked voice showing unwavering devotion towards her "missus": "I'd rather be black than ungrateful! Ah, George, our race has at least one virtue—it knows how to suffer" (2.467)!

It can be logically assumed that such pathetic, passive, abiding, and too-good-to-be-true projections like Uncle Tom, Zoe, or Nigger Jim by white authors such as Stowe, Aiken, Boucicault, and Twain were chiefly targeted at staving off African Americans' threatening virility and keeping the Caucasian blood untainted from the danger of its being turning into mulattos, quadroons, or octoroons—signifying a step closer to whiteness.[3] Commenting on such cultural images flooding in American literature from the mid-nineteenth until the early decades of twentieth century, critic Kenneth Burke wrote facetiously in his *Philosophy of Literary Form* that: "One could safely bestow one's love upon such essentially ineffectual foibles and imaginings. They had the lovableness of the incompetent. Americans, driven by some deep competitive fear, seem to open their hearts most easily to such symbols of 'contended indigence'" (361).

Nathan Irvin Huggins points out in his seminal work *Harlem Renaissance* that Jim Crow or minstrel shows had nothing to do with black life or experience in reality, and that these stage-productions were mere white fanciful imaginings. Referring to those "wrong" images, or in other words, the misrepresentations of African Americans in the commercial minstrel theaters, he says, "Despite standard explanations that these white showmen were mimics of southern plantation Negroes, there is very little evidence to support the claim. Close analysis of the minstrel shows reveals very little Afro-American influence in the music, dance, or inspiration. In fact, the two principal character types who define this theater—Jim Crow and Jim Dandy (or Zip Coon)—are unlike any concept of the plantation black or even the Sambo stereotype" (248-49). A hotcake for the commercial theaters, these minstrel shows with troupes and black musical companies reinforced the stereotyped stage picture of the African Americans where their comical demeanors became the character staples

per se. Writing in 1933, Sterling A Brown detects the reason behind black portraits' coming under such white hegemonic control for which the peculiar image of a "mirthful Negro" would flood the antebellum and the postbellum theater industries: "If the Negro could be shown as perpetually mirthful, his state could not be so wretched. This is, of course, the familiar procedure when conquerors depict a subject people. English authors at the time of Ireland's greatest persecution built up the stereotype of the comic Irishmen, who fascinated English audiences" (188).

Thus, the black portrait in US dramatic literature, which should have carried imprints of slavery, showing century-long inhuman struggle and oppression, instead became a "mirthful" fool for whom the word "wretched" stood as a complete mismatch. O'Neill, being an avid reader of Irish history, knew very well the circumstances unfolded in Ireland before his father's family's migration to US to escape English oppression, did not subscribe to or propagate the canvass of stereotypes based on the typical "phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body" (Bhaba 92). Hence, when he wrote about the black slaves in two of his notes for Black plays, he drew them against their Sambo images,[4] and he bestowed upon them dignity and intelligence to show how their capacity for autonomy within the confines of slavery paved the way for real freedom from within and from without, and how their strength, confidence, and endurance challenged and diluted the white psyche. When an African clan leader, the Bantu chief, is tricked to a US slave-ship and brought to be afterwards sold and separated from family as slave, he slaps back and scoffs at the institution of slavery as he tells his master who intends to free him later, "Freedom is God's, white man, you cannot set me free. I'm free." (Floyd *O'Neill at Work* 176).

Nonetheless, it was playwright Ridgley Torrence's *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre*, written between 1914 and 1917 and staged on 5 April 1917 at New York's Madison Square Garden (a comedy "The Rider of Dreams," a tragedy "Granny Maumee," and a passion-play with religious overtone "Simon, the Cyrenian"), that elevated black actors in dramatic roles on Broadway for the first time in US history (Wilmeth and Miller 28). Regarded as folk plays, Torrence's dramas not only were seen as "unimaginative realism" ("Three Negro Plays," *Times*), but also were viewed, as per Susan Curtis' account in her seminal work *The First Black Actors in the Great White Way*, as lacking Black experience of any kind: "neither Torrence, Jones [director], or Hapgood [producer] had the slightest knowledge of Black theater or Black performers … [these plays were] based on a sketchy and frequently exaggerated experience of Black life in [playwright's] native Xenia, Ohio. But in his search for an archetypal 'American' play, he had intuited that Blacks were at the center of America's folkloric tradition" (qtd. in Robinson 171). While Torrence's plays helped grow interests in dramatizing African American folk life, critics today consider these as "misguided representations of black life" (Krasner *A Companion* 97). It is not until 1918 that the American theater saw the first representation of "Negro problem" of any sort in Eugene O'Neill's *The Dreamy Kid*, a play based on a black family's moving to New York during Great Migration and the black dream's getting shattered in the North due to racism.

O'Neill started his career staging the challenges confronted by the black slum youths of New York with a focus on racism that existed in American public and private domains. In later years, his focus shifted from Postbellum to Antebellum years to show Blacks' unforgettable slavery era woes with an intention of staging slave narratives of a "Runaway Slave" and a "Bantu Boy" to dig up Black history on

American stage the way he planned to do with the Irish history. These cycles, however, could not be completed for his failing health condition at the fag end of his career. O'Neill knew where it all began as he was a modern prophet-poet diagnosing the "sickness of today" and so he understood what went wrong in America and why it has "failed" to ensure social equality. In fact, like Toni Morrison, he felt that the significance of the "slave narratives" was of utmost importance for African Americans in constructing histories of Black identities. According to Morrison:

> It is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that; remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory. (Morrison "The Site of Memory" 305)

Thus what Toni Morrison realized in the late 1980s, O'Neill had conceptualized it in the 1920s and 1930s with his two ideas for plays and particularly with *The Emperor Jones* which itself is an *avant-garde* history within a history in the form of a play within a play. Zander Brietzke, in his *The Aesthetics of Failure: Dynamic Structure in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, views that O'Neill "adopted a traditional form in his final plays but the action became entirely retrospective and time, in a novel way, became the definitive and tragic subject at last" (19). Fintan O'Toole in his recent *New York Review* article remarks in exactly the same way stating that the playwright was, with these unparallel efforts, "inventing a national drama" for America with an "artistic career that moves backward" since, according to him, the playwright himself saw "the American future is a hollow promise and the great journey is the voyage back into a relentless, inescapable history" (O'Toole). Con Melody, the Irishman in *A*

Touch of the Poet, sees himself as having "no future but the past." Likewise, Mary Tyrone, the Irishwoman in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, reiterates "the past is present, isn't it? It's the future, too." For the African American protagonist Jim Harris in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, his racial past determines his present: "We're never free—except to what we have to do." The "sensation" of "always being out of place" (Said 3) is what echoes in O'Neill's immigrant characters. Conditioned by physical and psychological exiles, an Irish American and an African American always experience traumatic disjunction with reality in O'Neill's plays.

O'Neill's view of American slavery and racism as reflected in his Black Plays resonate with many a scholar of today. For instance, Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* shows the Blacks in America are perpetually doomed where their first generations of ancestors unendingly fought against deaths and later generations against deprivations. The playwright, through his black portraits, tries to dwell upon the issues of injustices that cause "social death" for Blacks. By drawing up Focauldian "historicized body" (Brooks "Melodrama, Body, Revolution" 14) on stage, O'Neill attempts to confront the white American psyche to bring it to guilt and realizations.

[1] The following figure shows Johan Galtung's conception of violence existing in racial conflicts:

Fig: Galtung's triangular formation of violence (4)

Simon During's treatise on "systematic" racial oppressions in the United States goes hand in glove with Galtung's theory. Galtung "Violence, War and Their Impact" Web.; During *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction* 143-67.

[2] All references henceforth in this section are from *Early American Drama*, edited by Jeffery H Richards. NY: Penguin, 1997.

[3] Mulatto means half-black, quadroon is one-fourth black, and octoroon stands for one-eighth black.

[4] Critics who allege O'Neill of stereotyping black characters either say it because they have limited or no primary knowledge of the antebellum plays which propagated the cult of black stereotypes or simply due to the fact that they read it from secondary sources. A thorough reading of Pfister's chapter "The Ideological Work of 'Depth'" in his *Staging Depth* (86-199), Shaughnessy's "O'Neill's Africans and Irish Americans: stereotypes or 'faithful realism'" in *Cambridge Companion* (148-163), and particularly Diggins' "Is you a nigger, Nigger" in his *Eugene O'Neill's America* (137-156) would show recent scholars' findings that O'Neill had a progressive and significantly positive outlook on black life and experience in America; and that even if he gave Jones and Jim some stereotypical characteristics, he did this intentionally, portraying them as white wannabes merely to create ironical parables.