Chapter Two

Staging Ethnic Taxonomies:

The Politics of Exclusion in *Thirst* and *The Dreamy Kid*

As seen in the previous chapter's discussion of some antebellum plays, racism had become so ingrained into the fabric of American society that it would not simply disappear after the Civil War. While Radical Republican-initiated Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments subsequently abolished slavery, granted the blacks US citizenship and suffrage, their emancipation was seriously let down by some racist Southern Democrats' imposition of black codes, Jim Crow laws, and also by notorious Ku Klux Klan's killing spree in the forms of lynching, burning, and hanging during Reconstruction era (1865-73). Therefore, Black's assimilation into the American mainstream—from a plantation slave to a US citizen—went through numerous knock outs and set backs. It is not until the passing of the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that the blacks in America could assert their equality. In the backdrop of the torrid time at the beginning of twentieth century, Eugene O'Neill, who always "viewed himself and his writing as progressive on matters of race" (Pfister 121), addressed the issues of disharmony and ethnic bias particularly against the blacks in the US through the major characters of his early one-act plays: the West Indian Mulatto Sailor in *Thirst* (1913), and Abe aka Dreamy in *The Dreamy Kid* (1918). These leading characters can be seen as prototypes of American blacks of the era, and discussions on the plays would obviously dig up how O'Neill's role as a stage-campaigner for racial justice in the modern era progressed.

Thirst, a one-acter, centers on three shipwreck victims: a Gentleman, a Dancer, and a West Indian Mulatto Sailor floating on a small life raft in the middle of a violent sea encircled by sharks. As *res ipsa loquitur*, the survivors are discovered with death on the cards when the play begins owing to their long exposure, hunger, and essentially, thirst. *Thirst* is considered by many to be the first completed play by O'Neill (Sternlicht 44). It is also O'Neill's first play that involves a black character, and interestingly enough, the playwright himself acted in the role of the Mulatto Sailor when it was produced at Provincetown Players Theater. According to Gelbs, O'Neill's biographers, the playwright was so deeply tanned up for the role of the Mulatto Sailor that he hardly needed any make up (*Life with Monte Cristo* 571). Taking up the part of Sailor, who is constantly reviled and discriminated against by his other two white comrades, O'Neill seems to make an assertion that he is well aware of the American melting-pot situation and is able to value as well as comprehend the plight of a black in white-dominated America.

In 1913, *Thirst* was published in Boston for which James O'Neill, the playwright's father, had to "foot the bill of $450 for the 1000 copies" (Wilkins 5). However, it could not bring much success for the playwright since the readers back then might not have taken interest about the message it carried. Sheaffer, One of O'Neill's top biographers, writes that a relative of the playwright named Mrs. Brennon had thrown the book into the furnace after going through it and said "Someone ought to tell Eugene to get out of the gutter" (70)! While the book was priced at $8 per copy, the frustrated publisher offered O'Neill "virtually the entire edition at twenty five cents apiece" (212). The only solace for Eugene O'Neill was

perhaps the affirmative review from a renowned critic at that time, Clayton Hamilton, who described the playwright's certain feat in April 1915's issue of *Bookman* in the following way:

> This writer's favorite mood is one of horror. He deals with grim and ghastly situations that would become intolerable if they were protracted beyond the limits of a single sudden act. He seems to be familiar with the sea. … He shows a keen sense of the reactions of character under stress of violent emotion; and his dialogue is almost brutal in its power. (qtd. in Bowen 63)

Hamilton's review, which O'Neill regarded as coming from a mentor, had an electrifying effect on him as it gave him a direction for future by honing his interest and determination to write plays. Bowen quotes that while writing to Clayton Hamilton later, O'Neill admitted: "Do you know that your review was the only one that poor volume ever received? And, in brief, it was favorable! You can't imagine what it meant, coming from you. It held out a hope at a very hopeless time. It did send me to the hatters. It made me believe I was arriving with a bang; and at that period I very much needed someone whose authority I respected to admit I was getting somewhere" (63). In general, *Thirst* did not sell much as a book, and hence failed to make an impact *prima facie*. Nonetheless, the play stands as a testimony to racial prejudice which creeps into human hearts to breed confusion and distrust that finally bring about the peril of all humanity.

Thirst is O'Neill's first sea-play where, according to Virginia Floyd, he "demonstrates for the first time his concept of the sea as a malevolent force affecting men adversely and as having a mystical power over them" (*The Plays* 33). In this one-act tragedy, the agents of nature are out to ravage the three survivors of shipwreck

whose state of mind is in "*dawning madness*." The stage direction reads, the sun "*glares down…like a great angry eye of God*," the sea is "*glassy*" with black stained water where the "*fins of sharks*" are eagerly waiting to devour the three on the small raft as these objects are "*slowly cutting the surface of the water in lazy circles*" (1.31-32). Through this description of horrid "naturalistic negativism" (Wilkins 7), O'Neill shows his characters besieged in "hopeless struggle" (Floyd 33) for survival. In fact, the play can be examined from different perspectives: as an angst-ridden individual's frantic struggle against the forces of hostile and unyielding fate; as a man's feeling of loneliness in this world; as the total insignificance of worldly belongings or assets when a person's life is on the brink of sure disaster (as seen particularly in Dancer's case who, needing water, gave up her most precious possession of jewelry and offered her highly-priced body to the mulatto sailor), etc. However the main area of interest and the focus of this study lies in probing the fact that racial bias of the two White Americans, the Gentleman and the Dancer, against the Mulatto Sailor is the primary *raison d'être* behind these stranded characters' subsequent obliteration. Floyd states: "When man turns on his fellow man and breaks the bond of common humanity that links them, he contrives his own moral and physical destruction" (37). The three die, as this discussion would show, not because of the sharks that devour them but because of their preying on each other. This will counter the previous views of O'Neill critics like Travis Bogard who in his *Contour in Time* claimed, upon discussing the catastrophe, that "no general meaning finally evolves" out the of play let alone having a racial overtone (31).

Contemporary critics like Virginia Floyd, Paul Voelker, and Joel Pfister dig up the matter of serious ethnic implication in *Thirst* which has long been overlooked until the mid-1980s. Voelker, in his paper titled "The Rhetoric of Race in O'Neill's

Thirst," points out: "The bulk of critical commentary by established O'Neillians has traditionally emphasized the theme of naturalistic fate—the three type characters are seen victims of hostile universe, embodied in the circling sharks and the burning sun. By contrast (and it is a comment on the nature of majority criticism in America generally), the racial theme is ignored, except by those few critics who focus their attention exclusively on O'Neill's treatment of race throughout his career" (4). Terming *Thirst* as "worthy of performance and serious critical investigation," Voelker further states that "the relationship between the races" gave primary impetus in his research (4). Joel Pfister, in his recent psychoanalytical study (specifically "depth psychology") of O'Neill plays, states:

> The play exposes racist fears of the whites, who suspect that the sailor has stolen their small supply of water. When the dancer attempts to bribe and then seduce the sailor into sharing his water, and he insists that he is not hiding any (on the raft), she castigates herself for having "abased myself" to a "black animal," a "dirty slave" (1:48). While the extremity of their predicament at times modifies the social pretensions of the two whites, their deeply ingrained racial roles remain in force. (122)

Hence, it can certainly be averred that in *Thirst*, O'Neill, being a white dramatist, for the first time in the United States, brings to light the issue of racial disharmony in the melting pot scenario of American society.

Clustered Experience Reenacted as Ideas

O'Neill's setting of the play, *Thirst*, parallels the tragic shipwreck and sinking event of Titanic which was a matter of discussion and speculation then. However, a thorough discussion of the play's milieu, that not only involves the author's personal and philosophical standpoints but also American cultural dynamics, will throw some light on the inevitable fact that O'Neill's play accommodates a cluster of experiences which are reenacted as ideas—a recipe for any great play—of which Ronald Peacock speaks of in his *The Art of Drama*.

Firstly, according to O'Neill's biographers, the playwright decided to become a playwright while staying at Gaylord Farm Sanatorium (1912-13) recovering from Tuberculosis in his early twenties. The justification of O'Neill's such decision, according to Gelbs in their new autobiographical study of the playwright *O'Neill: Life with Monte Cristo*, was that the seven years preceding this had been marred by his fierce swing towards attempted suicide, failed marriage, futile gold-searching mission in Hondurus, bringing shame on himself on his father's vaudeville tour, taking refuge at sea, whoring and drinking senselessly, etc. pranks that would no longer be carried on further for his deteriorating physical condition, and hence "he was forced to internalize his rage, releasing it through writing and becoming a creator rather than a destroyer" (388). Dealing with a shipwreck incident, *Thirst* understandably stands for an unconscious symbolism for his wrecked health. O'Neill himself stated that before he fell sick he had hardly any direction of life:

> My ambition, if you call it that, was to keep moving—to do as many things as I could. I just drifted along till I was twenty-four and then I got a jolt and sat up and took notice. Retribution overtook me and I went down with T.B. (388)

In his last interview in 1948, he once again emphasized the fact that unless he were in the sanatorium and pressed to stare hard at himself, he might never have become a playwright (388). Edward Shaughnessy, while detecting O'Neill's shift from Catholicism to existentialism that covered the canvas of his beginning productions, in his latest critique *Down the Nights and Down the Days: Eugene O'Neill's Catholic Sensibility*, purports that as early as in 1903 O'Neill shook off his Catholic faith since he was "embittered by God's 'failure' to rescue his beloved mother from the tragic morphine addiction" to the extent of (quoting Dorothy Day in this regard) wishing "to turn back to God his ticket." In O'Neill's second wife Agnes Boulton's words, he seemed always to be "haunted by the God whom he had discarded" (Shaughnessy 36-40). To him God was indifferent and the world was hostile where life was based upon "hopeless hope" (Gelbs 389). Some core questions of existential nature led him towards a spiritual quest: "Where is home? How does the individual fit in? How shall we meet the fundamental tragedy that life (Shaughnessy 27)?" These are essentially found in *Thirst* which were formed as perceptions at Gaylord and recreated through these shipwrecked victims in *Thirst* and later to the final explosion in *Dynamo* (1929). The Dancer, being stranded, starved, and confirmed of no rescue ship in sight for some days, gives vent to the feeling of common existential frustration: "My God, this is horrible. To wait and wait for something that never comes" (1.36), the kind of which will later be heard in Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1954), and O'Neill's own masterpiece *The Iceman Cometh* (1946). O'Neill seems to substantiate his belief of a "Black Irishman"[1] through the Dancer in *Thirst* when in utter agony of waiting, starvation, and thirst her frustration gives a way to accusation: "This is too horrible. What have we done that we should suffer so? It is as if one misfortune after another happened to make our agony more terrible" (1.38).

Besides, the idea of people dying from the want of basic sustenance seems internalized in O'Neill from the very beginning until the end of his literary career of around forty years. This is reflected in the plays regarded as autobiographical, for instance, in *Thirst*, *A Touch of the Poet*, and in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Fintan O'Toole, in his recent review of John Patrick Diggins' *Eugene O'Neill's America: Desire under Democracy*, states that the playwright's father James O'Neill's strained migration to the United States happened at a time which marked "the worst period of Irish history" when thousands of people died of starvation resulting from the potato (staple diet of the Irish) famine in Ireland:

> In 1841, the population of 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 … 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)

O'Toole contends that the group of *blasés*' dying on a life raft while fighting for the basic human needs reflecting the primal instincts in *Thirst*, the "acid-tongued daughter" Sara's puncturing her father's pride by reminding him of his sordid and poor Irish past in *A Touch of the Poet*, finally cumulate into a sadder apocalyptic view of hunger in finding an honest expression of the tortured psyche in deeply autobiographical *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the play which O'Neill intended to be staged in 1978 so that none of his Irish ancestors may be living to be confronted with or emotionally evoked by the holocaust of starvation and death that had haunted them in Ireland. In fact, the running motifs associated with James Tyrone's (based on

O'Neill's actor-father James O'Neill) "present life" and "memories of the past" in *Long Day's Journey into Night* have been spotted by Michael Manheim as "his fear of poverty" and "his early poverty and sense of social humiliation" respectively (*New Language of Kinship* 211). In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, James Tyrone, who always hated to reminisce about the past for the nightmarish fear it inherently carries within it, confesses:

> We never had clothes enough to wear, nor enough food to eat. Well I remember one Thanksgiving, or maybe it was Christmas, when some Yank in whose house mother had been scrubbing gave her a dollar extra for a present, and on the way home she spent it all on food. I can remember her hugging and kissing us and saying with tears of joy running down her tired face: "Glory be to God, for once in our lives we'll have enough for each of us!" (*He wipes tears from his eyes.*) (4.808)

O'Neill lays bare through Tyrone, the eviction, death in the poorhouse, and the reduction of all hope to the desire for food.

Also, *Thirst* brings to the audience's memory the gravest human tragedy of Titanic's sinking which obviously suggests that O'Neill took the circumstantial phenomenon into account while picking a topic for his play. Titanic sank after crashing into an iceberg on its maiden voyage across the Atlantic in 1912, the year before O'Neill wrote *Thirst*. O'Neill incorporates in this play some of the graphic, long-drawn-out, and extensively reported hearings that began in 19 April 1912, the day after Titanic's survivors landed in New York (Gelbs 398). Reportages like the ship Captain's shooting himself with his own pistol right before the shipwreck or crowds of passengers' fighting to board into the lifeboats, etc. stand as exact historical

accounts (heard from survivors in this play and seen in 1998's Oscar-winning movie *Titanic*).

Racism in Politics, National Psyche

Most importantly, however, the matter of racial inequality and intolerance which in effect germinated into the spheres of public lives is watermarked significantly in *Thirst*. In fact, racial prejudice and injustice got an uncalled for institutionalized sponsorship when White House took Woodrow Wilson as its president in 1913. Historically, he was the first Southern Democrat to be voted as president since the Civil War ended. Taking his office on 4 March 1913, in his inaugural address to the nation Wilson, *inter alia,* promised:

> The firm basis of government is justice, not pity … There can be no equality or opportunity … if men and women and children be not shielded in their lives, their very vitality form the consequences of great industrial and social processes which they cannot alter, control or singly cope with … Justice, and only justice, shall always be our motto. ("Inaugural Addresses of US Presidents" 202)

Also, Herbert Aptheker cites in his documentary that President Wilson in his pre-election campaign assured Bishop Alexander Walters of African Zion Church of his future commitment to the community (to which he had hardly been known) and reiterated to him:

> It is not unnecessary for me to assure my colored fellow citizens of my earnest wish to see justice done them in every matter and not mere grudging justice, but justice executed with liberality and cordial good

> feeling. Every guarantee of our law, every principle of our Constitution, commands this, and our sympathies should make it easy. … I want to assure them that should I become the President of the United States they may count upon me for absolute fair dealing, for everything by which I could assist in advancing the interests of their race in the United States. (58)

Getting carried away by this political rhetoric, Harlem intellectuals like WEB Du Bois extended all out support towards Wilson who was estimated to have bagged, as claimed by Du Bois, one hundred thousand northern black votes, contributing notably to his election win (*Dusk of Dawn* 234-35).

Tellingly, Wilson's presidency proved to be a shocker to Blacks as his political pledges of "equality," "opportunity," "justice," "liberality," etc. became history once he moved to White House, and the president by himself became an epitome of racial bias and subjugation in modern America. An era which can easily be watermarked for the burgeoning of structural racism that helped breed institutional racism in the United States, Voelker in an article recounts some events from two prominent history volumes *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America* and *The Oxford History of the American People* vol. 3 to underscore how the policy of Wilson's racial prejudice resulted in federal segregation, anti-Black legislations, etc. where a good number of blacks were losing their jobs in the offices and being lynched on the streets:

> Black postmasters were categorically dismissed, a flood of Anti-Black legislation was introduced in Congress, and racial segregation was instituted among virtually all federal employees. Further, in 1913, fifty-two Blacks were lynched. (5)

Also, Nathan Irvin Huggins in his *Harlem Renaissance* recounts how James Weldon Johnson, the then Consul to Nicaragua, found himself in the quicksand of "politics plus race prejudice" as "he was eased out of the foreign service" after he had "consulted Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan about a much earned promotion and transfer" (33). These racist proceedings—sponsored and legitimized by President Wilson—stood tall in opposite to his pre-voting saccharine promises to the black community. Herbert Aptheker narrates: "[Wilson] has failed to realize any of the expectations raised by his fair promises and sweet sounding phrases about justice and equal opportunity uttered in pre-election days. His 'New Freedom,' it seems, has been all for the white man and little for the Negro" (58).

Wilson's taking stride into the gutter of racism through insinuation and conjecture plunged the entire nation into a volatile vortex of subjugation and segregation and thereby polluted the conscience of general masses. The society and the nation as a whole implicitly or explicitly adhered to racism as a phenomenon into its very fabric where the president served as the role model for propagating this. Before making to the White House, Wilson was once the president of the Princeton University, which according to Gelbs, O'Neill detested due to its "excessively traditions-based, self-consciously superior and clannish" entity (*O'Neill* 112).

Furthermore, as racial inequity gripped the entire nation, it crossed the boundaries of social and political milieus and interposed itself into sports to further flare up the national sentiment. 1913 was the interim year between 1909-15 when there was a frantic nation-wide search for a "great white hope" at its peak—someone to triumph over Jack Johnson, the first Black heavyweight champion of the world. Voelker comments that "Johnson's unprecedented achievement in 1908 led, almost immediately, to the protracted search for a 'great white hope,' a white heavyweight

boxer to dethrone a man, who in his personal style, was a forerunner Muhammad Ali" (5). Accordingly, the search continued from 1909 to 1915. Since Johnson's winning the coveted title was considered a serious blow to the white superiority, the chase was on to salvage it. To the Whites it symbolized the golden pride and the crusade to knock down Jack Johnson paid dividend in April 1915 when the latter was asked to appear in Havana and risk to defend his gold against "the latest of the White hopes," Jess Willard. The record shows that Johnson was knocked out in the twenty-sixth round of the dual, hence paved the way for re-establishing the White desire—a paradise regained. While a number of speculations are forwarded from time to time regarding this whitewash, the most crucial one is advanced by the conceder Johnson himself:

> Preceding the Willard fight it was hinted to me in terms which I could not mistake that if I permitted Willard to win, which would give him the title, much of the prejudice against me would be wiped out. Those who chafed under the disappointment of having a man of my race hold the championship, I was told, would be mollified … and that I might settle down quietly and live in peace with my fellowmen. (qtd. in Anderson 395)

These factors might have stirred O'Neill's imagination as the socio-political and institutionalized racial division as well as the biases against the Blacks found important room in his dramas. Modern America's insemination into its culture and national consciousness the very notion of racial bigotry is well detected in *Thirst*.

Thirst as Lens: Racism in Public Domains

At the very outset of the play, O'Neill seems to stamp the discrepancy of social bond among the three shipwreck survivors through his stage direction cautioning an impending dissension and segregation between the two whites and the Mulatto Sailor:

> *Seated at one end is a West Indian Mulatto dressed in the blue uniform of a sailor ... He croons a monotonous Negro song to himself ... At the other end of the raft sits a middle-aged white man in what was once evening dress ... evidently he had been a first-class passenger ... Between the two men a young woman lies with arms outstretched, faced downward on the raft ... she is dressed in a complete short-skirted dancer's costume of black velvet covered with spangles ... a diamond necklace can be seen glittering coldly on ... her emaciated shoulders*. (1.31)

This description shows that the two whites and the black are world apart. Other than their contrasting social levels portrayed through the dresses, the black is "troubled by some strange impediment of speech" that would symbolize his restraint laid down by the society for ages. Whereas the two whites converse almost entirely throughout the play, he hardly speaks or is spoken to even though all three endure the same plight of hunger, thirst, and certainly, death. Since he is of different color and has serious communicative problem, he sings gently and quietly to himself as if he is not wanted or does not belong in the midst of the whites. Generally, people, when jeopardized by an imminent natural catastrophe or hazard, and are left hopelessly high and dry, try to club together to figure a way out of trouble with utmost bravery, fellow-feeling, and sanguinity. This very perception of understanding, the sense of brotherliness or the act of watching each other's back is absolutely found wanting in them.

The stage direction, importantly enough, mirrors disparate social statures of the two whites and the black—the Gentleman's impressive shirt-and-tie formation of a first-class passenger and the Dancer's sequin outfit with fitting diamond necklace round the neck, versus the Sailor's freebie Union tee-shirt and ragged shoes. Thus O'Neill asserts the social classes of bourgeois and working to explain as well as indicate how the domination by the former on the latter was achieved through "scientific racism." According to Floyd, "The Gentleman and the Dancer are portrayed as materialists; both had returned to their staterooms immediately after 'the crash' to retrieve valuable objects: he his wallet, she her diamond necklace. The Sailor thought of his sole possession: life" (34). While describing "scientific racism" in functional terms in his *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction*, Simon During cites how the whites' "particular ideological needs … helped legitimate [their] domination of the globe." He further observes how racism facilitated the whites in asserting an unchallengeable authority through "capitalism and colonialism," and junked the blacks by incorporating a process of "systematic inequality":

> [Racism] also allowed whites to continue to dominate African Americans in the America where, even after the ending of slavery, a whole set of Jim Crow 'race laws' were established to prevent blacks participating fully in a society, politics, and economy. Racism also helped to unite groups of European dispersed across the globe under the impulsions of capitalism and colonialism. … Paradoxically, racism was also propelled by egalitarianism. It is as if once all human beings were deemed equal, systematic inequality could only be maintained by declaring some kinds of people less than fully human—and racism could do that. (163-64)

This well explains blacks' "systematic" relegation to the second class citizenry in the United States where their gradual social and political annihilation by the whites resulted in economic deprivation. Contrasting outfits of the whites and the black in *Thirst* justifies this claim and further clarifies why the advantaged white duo bludgeon together on the small raft where they constantly doubt, taunt, act up, intend to murder, and pass the worst possible racist remarks on the Sailor. Although the Sailor is taken in as "companion in misfortune" by them, his being dubbed as "black animal" or "dirty slave" (1.48) by Dancer, when her cons to hook him failed, carries the notion that he is considered "less than fully human" (During 164). In fact, blacks became the scapegoats of white's desire in the forms of golden championship title ("the Great White Hope"), the diamond necklace and the wallet (of the white passengers on the raft), etc. which, as detected by O'Neill, took the humanity or fellow-feeling out of mankind's gutter and left them looking down the barrel. In this society ruled by racial bigotry, if a black is able to prove his worth by achieving certain feat or proves to be superior, the mission to pull him down is initiated with double speed. As Larry Slade in *The Iceman Cometh* states: "I saw men didn't want to be saved from themselves, for that would mean they'd have to give up greed, and they'll never pay that price for liberty … And I took a seat in the grandstand of philosophical detachment to fall asleep observing the cannibals do their death dance" (1.570).

The reason for Gentleman's and Dancer's clubbing together, as stated above, is that they share a common ground founded upon socially and culturally endorsed binaries of color and economy. Hence, all out the play they have been conversing with each other where the Sailor is found as an outsider. When the first time they refer to him, their language smacks of scoff, doubt, and cynicism. To the Gentleman, the Sailor is "strange," and he comments, "I do not know what to think of him." The

Dancer retorts: “I do not pity him. I am afraid of him” (1.35). Therefore, both the Gentleman and the Dancer bear the stigma of racial narrow-mindedness and prejudice through which they further intensify and worsen their nightmarish situation. The core humane or religious fraternity among mankind even in the face of imminent disaster was found missing in white passengers’ treatment of Mulatto Sailor, and as William Pickett observes in a cynical tone, this has been a common black ordeal in US society:

> We may be taught in our churches to regard the Negro as a brother under the great fatherhood of God, but the lesson of fraternity proves helplessly insufficient when brought to the test of everyday conditions of life … This pronounced repulsion of the white toward the Negro is … founded upon such fundamental primitive instincts that its eradication is absolutely impossible. (17)

Thirst shows how racial bigotry and snobbishness carries with it harmful cultural tremor and effects in creating social gap among human beings. Because of ethnic chauvinism the distance between the two whites and the black gradually widens until it culminates into a catastrophe. The Gentleman accuses the Sailor of stealing the last quantity of water, and then both he and the Dancer make a mockery of the Sailor’s song (1.33-34, 43). The Gentleman supposes that the Sailor has a flask concealed under his dress and the Dancer even suspects the sailor of hiding food (1.44). On top of continuously rebuffing, disdaining, isolating, and insulting the Sailor by calling him “rotten pig,” “murderer,” etc. (1.44), they nonetheless charge the Sailor for not wanting to talk to them. The Gentleman remarks: “He does not seem to want to speak to us.” The Dancer retorts: “I have noticed that, too. When I asked him about the song he did not want to answer at all” (1.35). In fact, the Sailor’s sense of isolation and

feeling of indignation come as an outcome of snobbery and intolerance from his white companions which can easily be labeled as "cultural racism."

Cultural racism, according to Simon During, is an offshoot of "institutional racism" and the shift has well been identified by O'Neill in *Thirst* which would haunt the United States of America in the next few decades and will elaborately be dealt with in his another black play *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1923) written exactly a decade after *Thirst*. Writing about the effect of cultural racism, During observes: "Cultural racism survives the downfall of institutional racism—that is, racism that formally disbars some races from access to jobs, neighborhoods, clubs, etc. And cultural racism is especially damaging in that it can so easily be interiorised by members of oppressed races themselves" (165). As seen throughout the play, the two whites always maintain the *status quo* while dealing with the Sailor where the latter fails to have an access to white social sphere. In consequence, whenever the sailor is questioned or charged by them, he recoils to himself with an "interiorised" sense of being intimidated. These keynotes of his defensive disliking of two white companions and his resigned indifference go hand in glove with the stage direction that O'Neill ascribes to him: "*When he [Sailor] speaks it is in drawling sing-song tones as if he were troubled by some strange impediment of speech. He croons a monotonous negro song to himself as his round eyes follow the shark fins in their everlasting circles*" (1.31). This viewpoint is afterward endorsed by the other two characters of the play, Gentleman and the Dancer, as the former views: "Yet he speaks good English. It cannot be that he does not understand us"; and the latter says: "When he does speak it is as if he had some impediment in his throat" (1.35). In fact, this "impediment" is not to be treated on physical level but rather literally, figuratively and psychologically—the racial barrier the white institution and culture (of which the white duo are the

representatives) raised upon the black Sailor. Isolated, confined to mere crooning to himself, doubted and distrusted, the Sailor is stripped off the quotidian mind-frame to communicate with his white raft-mates since he knows pretty well that he does not belong to their world. Except singing to himself and occasionally answering to the white companions' rebukes and allegations in short shielding sentences, he is not engaged in any part or dialogue with his white companions in the drama until in the end when he intends to feast upon the corpse of the Dancer by taking resort to cannibalism.

Among many a negative connotation, racial intolerance and discrimination widens the crack between the oppressors and the oppressed, and later leaves both parties with an eerie feeling of fear and hatred. Particularly the person who is prejudiced against becomes a victim of suspicion and distrust as a result of the inbuilt phobia carried by the oppressing agents. As seen in the corresponding situation of *Thirst*, these dispositions are fatally dismantling the social schism between blacks and whites: "The wedge of racism separates men from others of their own species and blocks possibilities of common identification and mutual cooperation. Racism alienates men psychologically because it is also a flight from reality, distorting the human project of knowing the social world" (Blauner 20).

The Gentleman and the Dancer proactively initiate as well as complement the psychological pockmark the Sailor invokes in them which Joel Pfister terms as the "racist fears of the whites" gathered from "their deeply ingrained racial roles" (122). The Gentleman's experience of fear gets "deeply ingrained" in his subconscious and he relates to his white counterpart: "I dreamed he had a knife in his hand and looked at me. But it was all madness; I can see that now. He is only a poor negro sailor—our companion of misfortune. God knows we are all in the same pitiful plight. We should

not grow suspicious of one another." The Dancer retorts, though by bringing forth judgment from her conscious psyche, "All the same, I am afraid of him. There is something in his eyes when he looks at me, which makes me tremble" (1.35). Point to note, the Gentleman's remark that they should not become "suspicious of one another" is not carried out in reality since not long after this statement he and the Dancer start suspecting the Sailor of having and hiding drinking water and food. When the Sailor wishes for some water from the Gentleman so that he may continue singing for them as both the Gentleman and the Dancer demand of it to stave off silence, the Gentleman lashes out at him in the following way:

> (*furiously*) We have no water, fool! It is your fault we have none. Why did you drink all that was left in the cask when you thought we were asleep? I would not give you any even if we had some. You deserve to suffer, you pig! If anyone of the three of us has any water it is you who have hidden some out of what you stole. (*with a laugh of mad cunning*) But you will get no chance to drink it, I promise you that. I am watching you. (*The negro sullenly turns away from them.*) (1.43)

Noteworthy here is the use of plural pronoun and signifier "we" by the Gentleman in referring to himself and the Dancer. This not only signifies that the duo is conscious of their "racial roles" but also makes sure that it will "remain in force" throughout while sharing and administering their same plight. As the Dancer gets excited and takes his arm after this initial derring-do of the Gentleman in setting the pandemonium of mistrust (with the notion that the Sailor had water), in no time does she reach a decision form "Do you really think he has some …" (1.43) to "It is true … he must have something hidden …" (1.44) which is banked absolutely not upon facts

or findings but rather on the "He may have" (1.43) hypothesis or anecdotes of her white mate.

In *Thirst*, O'Neill portrays the shock and danger caused by revulsion and prejudice. Although the member of a despised race may find herself/himself defenseless or weak to wage a retaliatory attack against her/his tormenter, the years of digesting subjugation and patience unavoidably give a way to anger and abhorrence. Booker T Washington's testimony justifies this: "I suffered much, I grew to hate whitemen—I hated them until my soul began to dry up" (qtd. in Bridges 6). If we consider that the Sailor indeed drank the remaining amount of water, we have to contend that besides being selfish he was thirsty. But even in hindsight if we presume that he did, a closer look justifies the fact that his action of not sharing the water with his cohorts was goaded by the barrage of hurled abuses and racial spite he has been put through. From the moment the Gentleman and the Dancer enter the raft they never regard the Sailor as one of them but rather as a pariah intruding upon their everyday living. On top of it all, they insult him and call him by derogatory names. Thus, it is understandable that he will react in his capacity so as to reveal his resentment and hurt feelings. As Chester Long observes: "The Sailor has broken the rules of disaster survival on the sea, [i.e.] all life sustaining goods, such as water and food, are to be strictly and equitably rationed among the survivors by someone appointed to administer the distribution … It must be remembered here that these civilized beings have treated him rather badly" (54 and 56). The white duo's ill-treatment might be the reason behind the Sailor's drinking the water alone.

One of the crucial topics O'Neill puts forward in *Thirst* is that of class disintegration, i.e. under pressure class difference disintegrates. It suggests that people are prepared to compromise their position, prestige, and valuables when life is in

jeopardy, and that they will do anything, be it sordid or preposterous, to stay alive. This is germane both to the Dancer who is ready to let go of her treasured diamond necklace and surrender her highly-priced body to the black Sailor whom she despises, and at the same time to the Sailor who opts for cannibalism. The Dancer swears never to part with her necklace under any circumstances since to her its worth is extraordinary. She says, "It is worth a thousand pounds. An English gave it to me. I will never part with it" (1.45). Likewise, she is proud of her unfailing, attractive body for which, in her words, "Noblemen and millionaires and all degrees of gentleman have loved …, fought for …" (1.48). Now she gives up both the necklace and the highly desired body to none other than the one, the "pig," she hates the most. Here O'Neill advances the message, through ramification, that class distinction, color, supposition of superiority, etc. are merely man-made and account for nothing when people find themselves in hopeless and threatening circumstances.

However, to ponder over the fact as to why O'Neill makes the Sailor reject the Dancer and her necklace—the archetypes of apex desire—gives rise to the following observations: firstly, to show the extent of Dancer's reaching the lower moral ebb; secondly, to mark out the double standards of Dancer's declaration of love for him, whom she has detested all along; thirdly, to avoid implicating the Sailor in the sense that if he gives in to Dancer's offerings, then it would signify that indeed he is hiding water, and hence his raft-mates' charges would stand; fourthly, to show the Sailor possesses a sheer good moral basis by downrightly discarding these worldly or carnal desires which used to be regarded as strong basic instincts in white world's standard. Peter Gillett appreciates the Sailor's solid stand and considers him "a noble savage who patiently bears the slanders of his white companions and spurns with quiet

dignity not only their threats but also their bribes and the woman's tawdry enticements" (116).

Quite in sequence, the Sailor in *Thirst* is found physically and psychologically projecting himself head and shoulders above his white mates. In fact, this is where lies O'Neill's credit of portraying a black un-stereotypically early in his career which critics overlooked from time to time. O'Neill demonstrates the inner power and fortitude of the Mulatto Sailor over the creepy despair and impatience of his white companions. Floyd writes, "Why, they wonder, is he stronger than they? Here for the first time O'Neill uses a theory that will be found in later works: that representatives of particular ethnic group, usually deprived, exploited social class, are superior, physically, morally, or both, to the possessors of wealth, position and power" (34). For instance, black Brutus Jones in *The Emperor Jones* is superior to white Smithers, and black Jim Harris is superior to his white counterpart Ella Downey in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*.

Regression for Accursed Humankind

According to Finn O'Toole, through *Thirst* O'Neill introduces his peculiar theory of the process of regression of his characters which will later be found in the portrayals of the protagonists of two of his later canonical plays: *The Emperor Jones* and *A Touch of the Poet* (O'Toole). In these plays, the regression is indicated by the stripping away of the clothing. In *Thirst*, the climax is marked by the striptease-like dance of maddening swirls by the Dancer who eventually will shred her cloth down to the waist right before she falls dead. The felon Jones loses his emperor's finery in eight scenes gradually and is left in mere loincloth at the end before being shot in *The*

Emperor Jones; in *A Touch of the Poet*, Con Melody's bragging scarlet uniform of the Duke of Wellington's army becomes filthy, torn, and is pulled awry—in both plays the regression takes place in the form of "physical and psychological striptease" (Pfister 126) invoking inward and outward commotions within the characters' selves. But *Thirst*, unlike these two plays, presents the Gentleman and the Dancer as already stripped off at the play's beginning; the Gentleman in his evening outfit is "*reduced to the mere caricature of such a garment*" and the Dancer is in "*baggy and wrinkled stockings*" and "*swollen and misshapen*" shoes (1.31). This gives the message that the regression of the white duo had already begun, even before the action kicked off, as they transgressed the bounds of humanity like the Blackman Jones and Irishman Con Melody. This reiterates the fact that O'Neill's outlook is balanced and unbiased towards any race and he doles out equal retribution to all who cross the limit of tolerance and basic humanity.

Racial Division as Symbolic of "Failed" Humanity

In the stage direction of *Thirst*, O'Neill describes the Gentleman as "*blistered with sunburn, haggard with hunger and thirst*" (1.31), and that the Dancer "*must have been very beautiful before hunger and thirst had transformed her into a mocking spectre of a dancer*" (1.32). But in describing the Sailor O'Neill does not attach him with the cumulating impact of either hunger or thirst which suggests that the Sailor is not at all affected by it. As the curtain rises, the audience is introduced with the three victims floating on a life raft on sea for some days where the Gentleman "*from time to time … licks his swollen lips with his blackened tongue*" (1.31), and the Dancer "*is sobbing endlessly, hopelessly*" (1.32) because of hunger and thirst whereas the Sailor

is simply crooning a "*monotonous negro song to himself as his round eyes follow the shark fins in their everlasting circles*" (1.31). It tells of Sailor's strength and resilience under harsh circumstances in terms of Darwinian survival of the fittest phenomenon. This view is further stamped by the Dancer when she says that the Sailor looks "as if he had never known hunger and thirst" (1.44). This physical prowess of the sailor is further complemented by his moral magnificence. When asked by the Dancer why he is singing to the sharks circling around, the Sailor replies: "It is a charm. I have been told it is very strong. If I sing long enough they will not eat us" (1.34). Point to note, for the Sailor "us" stands for all three of them, the humanity comprising both the white and the black alike. But as stated before, to the white duo this signifier ("us") stands for themselves only—a white world without the existence of any black. To the Dancer, "[the Sailor] deserves to be killed," while the Gentleman proclaims, "I would willingly kill him … I have no strength left. I have no weapons (1.44). Hence O'Neill provides the socially-on-shaky-ground Sailor with significant vigor, self-control, and nerve which can easily be contrasted with the socially-privileged white duo's hysteric grumbling, restlessness, and limitation. Certainly, O'Neill seems to appreciate the humanity and the superiority of the browbeaten faction *vis-à-vis* their oppressors, and when both collide, he doles out his fair share of compassion to the oppressed group. Gassner rightly views, "O'Neill's dramatic writing is divided between imaginative flights and traffic with humanity on the gritty ground. Just as his feeling for sailors, derelicts, and commoners is generally preferable to his dealings with educated and highly placed characters, so is his realism to his fancies, his earthiness to his literary ambitions" (76).

The play goes into climax when the Dancer's white ego is dumped by the Sailor's rejection of her diamond choker and appealing body for which "like a woman

scorned" she dances herself to death exposing her mates to an imminent "fury" to be resulted from her corpse. The demised body of the Dancer gives the Sailor a hope towards survival as he readies himself to resort to cannibalism. O'Neill's stage direction for Sailor reads, "*He takes his sailor's knife from its sheath and sharpens it on the sole of his shoe. While he is doing this he sings—a happy negro melody that mocks the great silence … his swollen lips parting in a grin as he points with his knife to the dead body of the Dancer*." The Sailor, who hardly speaks, now utters three sentences of atavistic clamors aimed at the Gentleman, "We will live now. We shall eat. We shall drink" (1.50-51). The Sailor's attempt bites the dust as the Gentleman, calling the good conscience of "Good God," throws the dead body into the water while the Sailor, raged at this act, stabs the Gentleman and both fall into the water from the ensuing *mêlée* only to be feasted by the waiting sharks.

Such portraiture of the Mulatto Sailor in *Thirst* has often been criticized by the black and the white critics alike particularly for propagating a dangerous stereotype when he attempts cannibalism that recalls the acting out of the dormant savagery of his folks in Africa. Gillett comments, "If there were any black people in the audience at the play's first night at Provincetown in 1916 they might well have been seen it as a stupid insult to themselves a contribution to a set of dangerous stereotypes" (116). On the contrary, the Gentleman tries hard to thwart the Sailor' act and eventually dies for this through which he has raised himself to the position of an allegorical agent of the civilized society circulated by the white race for ages.

However, During's view of "racialised individual" can be forwarded here in order to concede to the fact that O'Neill's Sailor in *Thirst* bears certain character traits of "hyper virility" (he is not severely effected by thirst or hunger as conceived in stage direction and later seen through his mates' observation which validates the fact

that he is very strong and resilient where they are of no match with him) and "threatening" stance (attempted cannibalism and stabbing the Sailor).[2] But it must be borne in mind that if his stereotyped black-traits carry atavistic threats (like that of cannibalism) to socially and culturally jeopardize the modern world of the whites represented by the Gentleman-Dancer duo, at the same time the white duo's evil intensions provide an obnoxious view of themselves. The Gentleman intends to "willingly kill" the Sailor initially but he "cannot do that" since he has "no strength left" (1.44). This gives rise to two trains of thought regarding O'Neill's alleged negative stereotyping the Sailor. Firstly, the duo's unsuccessful design and intention to kill him is tantamount to the attempt of murder which obviously is worse than the intention to eat a corpse of someone who dies of natural causes for staying alive. Secondly, it must be noted that the white duo's and particularly the Gentleman's zealous wonder and resentment towards the Sailor regarding the latter's being "much stronger" than them (1.44) served for the "hyper-virility" of the Sailor. This foremost "racial characteristic" of "hyper-virility" actually saved the Sailor from being murdered by the white duo since they were afraid of killing him even in sleep fearing his sheer physical prowess and retaliation.

Therefore, O'Neill, instead of character-assassinating a racial type through projecting her/him with negative traits, positively employs the traits to shield her/him from the disaster and death in the hands of her/his oppressor where these "typical" features (of the despised) instill fears in the mind of the tyrants. Hence, the Sailor survives the initial wrath of the white passengers simply because his stereotyped trait of threatening atavistic strength overpowers their inhuman, un-Christian, and un-civilized intention to murder him. Thus, O'Neill's incorporating of the racial traits for the disadvantaged, downtrodden, and despised class to their advantage wipes out the

accusation against him by black and white critics that he was a racist or that he conforms to the practices of white authors of negatively portraying ethnic characters in his plays.

The issue of cannibalism also gives rise to some significant interpretations. Richard Long claims that blacks are not the only race in literary canon depicted as cannibals: "We know from reliable reports that civilized people on life rafts have eaten each other" (48). But in *Thirst* O'Neill gives two choices to his characters, according to Chester Long, just before Nemesis takes its place and hence poses a serious moral dilemma in the mind of the audience: the Darwinian law of "survival of the fittest" which was a hot-button issue in the late ninetieth and early twentieth centuries worldwide, and that of civil law. In plain terms he asks: is it acceptable to try to survive by eating a dead body knowing very well that such an action is appallingly repulsive to civilized humankind; or to die of hunger and thirst keeping intact society's civil code? Chester Long observes:

> Considering the terms to which O'Neill has reduced the situation—survival of the fittest—ironically enough the Gentleman has opposed himself as violently to that law as the Sailor has opposed himself to the emergency extension of social justice. In that sense then, the Gentleman has broken the most basic law, survival of the fittest … therefore, according to the dramatic logic of the special way in which O'Neill has utilized and shaped the material idea of Nemesis in this play, even the Gentleman's death is partially deserved, for his actions have gone beyond what is just in these special circumstances. (57-58)

The Gentleman breaks both the laws of the world— through his previous homicidal tendency of murdering the Sailor, and by not letting the Sailor survive as the latter tries to follow the Darwinian law.

The early plays of O'Neill, "Thirst," "The Web," "Warnings," "Fog" and "Recklessness," published under the title *Thirst and Other One-Act Plays* in 1914, deal with themes as varied as the grim notions of pessimism, bitter antipathy against the frauds and pretenders of civilizations, loneliness and the never-ending suffering of man in an intriguing as well as intimidating universe, etc. O'Neill, in *Thirst*, digs deep into the human agony and shows how doubts, mistrust, cynicism, and lack of tolerance among individuals wreck havoc in the lives of three shipwreck survivors. On top of it all, O'Neill advances the fact that they perish because they smack of racial prejudice for which they could not jell together as normal human beings. The Gentleman's verbal recognition of the Sailor as "our companion of misfortune" was not meant for to take a shape into reality. The Dancer, who is assumed to have been saved by the Sailor from drowning and taken to the raft after the ship capsized, the account of which is also implied in the stage direction, in the white duo's conversation, and in Floyd's observation: "There is a feeling that he (Sailor) himself might have saved her on his own initiative" (36), in fact, showed inconsiderate and obvious ingratitude towards the Sailor. Had the duo been not racist and showed little humanity to the Sailor by treating him as one of them, the circumstance and the fate could have been different for all of them. They could have been assisted by the Sailor who knew more about navigation. If they had not become suspicious of him by showing racial hatred from the very beginning, the Sailor could have unselfishly shared the water as a result of which they could have clung on to their lives until they drifted near a shore or island. Indeed, the Sailor's act of drinking the water alone, if he

really did so, portrays him as lacking humanity and fellow-feeling, but it should be noted that such action was ignited from the chide and distrust he experienced in the hands of the white duo. Hence, these picture a horrible outcome of racial disharmony and hatred. Justifiably then, this play is a "race war" (Pfister 122) where the three do not die in the brutal tragedy of lacking food and water on the sea but rather they "perish at the end solely because they prey on each other" (Floyd 33).

On a broader sense, divisiveness among human beings as a subject matter has apparently been present in O'Neill's canon of works where man is found neither in harmony with nature, nor with himself, nor with his fellow mate. In September 1946, just before *The Iceman Cometh* premiered, in an interview given to the press, O'Neill denounced the United States as the "greatest failure on earth." He went on further to slam the whole human race in the following way: "If humanity failed to appreciate the secret of happiness contained in that simple sentence (what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul) it was time to dump the human race down the nearest drain and let the ants have a chance" (qtd. in Gassner 69). In fact, if the statement is applied to these three stranded victims of shipwreck in *Thirst*, who symbolize the humanity, we unquestionably can infer that they "failed to appreciate the secret of happiness," which was badly needed on the cut off atoll in the shape of brotherly care and compassionate understanding. Thus, O'Neill's repugnant view on humanity was put on stage as the humankind was seen unsuccessful to demonstrate mutual love, respect or appreciation for each other in *Thirst*, and hence, perished by becoming food for the sharks—befitting O'Neill's frustrated image for "failed" humanity.

However, in the next play *The Dreamy Kid* (1918), O'Neill discreetly moves away from directly engaging the white and the black individuals into violence to pin

down the consequence of inequity among human beings as he did in *Thirst.* In this play, the playwright deals only with the black characters to seriously brood over the issue of the race's underdog position in society as victims of racism. Its production on 31 October 1919 marks a landmark moment in Broadway as through it American audience saw for the first time black characters engaged in serous tragic roles. This play stands in interstice between the end of Progressive Era when the idea of black culture burgeoned and the start of Jazz Age when that very culture experienced renaissance. Staging the play *The Dreamy Kid* served for the African Americans' memorable *entrée* to the white professional theater (Sternlicht 47; Gelbs *O'Neill* 399) to finally elevate the podium towards liberalization and assimilation—the very fundamentals of which O'Neill wrote, believed in, and advocated all his life.

Promoting "Darker Brother"[3]*: Black-Irish Synthesis*

The brainwave for writing and staging *The Dreamy Kid* came to O'Neill while living in Greenwich Village in 1915 in the midst of some blacks at the Hell Hole. According to his second wife Agnes Boulton, O'Neill was moved by the story of "Dreamy" he heard from Joe Smith, O'Neill's longtime friend and roommate at Hell Hole whom Agnes describes as "the boss of a Negro underworld near the [Greenwich] Village," and as someone whose "tales were startling" (Boulton 135 and 176). Virginia Floyd considers two aspects of the "Dreamy" story that might have "proved irresistible" to O'Neill: firstly, the name "Dreamy" itself might have attracted the playwright since he is a champion canvasser for disillusionment or pipe-dreams as seen in many of his plays; and secondly, "the spiritual side of Dreamy" also could have lured O'Neill to write the play as the story suggested that the corrupted and

biased society failed to triumph over the spiritual side of Dreamy though it took him out physically (154). In *The Dreamy Kid*, O'Neill demonstrates his awareness and understanding not only of the exterior characteristics of Blacks, such as their appearance, surroundings or vernacular, but also of their certain inner traits, continuous strains and struggles in life. John Lovell Jr. views:

> The traditional Negro, beset by ignorance and superstition and requiring a supreme show of courage, every minute, just to stay alive, was perfect for casting in the O'Neil grand drama. In using the darker brother, Eugene O'Neill, the artist, faced two tests. First was the depiction of this darker brother's struggle against traditional forces. Second was the comparison of the traditional Negro with the real Negro in America who for almost a century has been undergoing the most rapid change of any American group in the process of integration of growth. (46)

The stage description of the house in New York City where Abe, the Dreamy kid, was brought up from late childhood to adulthood, the environment as well as the atmosphere hanging over the neighborhood, the abject situation of Abe's grandmother on deathbed surrounded by medicine bottles, etc. chronicle a common sight of poverty, despair, estrangement, and aggravation. It gives the impression that the population of this part of the United States hardly "belong." Among other references to the wretched image of Manny Saunders, there includes an "*old-fashioned wooden bed-stead with a feather mattress … In the rear wall, toward the right, a low window with ragged white curtains … The rooms is in shadowy half darkness, the only light being a pale glow that seeps through the window form the arc lamp on the nearby corner, and by which the objects in the room can be dimly discerned. The vague*

outline of Mammy Saunders' figure lying in the bed can be seen" (1.675). This sort of description not only arouses sympathy but also concern in the audience's mind and goes far to prove that O'Neill took and showed special attention as a playwright for the oppressed, outcasts, discriminated, and the deprived race. As Thomas H Dickinson comments, from time to time O'Neill showed "interest in the black race." He adds, "To the members of this race [O'Neill] was always ready to grant a hidden spring of beauty in character that he denied to the dominant white" (117).

In fact, O'Neill understood and recognized the plight of the blacks because he and his family lived through the so called American "melting-pot" set up. Being an Irish in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries meant being castigated, caricatured and prejudiced against in America (Shaughnessy "faithful realism" 149), where to be Irish meant to be black (O'Toole). That is why, according to recent scholars like John Patrick Diggins, Finn O'Toole, and Joel Pfister, a salient part of O'Neill's works deals with the internalized racism and includes blacks and the Irish who are doled out sympathy and identified as having a common standing.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, O'Neill's father lacked basic sustenance in childhood and O'Neill himself suffered from the same plight during his rebellious years as a youth. Even though James O'Neill became rich and famous as a matinee idol, he had to bear with racial injustice and snobbery from the northern Yankees for being an immigrant and sharing the Irish ethnic lineage that carried the "Irish Nigger" taboo (Pfister 123-24). Also the Irish people's presence as a "race" in the mid-nineteenth century America was a source of major controversy following their mass migration from Ireland to the United States as a result of potato famine. Their common physical traits like "low brows," "ape-like facial formation," brogue, etc. were singled out. This "scientific racism" was propelled further when in 1924 US

Congress made arrangement for a scientific testimony aiming at limiting the Irish immigrant influx in America since, as Barkan recounts in his influential book *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars*, the Irish were considered the most degenerative and defective of all immigrant sects (199-200). Joel Pfister corroborates the historically underlying yet undeniable affinity between the blacks and the Irish to show how it might have impacted O'Neill's psyche:

> O'Neill's stance against "discrimination of any kind" was probably rooted in some historical awareness that the Irish and the blacks were both victims of similar cultural stereotypes disseminated since the mid-nineteenth century (frequently by the American theater). Nineteenth century blackface minstrel shows often lampooned the Irish as shiftless, ignorant drinkers and featured actors in blackface dancing Irish Jigs. The term "Irish nigger" originated in the antebellum South, where the Irish were employed as cheap, expendable laborers on jobs too dangerous to be undertaken by black "property." (123-24)

O'Neill felt deeply about the blacks and drew them sympathetically in his plays as brow-beaten human beings, victims of society, with emotional intensity and familial bond living in an era when segregation of blacks in educational and religious institutions, public places like toilets and transports, offices, various social events, etc. were a bitter reality and an accepted phenomenon. Living in the ghettos and in isolation, the disadvantaged "Dreamy" kids of the era were sufferers of overt racial repression where the social structure conditioned lack of opportunities for them and other minorities and thus made it difficult to strive for a better future. As American

Bishops declared in 1958, in their article, "Discrimination and the Christian Conscience:"

> It is a matter of historical fact that segregation in our country has led to oppressive conditions and the denial of basic human rights for the Negro. This is evident in the fundamental fields of education, job opportunity, and housing. … One of the tragedies of racial oppression is that the evils we have cited are being used as excuses to continue the very conditions that so strongly fostered such evils. Today we are told that Negroes, Indians and also some Spanish speaking Americans differ too much in culture and achievements to be assimilated in our schools, factories and neighborhoods … [These people] wish an education that does not carry with it any stigma of inferiority … They wish acceptance based upon proved ability and achievement. (American Bishops 32-33)

The "Negro" is inherently present in O'Neill's major dramas to serve a close link between him and the playwright and America—sometimes he is O'Neill's "darker brother" and sometimes he is playwright's very close comrade marrying a white woman in the hope of getting assimilated and thus accepted in the white-defined social system. Gary Jay Williams relates the likelihood of an autobiographical resonance with Jamie (O'Neill's brother) as the prodigal son and O'Neill's "Darker Brother" in his article "*The Dreamy Kid*: O'Neill's Darker Brother" (3). O'Neill even had the intention of making Irene a white prostitute in *The Dreamy Kid* (Sheaffer 430) but later discarded the notion since, according to Margaret Ranald, it could have been tantamount to "playing with the fire" and ultra progressive for that time ("From Trial to Triumph" 61). However, five years later O'Neill fulfills his desire with *All God's*

Chillun Got Wings where Jim is a near mock-up of Joe Smith, playwright's Hell Hole roommate and lifelong friend, and his wife Ella is white.

"Nigger"[4] *on the Run: The Dream Deferred*

In *The Dreamy Kid*, Abe, the central character, smacks of an ignorant, meek, innocent young lad. The name is ironical when judged against Dreamy's defiant, frightening, and boisterous disposition as a teenager right after the play begins. O'Neill's stage description for Dreamy reads: "*He is a well-built, good-looking young Negro, light in color. His eyes are shifty and hard, their expression one of tough, scornful defiance. His mouth is cruel and perpetually drawn back at the corners into a snarl*" (1.680). This will stand as total contrast to what Mammy Saunders, who raised him single-handedly from a baby, tells us a little later in reminiscence that Dreamy had an innocent childhood and used to gaze at the world with joy, admiration, and dream:

> Down by de crik—under de ole willow—whar I uster take yo'—wid yo' big eyes a-chasin'—de sun flitterin' froo de grass—an' out on the water— … yo' was always—a-lookin'—an' a-thinkin' to yo'se'f—an' yo' big eyes jest a-dreamin' an' a-dreamin'—an' dat's w'en I gives yo' dat nickname—Dreamy. (1.690)

As per Mammy, an innocent Dreamy, as an infant, would gaze at the world with joy, admiration, and eyes full of dream. The innocent, dreamy eyes spurred her to give him such name, she tells.

Dreamy, however, has been on the run for quite some time as he is wanted by police for killing a white man in self defense. He vows, however, never to be taken

alive in this post-slavery, modern era by the agents of the white law much like his antebellum forerunner George Harris in George Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), a stage version of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel. Both the portrayals (of Dreamy and George) show how for decades the blacks have been on their heels to be alive. While they are fugitives in the eyes of white law, they have to commit the crime as the worst possible choice when they are pushed and confined to a back-against-the-wall situation for existence. George in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* becomes a runaway slave after he has been threatened to be separated from his wife and son even though he tamely endures and carries out "the hardest, meanest and dirtiest work" (1.1.376) for his master. He has no other option but to flee to Canada[5] to prevent all three of them from being separated for lifetime (his infant is also about to be sold to a speculator), and when he declares to escape to North and then to Canada and is asked by an anxious Eliza of a possible capture in the hands of law for breaching the clauses of the Slave Act, George shows his strong resolve by declaring, "I won't be taken, Eliza—I'll die first! I'll be free, or I'll die" (1.1.377)! Likewise, Dreamy is determined to evade the shadows of the prison-house lurking behind him. When Irene apprehensively tells him that police might hunt him down someday, Dreamy proclaims: "Dey'll have some gittin'. I git some o' dem fust. Dey don' git dis chicken alive! Lawd Jesus, no suh. Not de Dreamy" (1.688)! Later on he also reiterates this in the same confident vein, "Dey don' get the Dreamy alive—not for the chair! Lawd Jesus, no suh" (1.690)!

The crime-motif shows that George in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* broke the white law by trying to keep the family bond active; otherwise all three of them would be living separately without knowing each other's whereabouts or existence. Backing up his own decision for breaching the Southern law, he asks Wilson, a white planter, to picture:

> I wonder, Mr. Wilson, if the Indians should come and take you a prisoner away from your wife and children, and want to keep you all your life hoeing corn for them, if you'd think it your duty to abide in the condition in which you were called? I rather imagine that you'd think the first stray horse you could find an indication of Providence, shouldn't you? (2.3.396)

In Dreamy's case, however, it was an act of self-defense. Before the deadly encounter with the white fellow took place, he has been warned of it, and according to his account of the story, he did his best to stay out of this, but his attacker was pigheaded:

> 'T'warn't my doin' nohow. He was de one lookin' for trouble. I wasn't seekin' for no mess wid him dat I would help. But he tole folks he was gwine ter git me for a fac', and dat fo'ced my hand. I had ter git him ter pertect my own life. (1.680-81)

The general law of the nature bears the fact that the greatest instinct in every human being is self preservation, i.e. if the life of any creature is jeopardized, he or she instinctively fights against all odds and circumstances to shield her/himself, to ward off the attacker. This is what both George and Abe did for safeguarding family or life.

The fact of the matter is, though Dreamy is living in postbellum modern era as a free man, the law of the land is determined and influenced by race, color, and position where the oppressed minority is denied fair trial. Since everyone is not equal in the eyes of biased law, Abe does not turn himself over to police for committing a homicide in self-protection; and even though he has witnesses for this, he knows very well that he will not go through a just trial. Living in a hostile environment where the law of the state will not protect him, Abe chooses to run away from it.

In fact, centuries of racial bigotry, domination, and discrimination trigger off anger and abhorrence in the victims. As a result, these sufferers of injustice are constantly on the back foot and will easily counter at the slightest of provocation: "Under the usual apparent submissiveness and deference of the negro … is to be found a sullen, malignant hatred of the superior race, easily inflamed and jealously quickening into life under slight provocation. This is but the natural result of centuries of scornful treatment, industrial oppression and constant assertion of race superiority" (Pickett 17). The direct physical threat from the white guy coupled with years of repulsion towards his race might have prompted Dreamy to shoot him.

One of the reasons behind this constant feeling of indignation and repulsion among the blacks and other minorities came as a result of their shattered dream in North (Jones 152). According to Virginia Floyd, "There are two forces at work affecting Dreamy: his heritage, symbolized by his aged grandmother, that preserver of an ancient culture, and his environment, represented by the policeman, who, in the name of society, assault the very stronghold where the cultural symbol lies dying" (158). O'Neill, through *The Dreamy Kid*, shows how blacks from different generations (Dreamy and his grandmother) had their dreams devastated in the North.

The postbellum era of late nineteenth century saw droves of southern blacks migrating to North from the rural South to work in cities and factories particularly between 1915 and 1920, during World War I years. Leaving behind the dreadful memory of slavery, the migrating blacks had very high anticipations of good days ahead. But at the end of the War in 1919, race riots erupted in industrial cities where the blacks underwent ordeals of job discriminations and housing restrictions leading to killings of hundreds in fights and shoot-outs. Born in slavery, Mammy Saunders migrated to North in the hope of a changed and good fortune where Dreamy

symbolized the means of achieving black American dream for her. On her deathbed, she speaks of that moment of great joy when she gave her grandson the very moniker "Dreamy":

> Does you know how yo' come by dat nickname dey all calls yo'—de Dreamy? Is I ever tole yo' dat? Hit was one mawnin' b'fo' we come No'th. (1.684)

Giving Abe the moniker "Dreamy" a day before migration therefore carries paramount significance for Mammy. The word "Dreamy" is a sort of commemoration of the moment of belief that time in North would heal the deep scars of South for Mammy. Dreamy the word stands not only for Dreamy the person, the apple of her eye, but also the "Dreamy" North of betterment. Therefore, the moniker is a tribute to the black American dream, a yearning that moved the lives of millions. Craving Dreamy to see therefore is a solemn hymn to the belief in the dream of better days which brought blacks like Mammy here in North. Seeing Dreamy would re-emphasize the belief with assurance that the dream is still alive and kicking and not lost into oblivion.

Mammy does not know her dream has already turned into a nightmare in Dreamy. Dreamy is no longer the meek, jolly kid she once reared. He, in fact, is a killer wanted by police. A stage description of the interior, "*a washstand with bowl and pitcher ...* [*b*]*ottles of medicine, a spoon, a glass, etc. ... on the stand,*" (675) clarifies the fact that she has been laid up for quite some time with hardly any communication with or knowledge of the world outside her room. Mammy doesn't know the outer reality on street for blacks like Dreamy kids as her movement is constrained. She asks Dreamy why he has not been around for some years to talk to her: "I wants ter talk. You knows you ain't give me much chance ter talk wid yo' dese

las' years" (683-84). It suggests that she does not know the reason why Dreamy is unable to come and visit her all these days as she is in the dark about Dreamy's carryings on nowadays.

Mammy learned racism in South and Dreamy in North. She dreamt of living a non-racist life in North and thus wished to provide Dreamy with an unconstrained upbringing. But for Dreamy even the confines of Mammy's bedroom is under racist attack. As Mammy talks endlessly of the moments she thinks worth reminiscing, he raises his ears continuously to every sound that comes from hallway staircase and peeks through the window curtains to make out if he is tailed by the plainclothesmen. Thus, while Mammy tried to unlearn racism in North, Dreamy encounters it on and off, here and there. Keeping her unlearned cost him his life because he knew seeing Mammy on deathbed would be a death-trap for him since the cops are after him. Yet he chooses to be beside her jeopardizing his life and not heeding his gang's advice to stay away. On one hand, O'Neill's stagecraft spares her the agony of learning the bitter truth, and on the other, shows a failed black resettlement.

Mammy's such illusion versus Dreamy's lived reality not only serves as the central conflict of the drama but also brings to fore twentieth century's one of crucial intellectual debates: whether moving from South to North really paid off for blacks. As August Wilson considered black migration North, in his words, "a transplant that did not take," so his *Seven Guitars* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* show African Americans making "atonement for this so-called original sin" (Shannon 660). O'Neill, through Mammy and Dreamy, representatives of two generations of blacks, shows how the black dream was conceived and what it has turned into. Mammy's traditional, southern "*red-and-yellow quilt*" may still look "*gaudy*" as is the case in Morrison's *Beloved*, but the "*white curtain*" separating her one-room tenement from overlooking

the neighborhood streets is "*ragged*." The tattered condition of the curtain not only tells of poverty, but also stands for the squalor of which Mammy is unaware.

The dream of achieving higher social status did not come true in the North for blacks, and worse, nearly three hundred years' black "heritage" which had chronologically developed in the South had been abandoned by the migration to North. Also, the new Northern "environment" drove the blacks crazy. In his 1989 interview with Bill Moyers of *American Theater*, August Wilson opined that the black migration to North was one "incorrect choice." He further said, "I think we should have stayed in the South. We attempted to plant what in essence was an emerging culture, a culture that had grown out of our experience of 200 years as slaves in the South. The cities of the urban North have not been hospitable. If we had stayed in the South, we could have strengthened our culture" (Kennedy and Gioia 1729). Thus the migration not only harmed the two-century old black culture blossomed in the South, but it had also proved to be disillusionment for them.

O'Neill's protagonist Dreamy in the play is chased by the police, the representative of hostile "environment," who are hot on his trail. The doomed Dreamy becomes, in Joel Pfister's words, "O'Neill's embodiment of the black dream of freedom in the North turned into a nightmare" (124). Nonetheless, Dreamy adds further tag on black's trajectory of evolvement in America, by taking the baton from his avatar George Harris and running, by becoming a postbellum Northern runaway felon from an antebellum Southern runaway slave.

Militant-Intent: "If We Must Die"

O'Neill's antithetical projection of Dreamy-in-crisis, marked by two events' simultaneous collision—Mammy's (culture-protector) being on deathbed, and the murder of the white man (culture-destroyer)—brings out a militant look in Dreamy, the kind of which had some historical connotations. The aggression that the 1919's audience saw in Dreamy and also partly noticed in the Mulatto Sailor of 1916's *Thirst* was what the whites feared in the black soldiers who would return victorious from World War I. In fact, according to Huggins, Blacks' participation in the War was envisioned "as an opportunity to bargain for improvement in official policies toward black citizens" by leading black intellectuals like Joel Spingarn, the chairman of the board of NAACP, and its founder-editor of *The Crisis*, WEB Du Bois. Their argument was that if blacks could take part under the leading nation's (America's) drive to establish social justice, democracy, and self-determination among world peoples, it might get paid off to reinstate the same values on American soil by eradicating the laws and customs of Jim Crow, white's humiliation, and bitter race relations since the blacks would come back as changed "New Negro" men after the War (Huggins 35-36).

However, their existing segregation in army, set off back in 1899 when Theodore Roosevelt claimed that "the racial weakness" of blacks would prevent them from taking command as officers (Gates "Trope of a New Negro" 138), bound them to fight under the attachment of French Army's Three-hundred-sixty-ninth Regiment. The entire black unit was awarded the "Croix de Guerre," the highest existing tribute by the French Army for showing outstanding record of valor and distinction in the war, even though the American Army circulated racist pamphlets among the French troops titled as "Secret Information Concerning Black Troops" suggesting that the French be aware of blacks and treat them in the "most official and perfunctory way"

otherwise blacks might rape French women. The East St. Louis race riot of 1917, the execution of black soldiers of the Twenty-fourth Infantry Regiment involved in the riot, and other numerous odds against the blacks could hardly subdue the their march in New York City on 17 February 1919 (exactly eight and a half months before *The Dreamy Kid* was staged). This signaled a "black victory" to the New Yorkers (Huggins 37-38 and 54-55) and symbolized to thousands of onlookers as the dream that things would change (Lewis 3).

In fact, the central idea behind the "New Negro" claim was explained by the "father of the New Negro" and the Harlem Renaissance intellectual Alain Locke who identified the war veteran blacks as "sudden and shocking." Locke defined "New Negro" as having self-confidence, self-respect, and a personality of her/his own who would shred off the century old white formulation of blacks—the stereotypes, the likes of which made way into "fiction, preserved in white minds through sentimentalism and reaction" (Huggins 56-57). This metamorphosis of blacks to "fight back" after they returned from War was also previously envisioned by Du Bois who hoped that blacks would overhaul their status in America to give a new persona to their despised identity—from Uncle Tom-like modest, docile, patient, and unassuming way of turning the other cheek to fight and make America safe for themselves, and to establish an "absolute and unequivocal social equality" with the assertion of militancy or aggression, and self-assurance (53 and 71). The "New Negro" formula called for self-assurance and self-defense to redress the racial grievances that would enact a change in and definition of black rights in Postwar America (Lewis 3; Huggins 71). Inspired by this "New Negro" notion, writers of Harlem Renaissance in the late second decade and in the early twenties authored a

plenty of works; one of the most notable pieces was a poem titled “If We Must Die” by Claude McKay:

> If we must die, let it not be like hogs
> Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
> While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
> Making their mock at our accursed lot.
> If we must die, O let us nobly die,
> So that our precious blood may not be shed
> In vain; then even the monsters we defy
> Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
> O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
> Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
> And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
> What though before us lies the open grave?
> Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
> Pressed to the wall, dying but fighting back![6]

Considered “the inaugural address of the Harlem Renaissance” (Maxwell), this poem draws upon the fierce race riots that shook the urban centers of contemporary America. Published in the July issue of the *Liberator*, the poem not only depicts a rancorous outcry against white aggression but also implores the blacks towards bloody reprisal. While *The Dreamy Kid*, staged in October on Broadway, may not have caused a nationwide cultural uproar like McKay’s poem, deserves attention for portraying an image of black resilience and resistance through the title character Dreamy. Dreamy, in the play, is drawn in a “fighting back” image with bellicose and militant look—showing expressions of “*shifty and hard … scornful defiance*” on face,

wearing "*well-fitting clothes of a flashy pattern. A light cap is pulled down on the side of his head,*" and carrying a cocked revolver in hand that looks like a tank. This description exactly fits in and goes hand in glove with the "New Crowd Negro" cartoon published in the September 1919 issue of *The Messenger* right after race riots had shaken some US cities (Pfister 127).[7]

Indeed, racial violence ran high in America during the time the staging of Eugene O'Neill's *The Dreamy Kid* took place. Termed as "Red Summer" by Johnson (Erikson 2293-4), *The Crisis* reported that at least 77 lynching of blacks took place during the summer and the early autumn of 1919. Such Postwar riots characterized by whites' attack and blacks' fighting back pepped the cultural climate of the time. As though driven by the "New Negro" ethics, out of self defense Dreamy "croaked" the white fellow and now on the run form police who are chasing him. Taking advantage of his emotional situation of visiting his ailing grandmother on deathbed for the last time, the policemen close on him like "hungry dogs." Though he knows he will be outnumbered by police, he vows to "git some o' dem fust" in a sheer defiance and commitment of a "fighting back" spirit which complies with the New Negro mantra—"If We Must Die."

The Birth of "Authentic Negro" Tragedy

However, one of the major focuses on *The Dreamy Kid* is to unearth the loss of Dreamy's innocence and the reasons behind it. According to Mammy's accounts, Dreamy has always been a good boy and she shows strong faith in him as she was telling around all that "Dreamy ain't gwine let his ole Mammy die all lone by he'se'f an' him not dere wid her" (1.682). She seems content and proud with the good

upbringing she provided Dreamy with even on her deathbed: “if dere’s one thing more’n nother makes me feel like I mighter done good in de sight er de Lawd, hits dat I raised yo’ fum a baby” (1.684). Mammy Saunders dies in her innocence and naivety with the knowledge that her grandson is the same good “dreamy kid” once she raised. She does not know her dream has already turned into a nightmare in Dreamy. O’Neill’s special theatrical maneuver spares her the agony, disappointment, and shock, unlike Ceely Ann and Irene, of learning that Dreamy is no longer the meek, jolly kid she once reared, but indeed a killer wanted by police.

The truth is, Dreamy loses his innocence because the very society he lives in denounces and castigates him for his racial affiliation or skin color, deprives him of the basic opportunities of sustenance, job or descent living, and thus he invariably resorts to disreputable or violent means to stay alive or to take his frustration out on. Floyd views, “As years passed, Abe’s eyes lost their dreaminess, which was crushed by the harsh realities of his life on the streets of New York” (154). Thus he invariably resorts to disreputable or violent means to stay alive. Blauner recounts a testimony of a black American living in that era to delineate how wretchedly they survived: “We need jobs. I got eight kids, and I’ve only worked ten days this year. I ain’t ever been a crook, but if they don’t do something, I’m gonna have to take something. I don’t know how they expect us to live” (200). The social system that banks upon systematic exclusion and breeds racial narrow-mindedness and oppression made it impossible for a colored person to maintain a livelihood to exist respectably in society.

Moreover, the presence of police offstage, invisible yet omnipresent, representing as well as propagating institutionalized racism should also be taken into consideration. Members of police force have often been charged with harassment and unconscionable brutality against the blacks and other minorities in the US which

pervaded particularly throughout Jim Crow era. They served the interest of the white people by either killing blacks in encounters or supporting the whites in interracial riots. Historians often charge members of police force with harassment and unconscionable brutality against the blacks. This accusation, nonetheless, applies here as they advance to hunt down Dreamy even at the time of his acute mental turmoil. Since they ingloriously close in and he is aware of their hatred towards his race, Dreamy grows more with militant-intent and pledges to fight back rather than to be taken alive. Through splendid theatrical ingenuity O'Neill here is stirring audience's compassion towards Dreamy, who regardless of this impending danger around, persuaded by his superstitious belief and goaded by love for dying grandmother, decides not to run off but to be on her side. The policemen pose threat not only to Dreamy, the torch-bearer of the next generation of blacks, but also to old grandmother who suffers emotional sterility in his absence. Hence the audience is repulsed, disgusted, and frustrated seeing police's lack of humanity, particularly when they intrude upon the house in about the time of the old woman's passing out. Robert Blauner's illuminating assessment of the force follows such:

> Of all establishment institutions, police departments probably include the highest proportion of individual racists … The police constrict African Americans to black neighborhoods by harassing and questioning them when they are found outside the ghetto … and they continue to use offensive and racist language no matter haw many seminars on intergroup understanding have been built into the police academy … Journalistic accounts suggest that police see themselves as defending the interests of white people against a tide of black insurgence … There is probably no other opinion on which the races

> are today so far apart as they are on the question of attitudes towards the police. (97-99)

O'Neill seems to insist on the common black perception of this racist organization to corroborate the verity when he puts more stress not on the gross exterior of gangster-murderer Dreamy, but on the delicate interior of caring Dreamy. Dreamy is not portrayed as an obstinate criminal or flagrant lawbreaker posing a threat to civilization, but rather as someone with humane qualities as seen in his love and concern for family members, and risking life just to meet the dying grandmother. When Mammy laments to Dreamy that he has not been around for some years to talk to her, he replies with a note of appeal: "I ain't had de time, Mammy; but you knows I was always game ter give you anything I got. You knows dat, don' you, Mammy" (1.684)? Edwin Engel, in his *The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill* observes that "beneath his hard, efficient, snarling exterior there appears increasingly the soft and dangerous tendencies which he has carried within him … Superstition, affection, boyish bravado, effect the disintegration of the adult Negro who was unfortunate enough to come of age in the sordid, alien, white man's environment of New York City" (46).

By apprising audience of the reason behind Dreamy's killing the white man, O'Neill seems to downplay the gravity of the homicidal offense to diminish our aversion towards him. In consequence, audience's sympathy reaches out to Dreamy who murders to protect himself from getting killed. In a critic's words, "O'Neill induces your complete sympathy and pity for a conventionally abhorrent character" (Woollcott 134).

Besides, Dreamy's family, serving as a microcosm of black community, is depicted to harbor genuine love and altruism, which goes far to show O'Neill's care

for the oppressed minority, particularly considering the fact that *The Dreamy Kid* is the only play dealing with all black characters without the "melting-pot" situation except for the offstage presence of the white policemen. When the action kicks off, Ceely Ann is discovered to serve the needs of dying Mammy Saunders and reassuring her of recovery. She cheers Mammy up but the audience sees her wiping her tears with handkerchief secretly. Although she is aware of Mammy's failing health, she tries to invigorate her spirit claiming that old Mammy is soon going to regain her health to start over again: "de doctor tole me des when I goes down to de door with him. (*glibly*) He say you is de mos' strongest 'oman fo' yo' years ever he sees in de worl'; and he tell me you gwine ter be up and walkin' agin fo' de week's out" (1.676). The fret and solicitude of Dreamy's girlfriend Irene for his safety, her wide search to track him down in order to hide him from the encroaching police, her determination to stay and die with him obviously excites our admiration for her. Through these characters O'Neill appears to present to the audience a glaring picture of what true love, care, gratitude, and fellow-feeling—mankind's "secret of happiness"—is all about. O'Neill denies this rare show of harmony to any of his ensembles of whites in his entire dramatic canon.

Indeed, through Dreamy's lover Irene, who declares to stick to him come what come may when she says, "What I care if dey kills me … I'se gwine stick wid you" (1.689), O'Neill forwards for the first time in his dramas, the need and indispensability of love as an anecdote, a therapy for "the sickness of today." O'Neill reiterates this idea of love as the sole hope for humanity through Lazarus later. In *Lazarus Laughed* (1928), the title character tells Tiberius, who wishes hope for himself, "But there is hope for man! Love is man's hope—love for his life on earth, a noble love above suspicion and distrust! Hitherto man has always suspected his life,

and in revenge and self-torture his love has been faithless … Hope for you, Tiberius Caesar … Be brave enough to be possessed" (4.1.610)!

In this play, O'Neill, however, was once again accused of lining up racial stereotypes through Dreamy and his old grandmother as, according to some critics, they carry superstitious beliefs and plantation era character traits. For instance, Dreamy is persuaded by his superstitious fears, despite the serious risk to his life, to visit and stay by his dying grandmother's bedside so as to escape the curse of bad luck that might befall him. As he says, "De boys was all persuarin' me not ter take de chance. It's takin' m life in my hands, dat's what. But when I heard it was ole Mammy croakin' and axin' ter see me, I says ter myse'f: "Dreamy, you gotter make good wid ole Mammy no matter what come—or you don' never git a bit of luck in yo' life no more"" (1.682). However, it can be argued that this kind of superstitious disposition in a character is pretty common in O'Neill's plays dealing with white casts as well; for example, Cabots and Mannons of *Desire under the Elms* (Eben's faith in his mother's spirit or Abbie's infanticide) and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (Lavinia's belief that the revenge cycle was triggered off from secret repressions and disgraces under the "whited sepulcher") are possessed by it, and therefore, it cannot be claimed that people of a particular ethnic group only subscribes to this belief-system. Hence "the residue of primitive superstition in civilized man" (Gillett 117) can be identified in both black and white portraits alike in O'Neill's plays. Also, as stated before, O'Neill's Dreamy is drawn after the "New Negro" model, and to compare him with an antebellum "Old Negro," who breeds superstition, sacrifices all for a flogger white master, is irrelevant.

Further, Mammy should not be taken as caricatured for namesake. She also does not conform to the plantation era portraits like Chole or Dido[8] simply because

she engineers the vision of black American dream of postbellum or post-slavery migration period—coming in the urban North from resigned passivity of life in isolated Southern country farms in the hope of changing social and financial status. In this regard, *The Dreamy Kid* shares weight with Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Hansberry's Mama (Lena Younger) plays the second string of black American dream as she buys a house for her family in the midst of the whites, who do not want to take her family in, with an aspiration of getting assimilated. Hence Mammy Saunders stands as a prototype of black's desire to vie for equality in white-dominated American society. Both plays' records of the evolvement of the blacks' desires in America and their unyielding dream to earn recognition in the face of society's jaundiced view of them are considered rare moments in American drama. Significantly enough, Hansberry's title of the play, taken from a line of Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem," splendidly suits Dreamy's plight—"Dream deferred … Like a raisin in the Sun" (Paul & Hunter 1805)? Huggins narrates how the New Negro movement bit the dust in the wave of white thrashing:

> The irony was considerable. Among other things, the post-war years saw a spectacular revival of racism; the new Ku Klux Klan found white support throughout the country, and violence against Negroes increased. Apparently, the white Americans believed in the New Negro as much as black Americans did; he was a threat to one as much as a hope to the other. (56)

Therefore, Dreamy was destined to fall if judged in the light of historical fact stated above. When goaded by love and superstition, he happens to visit his dying grandmother jeopardizing his life and not heeding his gang's advice to stay away. He undoubtedly arouses a sense of pity and admiration in audience's mind irrespective of

the enormity of his crime. According to Joseph Wood Krutch: "Many of O'Neill's characters were to be obsessed by something stronger than themselves and it is that obsession, that relation to something good or evil bigger than their conscious minds, which makes them interesting to their creator. They … 'belong' to something, and the most tortured of his characters are those who … have lost all sense either that they 'belong' to anything or that there is anything in the universe to which it is possible to belong" (82-83).

When applied to Dreamy, we find that at the beginning of the play he is reported to have been a goon and a drifter of some sort who, according to Ceely Ann, whiles away his time "with all his carryin's-on wid dat passel er tough young niggers—him so uppity 'cause he's de boss er de gang—sleepin' all de day 'stead er workin' an' Lawd knows what he does in de nights—fightin' wid white folks, an' totin' a pistol in his pocket" (1.678). If pondered as to why a young potential kid is hanging around and doing nothing, the answer would be that for Dreamy and many blokes of his race there is hardly any opportunities to advance in a racially prejudiced society. To wonder why Dreamy is involved in "fightin' wid white folks," it might be that he considers them as an entrenched vehicle of his people's oppression, his folks' poverty and repression. George S Schuyler observed in the twenties:

> It is difficult enough to survive and prosper in this world under the best of conditions, but when one must face such an attitude on the part of those who largely control the means of existence, the struggle is great indeed … Nothing else could be expected from a people who confront a continuous barrage of insult and calumny and discrimination from the cradle to grave. The Negro is a sort of black Gulliver chained by

> white Lilliputians, a prisoner in jail of color prejudice, a babe in the forest of bigotry. (285 and 291)

Dreamy is already a "prisoner" before even committing a felony. He is "chained" by the "invisible" complex dynamics of power structures that existed in the then America.

Hence Dreamy is faced with the snobbish and biased society where he and his people have nowhere to turn to for remedy. Dreamy, O'Neill seems to be saying, cannot help the way he is, because he is repressed and encapsulated by forces beyond his control. Much like Mary Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, life has made Dreamy like that, and "he can't help it." As Mary laments, "None of us can help the things life has done to us. They're done before you realize it, and once they're done they make you do other things other things until at last everything comes between you and what you'd like to be, and you've lost your true self forever" (2.1.749).

The restless and paranoid Dreamy, portrayed as a murderer as well as a belligerent, defiant and repulsive character, is hard-bitten by the harsh realities of his surroundings where the social and administrative systems were indifferent to his plight: "Slavery, crime, penitentiaries, the whole vicious illogical structure of our modern industrial world, O'Neill felt, goad the poverty-stricken day and night to commit crime, and then when it is committed, punishes the criminal it has helped to make—punishes without reference to the cause that inspired the crime" (Winther 190).

The curtain falls as Dreamy is crouching down by Mammy's side (who is about to "croak") giving her his left hand, and holding the cocked revolver in right hand, aiming towards the fast approaching police at the door. His two hands are clutching "two warring ideals" (Du Bois 2) where Mammy represents the African

cultural heritage and his pistol stands for a fast, free, violence-prone African American new way of life of "New Negro" style. This, perhaps, serves for a physical representation of Du Boisian "double-consciousness" at its best. Mammy threatens Dreamy with the superstitious curse saying that if he departs her on deathbed he wouldn't have much luck in life: "If yo' leave me now, yo' ain't gwine git no bit er luck s'long's yo' live, I tells yo' dat" (688)! She asks him to say prayers for her on his knees and clutches to his hand when her time nears. She is sure that her withdrawal would be peaceful beside a meek, innocent, God-fearing Dreamy. While she reads Dreamy's uttering of "Lawd Jesus" as tinged with religious ecstasy to smoothen her release, the audience knows it is blasphemous and pronounced from a different perspective by Dreamy. Masking his newly evolved identity, Dreamy may play Jesus to Mammy, but he is a Judas in the eyes of white law.

Dreamy, nevertheless, fits the racist image of a violent black man circulated for a long time and thus formed a common American perception that colored youths are criminals and less than human. In the eye of law, he is, then, an obstinate criminal or flagrant lawbreaker who is a threat to white civilization that needs to be continuously controlled, confined, disciplined, and punished. The "invisible" police force in the play plays such "racial duty" of checking the blacks. The way Negrophobia is not seen but felt in the systemic ways of its operation that prevents black progress and undermines black attainment, the presence of police in the play likewise is not visible, but reported on stage by various characters before and after Dreamy's arrival in Mammy's one-room shabby tenement. While the "visible" effects of violence would result in killing, like Dreamy's killing the white and possible more killings in Dreamy-police encounter at play's end, the "invisible" effects of violence are even more vicious as it reinforces the existing structural and cultural violence

caused by "visible" or "direct violence" (Galtung). Dreamy's homicide disturbed the hegemonic formation, so now he has to undergo institutional and cultural violence. The police would run the cleansing operation by target shooting to quell an uprising to set the structure right, i.e., re-establishing white hegemony.

When the police reach the doorstep and their "*sound of movement from hallway*" seems silent like on tiptoes since they are about to break in from outside, Mammy "*groans weakly*" to breath her last holding Dreamy's right hand. Cocking the revolver in the other hand, violent Dreamy makes his "*pledge*" to shoot down some of the policemen as he "*aims his gun in the direction of the door* (691)." The police perform the modes of racial dominion with a view to rooting out the "undesirables," making sure the boundary is marked. Dreamy on the other hand shows a counter current of resistance by threatening to undermine white supremacy.

JP Diggings finds Dreamy's such demeanor a befitting "tragic struggle," and regards Dreamy as "an authentic Negro character" that leading theater critic George Jean Nathan rightly spotted in the early 1920s. Diggings further elaborates,

> In Dreamy O'Neill presents a hardened black man rising to individual responsibility and moral choice, an 'authentic Negro character' capable of sensing the conflict of values that is at the heart of tragedy, a character divided against himself, torn between the warnings of his gangs to stay away and the memories of his grandmother that compel him to return. (141-42)

O'Neill portrays Dreamy as a genuine black man who is a victim of and a spin-off from the society sunk in racial injustice. Widely recognized as a taboo subject back then, *The Dreamy Kid* marks the birth of an "authentic Negro" tragedy written and staged at such a crucial time when white American authors were using blacks as a

canvass for their whimsical drawings (Frank 75), when black roles on stage conformed to canyoning where their main objective was to perform to the "comfort zone of the whites" (Harrison). O'Neill's play shows the formation of a new black identity through Dreamy who achieves a sort of communal plenitude by resisting white dominance at such a time when xenophobia against the people of color was a common verity.

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[1] The term "Black Irishman" baffled O'Neill critics and scholars over the years. Croswell Bowen, in his article "The Black Irishman" (64-84), refers to the description of O'Neill by one of the friends of O'Neill's father who had known the playwright as a youth in New London. He describes O'Neill as "always the gloomy one, always the tragedian, always thinkin'." Speaking of O'Neill he adds, "My God, when he looked at you he seemed to be lookin' right through you, right into your soul. He never said much and then spoke softly when he did speak. Brilliant he was too, always readin' books. We're all Irish around here and knew the type. He was a real Black Irishman." He further goes on to elaborate that a "Black Irishman" is one who had believed in Catholic religion and then lost his faith and spends the rest of his days searching for life's meaning in a world without God. JP Diggins (185-86) shares the same viewpoint by elaborating that the term "Black Irishman" has "less to do with ethnicity than psychology." He validates his claim by citing, for example, O'Neill's regular referral to "humankind's fallen, 'black soul,'" Dorothy Day's take on the playwright's "quarrel with God" as found in Shaughnessy's *Catholic Sensibility* (7), and O'Neill's letter to his friend Sister Mary Leo Tierney written on 26 March 1929 where the playwright writes that "his work expresses in symbols … a black despair that believers never know" (Bogard and Bryer 332-33).

[2] While discussing "racialised individuals," Simon During forwards that certain "gender stereotypes" bearing "typical" racial characteristics like an African American man's hyper-virility and threatening presence or Asian Woman's hyper-feminine and submissive nature were infused into literature from time to time. *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction* 164-65.

[3] O'Neill's critics and scholars have used this coinage "Darker Brother" from time to time while referring to the portrayals of blacks his plays, and particularly Dreamy. However, complying with the focus of my research, I primarily took into consideration two of them: John Lovell Jr.'s "Eugene O'Neill's Darker Brother," *Theatre Arts* 32 (Feb. 1948): 45-48; and Gary Jay Williams' "*The Dreamy Kid*: O'Neill's Darker Brother," *Theatre Annual* 43 (1988): 3-14.

[4] Randall Kennedy forwards the notion that taking the white people to task for using "the N-word—nigger," nullifying the milieu, is merely fetishism. Besides, he purports that white writers including O'Neill "have unveiled nigger-as-insult in order to dramatize and condemn racism's baleful presence." *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* 52.

[5] As per the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, if a runaway southern slave is found anywhere in the US, he or she would be captured. Hence slaves, who escaped to North, had to make it to Canada to taste the real Freedom.

[6] According to Huggins' note, this groundbreaking piece was first brought out in Max Eastman's *The Liberator* 2 (July 1919): 21, and later appeared in *The Messenger* 2 (September 1919): 4; therefore, O'Neill must have read this before producing the play as the

first staging of *The Dreamy Kid* is dated on 31 October 1919 and the first publication of it was in the January 1920 issue of *Theatre Arts Magazine* (Floyd 154). *Harlem Renaissance* 313.

[7] Joel Pfister publishes this and other invaluable images of cartoons in courtesy of Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University. *Staging Depth: Eugene O'Neill and the Politics of Psychological Discourse* 125 and 127.

[8] Chole is the wife of Uncle Tom in George Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and Dido is wife of Old Pete in Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1859). Though considered very progressive in matters of race for the era projecting anti-slavery tints, these white-authored plays are found to be maintaining the traditional norms in pretty much the same way of breeding black stereotypes. The loyal, all-sacrificing family butlers like Old Tom and Pete are well matched with their wives who are warmer in heart and solely dedicated to cooking and expressing well-being of the planters and their families. Jeffery Richards edited these two along with another six plays in his *Early American Drama* 368-494.