

THE BLACK O'NEILL: AFRICAN AMERICAN PORTRAITURE

IN

*THIRST, THE DREAMY KID, MOON OF THE CARIBBEES, THE EMPEROR JONES,
THE HAIRY APE, ALL GOD'S CHILLUN GOT WINGS, AND THE ICEMAN COMETH*

By

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INTRODUCTION

EUGENE O'NEILL'S CULTURAL INFLUENCES

As the father of modern American drama, Eugene O'Neill explored his narrative on human existence through realism and experimentation. Among his forays into experimental theatre were plays that depicted blacks. O'Neill was among the first mainstream playwrights to portray black characters in dramatic roles, plus he employed black actors in faithful efforts towards realism. O'Neill defined his perceptions of realism by writing scripts with ethnic dialects, by presenting actors in roles that clearly identified their race, and by depicting his characters in scenes based on his perception of African American lifestyles. O'Neill's interpretation of blacks and the resulting depictions of African Americans' proclivities and lifestyles fueled the controversy debating the merits of realism, as he perceived it, versus perpetuating racist preconceptions of blacks and negative stereotypes.

Eugene O'Neill depicted blacks in six plays over a twenty-six year period, creating black characters that evolved from preconceived stereotypes to tragic characters whose narratives reflected an understanding of the conditions that African Americans faced in the early twentieth century. O'Neill created sixteen characters in his completed plays and several others in his unfinished works. The first three works that included black characters were the one act plays: *Thirst* (1913), *The Dreamy Kid* (1918), and *Moon of the Caribbees* (1918). The longer three plays with black characters were: *The Emperor Jones* (1920), *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924), and *The Iceman Cometh* (1939). For a London revival of *The Hairy Ape* (1924), though written for an all-white cast, the playwright requested that a black actor perform the title role. In addition, O'Neill left notes and ideas for several unfinished works that included black characters, the most extensive of which was the play "Bantu Boy," written in 1927. During the period that

he depicted black characters, O'Neill's portraiture of blacks appears to have evolved in complexity from stereotypical caricatures of blacks to character studies that shared common ground with the play's white characters. Over time, the playwright's portrayal of black characters evolved from exploitive to ambivalent to advocate.

Eugene O'Neill's exploitive use of black characters appears in his early three one-act plays written before 1920: *Thirst*, *The Dreamy Kid*, and *Moon of the Caribbees*. The black characters depicted demonstrate attributes considered stereotypical of blacks in the early twentieth century: criminality, regression to primitivism in the midst of adversity, and reliance on superstition. These one-act plays exploited the negative preconceptions of blacks by reinforcing accepted negative stereotypes in support of the play's plot. In the subsequent two plays written for black characters, *The Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, O'Neill accepts popular stereotypes and social norms concerning blacks in the early scenes of each play, subsequently rejecting those stereotypes for their shock value. O'Neill's repeated use of negative black stereotypes in his plays despite by the black community's criticisms demonstrated O'Neill's ambivalent disregard for the effects his plays had on black portraiture and white perceptions of the African American community at large. In his last two works that contributed to black portraiture, *The Hairy Ape* and *The Iceman Cometh*, O'Neill represented blacks with a purpose, as an advocate for change, illuminating the African American socio-economic condition.

O'Neill's personal experiences, his acquaintances, and political sentiments influenced his playwriting, as did his sensitivity to ethnic and cultural bias. Among Eugene O'Neill's biographers Louis Sheaffer offers a detailed overview of O'Neill's early life and influences in his book *O'Neill: Son and Playwright*. Sheaffer's biography of O'Neill describes his early life as the

youngest son and member of a dysfunctional family, his father, the famous Irish American actor James O'Neill, an alcoholic, and his mother Ella, a doctor-prescribed morphine addict. In the seaport community of New London, Connecticut, where the family resided, O'Neill lived as a social outcast. His Irish heritage, his father's profession as an actor, and his Catholic religion were antithetical to the middle-class Protestant society of New London. In his later O'Neill biography, *O'Neill: Son and Artist*, Schaeffer notes a comment made by one of New London's gentry on her impression of the O'Neills: "We considered the O'Neills as shanty Irish and we associated the Irish with the servant class (qtd. in Sheaffer, *Artist* 49). In *Son and Playwright*, Schaeffer asserts that as a youth in New London, the time O'Neill spent fraternizing with the marginalized denizens of the port town prepared him for the raw life he witnessed during his later travels at sea and on the New York waterfront (54).

Though O'Neill may have been an outcast among the New London gentry, he did not lack a formal middle-class education -- including a private school, where he embraced the socialist writings of Emma Goldman (105). O'Neill's formal education included a year at Princeton, where he continued his role as an outsider, identifying with the underprivileged (116). Sheaffer references Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg as O'Neill's principal influences as a playwright: Ibsen for a dramatic sense of realism and Strindberg for what would later be considered tragic expressionism.¹ Both playwrights relied on family relationships as subjects of their plays, as did O'Neill in writing about the internal workings of his own family. When asked who his literary idol was, O'Neill replied that it was Friedrich Nietzsche and his work *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (122). O'Neill left Princeton without graduating. He had lived on his own schedule, avoiding classes, reading, and drinking (124). By his own admission, O'Neill confessed that he had gone too far with "general hell raising" (qtd. in Sheaffer, 124). O'Neill's

drinking and identification with the underprivileged would continue throughout his young adulthood.

Eugene O'Neill's experiences with blacks derived from his experiences at sea and in Greenwich Village. According to Sheaffer, O'Neill fled from a bad first marriage by spending approximately a year sailing tramp steamers (149). Those experiences and observations at sea influenced several O'Neill plays depicting black characters: *The Moon of the Caribbees* (1918), *The Emperor Jones* (1920), and *The Hairy Ape* (1922) (151-87). In 1915, O'Neill, still in his early twenties, spent his time reading, drinking, and romancing among the bohemian and literary elements of Greenwich Village (325-41). The lives of his drinking companions, many of whom frequented The Golden Swan Saloon, often referred to as "The Hell Hole," influenced his plays, most notably *The Iceman Cometh* (1939), a play set in a 1912 bar (333). The road from Princeton to Greenwich Village followed O'Neill's exposure to African American acquaintances who became character models for his plays depicting blacks.

A key inspiration for O'Neill's perception of blacks came from his friend Joe Smith, an African American drinking companion whom he met in the Golden Swan Saloon. He described Joe Smith as a "quiet good natured gambler" (424). O'Neill used Smith as one of the models for the title character in *The Emperor Jones* (29) and for Joe Mott, a character in *The Iceman Cometh* (425). Smith formerly owned a gambling house and as such authoritatively shared gossip with the playwright about the Village's dwindling black community, which was in the process of migrating from Greenwich Village to Harlem. A casual reference by Smith, who occasionally brought an inebriated O'Neill home to sober up, concerning a black gangster on the run from the police, referred to as "Dreamy," inspired O'Neill's play *The Dreamy Kid* (Gelb and Gelb 347). Both Smith's stories and his personal history inspired O'Neill's plots and black characters.

CHAPTER 1

CLIMATE: O'NEILL'S CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

Though O'Neill may not have considered himself an active participant in the re-imagining of African Americans in the early twentieth century, he was part of a process. The time period in which O'Neill included black characters in his plays ran parallel to the burgeoning cultural African American reawakening referred to as the Harlem Renaissance. Following the American Civil War, African Americans began the process of acculturating as a race and as individuals into American society as citizens. This process required redefining roles of both citizen, and of cultural representation: in the visual arts, music, and literature. As a race, American blacks suffered from the stain of slavery, both in the former slave states as well as in the northern free states. In the antebellum South, blacks, both slave and free, held social positions universally subordinate to whites *de jure*. In northern states, both antebellum and postbellum, blacks shared their inferior place in society with new, though upwardly mobile immigrants, particularly the Irish. Sharing the lowest rungs of the social ladder produced sentiments of empathy and antipathy between the two groups, sentiments reflected in the plays of the second-generation Irish American playwright Eugene O'Neill.

The Black Renaissance

In response to Jim Crow an African American political and cultural movement developed and flourished into the Great Depression. Near the turn of the century black political philosophers and critics applied the name "New Negro" to those black leaders, such as Booker T. Washington, who actively exemplified the concept of blacks shrugging off the shroud of

ignorance and slavery. In contrast, the political philosopher W.E.B. Du Bois pursued an intellectual argument encouraging black political activism and literature that would define the African American narrative. Notably, Du Bois's seminal work *The Soul of Black Folk* (1903) identified the variants of dualism that had characterized race relations in America.

In *The Souls of Black Folk* W.E.B. Du Bois labeled racial dualism from a black perspective:

the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil , gifted with second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (10).

In this passage, Du Bois names the bifurcated self-consciousness of American blacks "double consciousness." Though blacks considered themselves American citizens by law, as guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution, the dominant culture measured blacks by double standards, standards that recognized a restricted form of citizenship, a second-class citizenship viewed through the lenses of contempt and pity. The burlesque of minstrelsy showcased the prevailing sentiments towards blacks, diminishing the potential social and political gains won during the Reconstruction Era. Black political philosophers of the era, including Du Bois and Washington, rightly appreciated the negative effects of stereotyping

blacks as buffoons, validating the Southern disenfranchisement of African Americans. Du Bois offered a hint of optimism by noting the “dogged strength” keeping blacks as individuals and as a race continuing to strive for acceptance and acculturation into American society.

James Smethurst discusses the contrasting opinions of Du Bois and Howard University professor Alain Locke. Du Bois built his concept of double-consciousness upon a foundation of modernist realism. He acknowledged the socio-economic position of the early twentieth century blacks, warts, and all. Essentially, Du Bois advocated self-criticism and self-improvement as products of self-awareness. As a realist, Du Bois defended black modernist literature, such as the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, who wrote in the black dialect of the South. Du Bois considered Dunbar’s use of dialect part of the African American heritage, dissimilar in intent from the comedic and exploitative representations of black dialect in minstrelsy. Smethurst asserts that Du Bois encouraged African Americans to acknowledge the dualism of double-consciousness from the perspective that blacks perceived themselves as equal to whites, while whites considered blacks as an inferior race. In addition, African Americans live in a bifurcated society, mirroring many characteristics of the white middle class culture, yet maintaining the knowledge, virtues, and attributes of the African American sub-culture. In effect, black Americans maintained a double self-awareness and dual identities in the era of the New Negro.

Du Bois’s contemporary, Professor Alain Locke of Howard University, a political philosopher himself, embraced the label “New Negro,” applying it to the burgeoning black intellectualism of the early twentieth century. By embracing the concept of the New Negro, Locke asserted that African Americans needed new forms of portraiture in literature, the visual arts, and in the theatre. In his essay “Harlem on Our Minds” (1997), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. credited Alain Locke for shepherding the New Negro movement, which evolved into the New

Negro Renaissance. Locke edited the anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925) that showcased writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. He looked to African American artists to depict blacks in the best light, discrediting the Jim Crow and minstrel representations that flourished in the early twentieth century.

With World War I, blacks began migrating from the South into the large Northern cities in hopes of escaping Jim Crow and poverty, a diaspora known in African American history as the Great Migration. As such, Alain Locke recognized that New York City had become a cultural mecca for African Americans. He asserted that the cultural capital of the Negro world was in New York City; hence, the New Negro Renaissance or Black Renaissance is more popularly referred to as “Harlem Renaissance” (Smethurst 207).

In contrast to W.E.B Du Bois’s philosophy of modernist realism, Alain Locke took a conservative stand on black portraiture in theme. In Gates’ “Harlem” essay, he asserts that Locke urged black artists to adopt European modernist styles as they were influenced by sub-Saharan African art. He quotes Locke as saying, “By being modern, we are being African (qtd. in Gates, “Harlem on Our Minds”). His appeal to Black Renaissance artists assumed that black writers and performers would depict African Americans in a positive light where industriousness and education overcame the marginalization of blacks in America. Locke perceived the Black Renaissance as fundamentally a political movement of which its great works would lead to a reevaluation of African Americans on the basis of their achievements. (Gates, “Harlem on Our Minds”). During the Black Renaissance, Alain Locke, as with W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, offered African Americans a narrative of hope for change, particularly in the arena of civil rights.

Black and Tan

Jay P. Dolan's book, *The Irish Americans: A History*, explains the relationship between the Irish immigrants and African Americans in the era that O'Neill portrayed blacks. Dolan notes that the Irish and African Americans of the 1830s coexisted peacefully, particularly in Philadelphia and in New York's Five Points neighborhood in Greenwich Village. Blacks and Irish drank, danced to blended musical styles, and intermarried, violating mainstream social norms (54). In the nineteenth century, both African Americans and Irish Americans suffered discrimination. Dolan illustrates this discrimination by noting several pejorative terms used to describe both groups: savage, bestial, and simian. Ironically, blacks were referred to as "smoked Irish" and Irish were described as "niggers turned inside out" (54). He suggests that such derogatory references contributed to Irish disdain of blacks, the Irish hoping to distance themselves from the stereotype of primitivism associated with blacks. Dolan cites Victorian adherents of the pseudo-science of physiognomy describing Irish stereotypes as "providing a scientific basis for assuming that such characteristics as violence, poverty, improvidence, political volatility, and drunkenness were inherently Irish and only Irish," ranking the Irish below the Anglo-Saxon, but above Africans on the ladder of evolution (103). The pseudo-science of physiognomy characterized the Irish as ape-like and beast-like, popularizing a derogatory stereotype, which may have inspired Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922).

In the years following the American Civil War, the roles of both Irish immigrants and blacks changed within the framework of America's social structure, both struggling for acceptance into the mainstream society. As the Irish gained control of political and civil structures in cities such as Boston and New York, African Americans maintained their role as the subordinate race, perpetuating a distinct sub-culture. In *The African American Roots of*

Modernism, James Smethurst notes that in both the North and in the formerly rebellious Southern states, blacks suffered under the stain of slavery and were marginalized culturally and economically by custom and law. Both the North and the South marginalized African American cultural and intellectual expression. The former slave-free states of the North maintained de facto social segregation and restrictions, while the Southern states developed institutions, such as tenant farming and Jim Crow codes, which replaced slavery, ensuring a reliable agrarian workforce. The goal of the postbellum Reconstruction Era (to 1877) was to rebuild the South, resulting in the institutional suppression of blacks in the form of Jim Crow laws, essentially an American apartheid. The post-Reconstruction era, referred to as the Southern Redemption, began a period of suppressed black civil rights and social segregation between the races that extended well into the late twentieth century. As the era of Southern Redemption progressed towards the end of the nineteenth century, cultural manifestations developed that supported Jim Crow. African Americans became the object of derogatory representations in print as well as on stage. “Sambo” pictures and “coon songs” caricatured black culture often derived from the plantation culture stories (17).

During the postbellum years during and after Reconstruction, blacks experienced social, residential, and economic segregation as well as abridged civil rights in the North, though Northern segregation lacked the broader institutionalization of the Southern Jim Crow laws. New York City, specifically within the Bohemian atmosphere of Greenwich Village, however developed an environment of tolerance and interaction. Blacks and lower class Irish frequented common bars and musical establishments known as “black and tan” dance halls and saloons. Gerald W. McFarland’s *Inside Greenwich Village* describes the black and tan saloons as flourishing in an area of Greenwich Village known as Little Africa, a neighborhood in which

many of New York City's African Americans resided until the post World War I black migration from Greenwich Village to Harlem. The black and tan clientele consisted of poor whites, blacks, and mulattoes, the "tan" progeny of miscegenation (12). On McDougal Street, within the neighborhood of Little Africa, the Provincetown Players established their theatre, the Provincetown Playhouse, where several of Eugene O'Neill's earliest plays were performed (191).

James Smethurst asserts that such social interactions created not only mixed marriages, but also new synergies that developed into art forms uniquely American. The combination of Irish step dancing and the African Juba developed into tap dancing. Similarly, minstrelsy, an American entertainment form with roots in the slave-free antebellum North flourished. Minstrel performers, who were often Irish entertainers in blackface, caricatured blacks first as happy slaves and later as musical comedic foils, harmless overdressed dandies, and buffoons. Minstrelsy, which often provided musical interludes during variety shows, contributed to the foundation of vaudeville as well as perpetuating the derogatory perception of blacks. The faux blacks of minstrelsy contributed to the validity of Jim Crow in the South and the somewhat milder forms of social and economic racial segregation in the North. Minstrel blacks hid behind the blackface mask, both white minstrels and black performers, speaking in black dialect and often merrily creating comic scenes of black subterfuge, attempting to outwit white masters or bosses in the style of Uncle Remus stories (55). The dissembling behavior of black subculture depicted in the minstrel shows, though provided on stage as entertainment, developed as a product of survival behavior characteristic of plantation slaves.

Minstrelsy as an American entertainment forum exemplified the American proclivity towards dualism and self-deception, a supposedly harmless venue for popular entertainment that

was essentially derogatory and degrading. The later evolution of African American theatre during the era of the Black Renaissance owed some of its momentum to the popularity of minstrelsy. In his essay "A Tragedy of Negro Life" Henry Louis Gates, Jr. noted, "the roots of black theatre in the twenties were buried in soil of minstrelsy and vaudeville" (17). O'Neill broke tradition by exploiting black stereotypes for drama rather than for the comedy of minstrelsy.

CHAPTER 2

ONE ACTS: O'NEILL'S EARLY BLACK PORTRAITURE

Eugene O'Neill's first three plays with black characters are one-act plays performed in experimental theatre. The plots of the first two of these early plays, *Thirst* (1913) and *The Dreamy Kid* (1918) stand alone, while the third, *Moon of the Caribbees* (1918), is the last part of a series of four one-act plays concerning the fictional British freighter Glencairn. According to the Gelbs, the Provincetown Players produced the first of O'Neill's plays portraying a black character, *Thirst*, in 1916. Playwright and Pulitzer Prize winning journalist John Reed, along with Reed's wife, Louise Bryant, introduced Eugene O'Neill to the Provincetown Players, a small production company dedicated to presenting experimental theatre. Greenwich Village's Provincetown Theatre, located in the heart of the mixed-race neighborhood of Little Africa, became the primary venue for the theatre company. The Provincetown Players essentially rebelled against larger commercial Broadway venues, making it an ideal theatre company for O'Neill's foray into uncharted theatrical territory (311-12).

Thirst (1913)

Three years after O'Neill wrote *Thirst* (1913), he performed in it in a small Provincetown, Massachusetts's theatre. *Thirst* would become the last of his plays in which he acted (313). The *Thirst* plot involves a character study exploring the principals' reactions to adversity. The play established the oft-repeated fatalist model that O'Neill would use throughout his career: difficult situations shrouded in despair through which glimmers of hope shine. Hope is snuffed out by overwhelming events, often scandalous and shocking. *Thirst* tells the story of

three shipwreck survivors aboard a lifeboat in shark-infested waters. Gentleman, Dancer, and Sailor are the survivors representing three distinct social classes. O'Neill described Gentleman and Dancer as white, he in a tattered evening suit, and she in a short-skirted dancer's costume, bejeweled with a diamond necklace. The third survivor, Sailor, O'Neill describes in his stage notes as a West Indian Mulatto dressed in a blue sailor's uniform. Early in the script, Gentleman realizes that they lack sufficient water for survival. In turn, he hurls an unwarranted accusation at Sailor for stealing water. Once Gentleman accepts the fact of their common destiny, he creates a social distance and absolves Sailor's potential misdeeds: "He is only a poor negro sailor -- our companion in misfortune. God knows we are in the same pitiful plight. We should not grow suspicious of each other" (O'Neill, *Thirst* 10). Dancer addresses Sailor, the suspected water hoarder, attempting to bribe him with her jewelry and sex: "Look! I am offering myself to you -- my body that men have called so beautiful. I have promised you -- a Negro sailor -- if you will give me one small drink of water. Is that not humiliation enough that you will keep me waiting so?" (O'Neill, *Thirst* 21). As with Gentleman, Dancer distances herself socially from Sailor, in her case by remarking that a Negro sailor would dare make her beg for water. Sailor denies ownership of water, alternately brooding or humming a sea chantey in response to his fellow survivors' entreaties. In the end, Dancer dies of thirst and the two surviving men struggle over her lifeless body. After Sailor declares his intent to eat the lifeless Dancer, the weakening Gentleman fights Sailor for her body in an effort to preserve Dancer's dignity in death. In the last moments of the play, Sailor stabs Gentleman to death, trips and falls into the ocean leaving a black stain, presumably eaten by sharks.

The premise of the play is that of survival and atonement within the purview of three stereotypes defined by social class, each holding onto hope in his or her own way. Sheaffer

asserts that O'Neill was haunted by his Catholic heritage and that the play concerned doing penance for one's sins (Sheaffer, *Playwright* 272). The survivors' lives depend upon locating a water source. In the end, each of the characters dies, the play being decidedly fatalistic. Each atones for their reaction to their common circumstance, their mode of death determined by their social position and stereotypical behavior. Gentleman lives up to his heritage and social position by first blaming his situation on Sailor, the representative of the underclass, later pitying him, and dying by his hand in the end, thus atoning for his rush to judgment. Dancer offers her jewelry and charms for water, suggesting that the allure of sex grants women control over men. She atones by dying of thirst, having been rejected by the sailor and lost without a male sponsor. Sailor is punished for his black stereotypical atavism, the suggestion of cannibalism, by falling into the ocean, becoming a black stain amidst circling shark fins.

The play premiered in Provincetown, Massachusetts, to a small audience, introducing cannibalism to American theatre (Sheaffer, *Playwright* 273). In *Thirst*, O'Neill played the role of Sailor, opposite Louise Bryant, who acted the role of Dancer. The Gelbs speculate that *Thirst* provided a vehicle in which O'Neill could play a romantic scene with his friend Jack Reed's wife, Louise Bryant, who was also O'Neill's lover (Gelb and Gelb 311-12). The mulatto character also gave O'Neill an opportunity to adhere to his philosophy of realism, playing a mixed race man, but not in blackface, which would have been inappropriate for a white-featured mulatto. Instead he spent hours on the Provincetown beach tanning to a dark mahogany (Sheaffer, *Playwright* 350). The result depicted a believable mulatto with white features and tan skin. Unlike some of O'Neill's later black characters, Sailor does not speak in a discernable black dialect (Gagnon 55). The resulting character is a product of two worlds. Sailor's final

degeneration to cannibalism dramatizes the mulatto's internal conflict between two cultural influences: the savage world of the African and the civilized white world.

The sensationalist threat of cannibalism by Sailor perpetuates the degenerative stereotype of blacks. O'Neill's use of mulatto imagery demonstrates that despite Sailor having assumed the role as a civilized man, by virtue of his hybrid genealogy and his occupation as a ship's crewman, as a black man he reverts to primitivism under stress. In the case of *Thirst*, as with later O'Neill plays depicting black stereotypes, the discourse concerns intent. The stereotyping solicits the opinion suggesting that O'Neill may have written the play with the goal of illuminating the shocking behaviors of cannibalism and primitivism, behaviors most often associated with the early twentieth century conception of a primitive black Africa. In that context the black seaman simply represents a visual metaphor for primitivism. If his use of Sailor suggested a social commentary, as O'Neill's critics suggest, then cannibalism was the trope, illuminating the proclivity of primitivism in blacks, a predictable duality: visually civilized by wearing the sailor's uniform, a costume representing modernity, but internally primal. O'Neill dramatized a racist stereotype by suggesting that cannibalism is inherent in blacks.

The Dreamy Kid (1918)

The Dreamy Kid became one of the first American plays to treat blacks as human beings, dramatizing social and moral issues that employed black actors in dramatic roles. Unlike the West Indian mulatto sailor in *Thirst*, the playwright depicted African American blacks as principals in *Dreamy*. This play's characters depict African American blacks as having complex human personalities: both virtuous and reprehensible.

O'Neill replaced the atavism depicted in *Thirst* with criminality in *Dreamy*, dramatizing the personal lives of a black prostitute and a murderous black gangster. *The Dreamy Kid*'s plot concerns the final hours of a dying grandmother, Mammy, who has summoned her grandson, the flamboyant gangster Dreamy, to her deathbed. O'Neill's director notes describe Dreamy as a well-built light-skinned black, who leads a local gang. Two additional characters, his sister Ceely Ann and his prostitute girlfriend, Irene, pass through the grandmother's room during the course of the play. Ceely Ann acts as her grandmother's nurse. Irene performs the role of the messenger between Dreamy and his gang. Mammy raised Dreamy after his mother, her daughter, had died. As Ceely Ann tends to the dying Mammy, Irene enters the room informing her that the police are searching for Dreamy, who has killed a white man in a dispute the previous night. The dying Mammy requests that Dreamy come to her deathbed, complicating Dreamy's flight. After Dreamy comes to his grandmother's side, she appeals to his sense of loyalty, beseeching him to swear that he will stay with her until she dies. As noises outside of the room suggest, the police have located Dreamy, making him apprehensive. Mammy curses his life if he leaves before she dies. The curtain lowers as a sound outside the door suggests that the police have found Mammy's room. Dreamy, one hand in his dying grandmother's, the other on a revolver, vows, "Dey don't git Dreamy! Not while he's live! Lawd Jesus, no suh!" (O'Neill, *The Dreamy Kid*). The final line dramatizes two key elements in O'Neill's play: the use of black dialect for realism and the African American dilemma of double-consciousness. In the latter case, Dreamy appears to be torn between loyalty and criminal flight.

In *Dreamy*, O'Neill reinvented black stereotyping for white audiences through his interpretation of African American life: blacks as criminals, the roles of black women, and the use of black dialect for dramatic rather than comic effect. Adhering to realism, O'Neill pioneered

the use of African American actors, not the traditional faux blacks in burnt-cork, in his portrayal of his black characters. His enterprising director hired black actors from a Harlem-based production company to articulate African American dialect (Gelb and Gelb 400). Their performances mitigated the comic effect associated with black dialect as depicted in minstrel shows. Within the context of O'Neill's evolving representation of blacks in his plays, the use of black actors appears to be less altruistic than functional. His motives for using blacks reflect a persistent effort towards exploiting stereotypical preconceptions as realism rather than being a means of social change.

In her essay on O'Neill's treatment of black women, Deborah Wood Holton notes that, "O'Neill's blindness toward the culture and values that informed the black experience as he observed it was neither unique nor distinct" (29). Holton observes that O'Neill's black women in *Dreamy* fill traditional matriarchal roles and employ stereotypical black motivators, such as Mammy's curse, thus perpetuating the stereotype of black dependence on superstition. Dreamy's sister as nurse to the ailing grandmother, plus the grandmother acting as surrogate mother to Dreamy as a child, add credence to Holton's observations. At one point the grandmother speaks fondly of her deceased daughter, but never refers to Dreamy's father, implying an absentee father. Between the absent father and Dreamy's criminal behavior, O'Neill's protagonist perpetuated the negative stereotype of the criminal black male.

O'Neill chose his first representation of an African American in the title role as a gangster -- exploiting the mainstream stereotype that African Americans are innately criminal. The nickname "Dreamy" fits the character's dual nature: a criminal and a dreamer. As in Dreamy's case, nicknames are often associated with gang members and criminals. Ironically, Dreamy's grandmother gave him his nickname. Mammy recounts nicknaming her grandson,

Abe, as Dreamy, associating the baby's far-away gaze with that of a thoughtful dreamer.

Dreamy's name implies dualism in a criminal character exhibiting admirable behavior, his loyal duty to Mammy over self-preservation. O'Neill created a polemic for the audience: sympathy for a murderous criminal. The choice between self-preservation and loyalty that Dreamy faces takes the form of a dilemma: a choice between crime, associated with blacks, and respect, a mainstream virtue. In addition, O'Neill's use of Mammy's curse forces the audience to question the motives behind Dreamy's resolute refusal to leave his dying grandmother. Is Dreamy loyal to his grandmother or compelled to stay by her deathbed by superstitious fear? If not, his loyal steadfastness to Mammy's dying wish contradicts the stereotype of criminal selfishness then associated with blacks. In *Dreamy*, O'Neill includes African Americans in the universal dilemma of personal survival and the welfare of others. In effect, O'Neill exploits the perceived criminal African American sub-culture he had witnessed in New York City as a device that dramatizes an individual's conflict between duty and self-preservation.

Dreamy's confidence that his gang would save him from the police demonstrates the optimism associated with African American dualism as defined by Du Bois's double-consciousness. Travis Bogard describes the optimism characteristic of double-consciousness as "defeated hope" (Bogard, "Contour in Time, The Amateur: *The Moon of the Caribbees*" 105). Within the context of the playwright's evolving thematic style, Bogard views defeated hope as the foundation of O'Neill's later theme of pipedreams, planning and hoping for the unattainable. Defeated hope, coupled with Dreamy's defiant defense against the intrusion of the white world's invaders, however warranted, captures the essence of double-consciousness. Within that context, O'Neill's depiction of Dreamy as a fugitive criminal, exploiting the stereotype of a black criminal environment, dramatized the defeated hope associated with the American under-class.

In “Pipe Dreams and Primitivism: Eugene O’Neill and the Rhetoric of Ethnicity,” Donald P. Gagnon asserts that race as used by O’Neill in *Dreamy* dramatized the position of the underclass. Gagnon asserts that *Dreamy*’s black world represented O’Neill’s perspective of shared stereotypes between blacks and Irish Americans:

Apparently, not all members of the human community were going to be blended easily into the American “melting pot” and O’Neill seemed aware that an understanding of the prejudice against the transplanted Irish -- those of his own ethnic heritage -- would illuminate his understanding of the prejudice against black immigrants from the South who were migrating north to fill lower-class job openings. (53)

Gagnon’s observation suggests that O’Neill’s play reflected the social pressures that blacks faced during the Great Migration. Southern African Americans attempting to assimilate into the urban world of the Northern cities faced challenges similar to those of Irish immigrants of an earlier generation. *Dreamy*’s tragic story, though depicted as a product of criminal behavior, elevated African American portraiture to the status of a common American immigrant experience.

In effect, *The Dreamy Kid* not only suggests the tragic end of a black gangster, but the tragic victimization of under-classes marginalized by society. O’Neill employed race, color, and dialect as theatrical devices that contributed to his narrative of American dualism, a land promising prosperity, but only to those who assimilate within the boundaries of color, language, and culture. Those groups living outside mainstream culture would suffer a deterministic fatalistic fate. O’Neill’s efforts at realism, often supporting negative black stereotypes as well as mitigated others, gave credence to the humanity of the characters. The final effort of Mammy

holding onto life as Dreamy defiantly states last lines limns Du Bois's double-consciousness optimism offering hope to the marginalized under-classes, inclusive of African Americans.

The Moon of the Caribbees (1918)

O'Neill said of *The Moon of the Caribbees*, "That was my first real break with theatrical traditions," and "my pet play of all one-acters" (Sheaffer, *Playwright* 383). He would later boast, "No one else in the world could have written that one" (qtd. in Sheaffer, *Playwright* 395).

Moon's plot paints an image of an evening aboard the fictional British tramp steamer *Glencairn*. The theme is deterministic, depicting the evening conversation and activities of working class men intellectually and physically confined to a small ship anchored in a Caribbean port of call. These men share a fatalistic worldview, travelling from foreign port to foreign port, living monotonous lives between each stop. They demonstrate their uneducated and unwarranted fears by believing in the absurd notion that the indigenous population practices cannibalism, a practice not found in the Caribbean, but popularly associated with blacks. The seamen overcome their prejudicial and irrational fears by satisfying two basic pleasures denied them in their confining shipboard existence: sex and drink. The play opens as the men anticipate the arrival of West Indian women (the promise of sex) bearing rum, a substance banned by the ship's captain.

The story is told in two parts, before and after the arrival of the women. In the first part of *The Moon*, O'Neill describes the environment and mood of the crew through realism: the ship's deck, the topics of the crew's uneducated and coarse banter. Throughout the play, O'Neill explores variants of dualism: duplicity, double consciousness, and hypocrisy. The captain, who one crewman relates as standing with the bearing of a "sky pilot" at their homeport with his wife

and children present, exemplifies bourgeois hypocrisy: at anchor in the ship's home port, virtuously prohibiting the consumption of demon rum aboard ship, but in ports of call, negotiating with prostitutes.

The crew exhibits dualism through their duplicity and deception. In the second part, the playwright implies a lower class proclivity towards primitivism by introducing the black prostitutes and rum, improvidently satisfying the crewmen's primal urges. Duplicity and deception rule the evening as the crew rationalizes their disdain and fear of the indigenous black population, while availing themselves of the black prostitutes' services. The crew attempts to deceive their captain, financing their evening by having the boson's mate dock their pay for purchases of fruit and sundries. The concurrent activities of the captain and the crew's rum fuelled party and debauchery blur the moral line between classes.

Eugene O'Neill's depiction of *The Moon*'s black female characters as rum-bearing prostitutes and his references to cannibalism perpetuate black stereotypes, which presumed blacks to be regressive, immoral, and undisciplined. As with his later play, *The Emperor Jones* (1920), O'Neill exploits black stereotypes in order to dramatize immoral behavior. In the case of *Moon*, white actresses in black face performed the roles of West Indian black women. O'Neill created masks for his performers not dissimilar to the black face caricatures of minstrelsy and having the same derogatory effect.

The predictable, inevitable conclusion, a loud drunken fight among the crew, alerts the captain to the night's illicit activities resulting in the unpaid expulsion of the West Indian women from the ship. Ultimately, *Moon of the Caribbees* dramatizes a deterministic viewpoint that certain elements of society are predisposed to immoral behaviors. In the case of the crew, primal

needs motivate their actions. The crew, as well as the West Indian women, represents the lower classes of society, whose inherently myopic goals of primal satisfaction, a distraction from the monotony of life, often results in predictably negative consequences.

Eugene O'Neill's early one act plays contributed to African American portraiture by employing black actors, scripting black dialect, and developing plots that place the protagonists in environments depicting African American life in the early twentieth century. He pioneered new standards for realism. The key influences contributing to O'Neill's style and content for his early plays using black characters included his life aboard a tramp steamer, his youthful forays into the wharf area in New London, and his life in the bohemian world of Greenwich Village during the Great Migration. As pioneering works that experimenting with black characters, often exploiting black stereotypes, the one-acters provided the foundation for his larger productions presented at the dawn of the Black Renaissance: 1920's *The Emperor Jones* and 1924's *All God's Chillun Got Wings*.

CHAPTER 3

THE PROTAGONIST PLAYWRIGHT: IN THE MIDST OF CONTROVERSY

Eugene O'Neill broke ground by employing black actors and portraying black characters in his early one-act plays, but two longer plays centering around black characters, *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924) were the first full-length plays produced by a white production company that depicted African American protagonists as complex dramatic characters. *The Emperor Jones* depicts the decline of a former black Pullman porter, who has risen to become dictator of a Caribbean island and *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, described the dysfunctional marriage of a black law student and his white wife. Though both plays dramatize the lives of black protagonists, they did not attempt to advocate change in the African American condition. When the plays premiered, O'Neill appears to have been ambivalent to the positive or negative racial aspects of either *Jones* or *Chillun*. The plays were about his characters not social change or advocacy for the African American condition.

The Emperor Jones (1920)

The Emperor Jones depicts the last few hours of the fictional island dictator, Brutus Jones: an émigré during the Great Migration, a former Pullman porter, gambler, and wanted murderer. In the first scene, the Emperor Jones, adorned in a uniform befitting his title, converses with Henry Smithers, a cockney trader with whom Jones had partnered since Jones landed upon the island. Jones boasts how he had deceived Lem, the previous chief, and Lem's court, referred to as "bush niggers" and "woods niggers." Jones exploits the islanders' superstitious natures by

creating the myth that only a silver bullet can kill him. As Smithers and Jones reminisce about Brutus Jones's rise to power and subsequent exploitation of the indigenous population, the self-proclaimed emperor realizes that his day of reckoning has come and with it a revolution. In turn, Jones divulges to Smithers his planned escape route through the island's jungle to the stretch of beach upon which Jones originally landed. In hand, he carries a revolver with six bullets, five lead and one made of silver. Brutus Jones intends using the lead bullets on any of Lem's soldiers who get in his way and the silver bullet for himself as a last resort to avoid capture.

In the first and last scenes of the play Smithers presides: initially in the palace with Jones as emperor and in the last scene with Lem on the beach from which Jones intends to escape the island. As Brutus Jones enters each scene following his flight from the palace, his costume disintegrates and his self-confidence wanes. Upon entering the jungle, night creatures frighten Jones, which he chases away by shooting a lead bullet. In subsequent scenes, Jones travels through the Jungle receiving ghostly visits from the fellow Pullman porter he killed during a gambling dispute and his fellow chain gang prisoners escorted by the white prison guard he had killed. In both cases he wastes a lead bullet on each of the apparitions. Later, Jones envisions a slave auction in which white slave traders bid for him, and he joins captive spirits aboard a slave ship. In both cases, Jones ends the ghostly scenes by expending lead bullets, leaving him with only the silver bullet for defense. In his final jungle scene, a witch doctor costumed in a mask, loincloth, and animal furs, steers a mystical crocodile god towards a tattered Jones. In desperation, Jones thwarts the attacking crocodile by shooting his silver bullet, leaving himself unarmed. The play ends with Smithers and Lem watching Brutus Jones's lifeless body carried onto the beach by Lem's soldiers. Lem informs Smithers that he had his soldiers armed with

silver bullets, created from silver coinage, for the inevitable revolution and dispatch of Brutus Jones.

Tavis Bogard describes *The Emperor Jones* as the story of a life-lie, a story of self-deception that ends in reducing the protagonist to primitivism (136-137). Through the course of the play Jones degenerates from the boastful, self-confident tyrant into a superstitious shell of his former self. The Gelbs note that O'Neill modeled Brutus Jones on four black men: Haitian dictators Emperor Henri Christophe and President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, plus African American bartender Adam Scott and O'Neill's drinking companion Joe Smith. They assert that O'Neill used his African American friends for language and personality and the Haitian dictators for historical context. Though almost a century apart, the two Haitian dictators each ruled their island nation as corrupt tyrants; both men eventually met untimely deaths. Henri Christophe, an early nineteenth century Haitian dictator, rose from slavery and declared himself king. He ruled until he became ill and committed suicide. Haitian President Sam, an O'Neill contemporary, boasted only silver bullet could only kill him until a voodoo-maddened mob hacked him to pieces (Gelb and Gelb 439). In effect, the blended Haitian stories depict life-lies, self-deceiving images of superiority, that resulted in falls from power and death.

In Brutus Jones, Eugene O'Neill took the opportunity to construct a nuanced character and deconstruct him through expressionism. He wears the costume of an emperor, surrounded in his palace with the trappings of power, inclusive of a confidante. He alludes to foreign bank accounts and boasts of invincibility. Scene by scene, O'Neill deconstructs Jones through expressionist devices such as apparitions, both personal and historical, plus the witch doctor and crocodile god. Through the course of an evening, Brutus Jones descends from pompous dictator to naked corpse.

Jones's story parallels the histories of the Haitian dictators, rising to power through a life-lie of personal superiority to those around him. He convinces himself that he was smarter than his white partner and the islanders that he rules and exploits. The playwright painted the picture of Brutus Jones's dualism in the first scene's director's notes:

He is a tall, powerfully-built, full blooded negro of middle age. His features are typically negroid, yet there is something decidedly distinctive about his face -- an underlying strength of will, a hardy, self-reliant confidence in himself that inspires respect. His eyes are alive with a keen cunning intelligence. In a manner he is shrewd, suspicious, evasive.
(O'Neill, *Plays* 5)

O'Neill's description defines Jones as a Negro "yet" he elicits respect, as though the two descriptions might be mutually exclusive. Gagnon points out that with the "yet" O'Neill makes Jones's inevitable tragedy racially motivated, a "biological determinant" (90). As a biological determinant, O'Neill attaches preconceptions to the black race, exploiting common stereotypes: primitivism, superstition, and criminality. The "yet" suggests dualism. Jones is both an oppressor and a victim of oppression. The plot makes Jones not only a victim of his own past, but of his race's past by placing him in the slave market, the slave ship and in the hands of a witch doctor. Superstition facilitates his regression into primitivism, the punishment for his criminal behaviors: the two murders and tyranny. By deconstructing Brutus Jones's history to the point of including his racial history, O'Neill made statements both on preconceived racial stereotypes and the life-lie that Brutus Jones's inflated self-confidence created.

O'Neill perpetuated derogatory black stereotypes by making race Brutus Jones's original sin. In the first scene, Smithers remarks that Jones is putting on airs, the classic admonition

against blacks rising above their social station. In the opening dialogue, Brutus Jones boasts that as a porter he learned his cunning by eavesdropping on the dealings of white businessmen. In effect, Jones mimicked the behavior of the white businessmen without truly understanding the underpinnings that sustained their economic power. Jones admits he taxed the populace to the point of revolution with little concern for his future beyond hiding stolen funds in off-island banks. In that context, O'Neill elevated black caricature from minstrel buffoon to reckless tyrant, from outlandishly attired dandy to the grandiose uniform of a petty dictator, from comic entertainment to tragedy.

Brutus Jones's regal affectations illustrate the assertion that blacks aped white behavior, creating the illusion of intelligence. In "What White Publishers Won't Print," Zora Neale Hurston asserts that among the negative stereotypes associated with blacks is that of imitation. She describes slaves that were able to translate passages written by Virgil into English, but who were dismissed as simply aping behavior. The slaves were able to translate into English, but were relegated to the opinion that they could not comprehend the passage. In addition, she notes that that stereotype supports the belief that no matter how high blacks "may *seem* to climb," when put under strain, they "revert to type, that is the bush" (1161). O'Neill dramatizes those concepts in *The Emperor Jones* with Brutus Jones's unsustainable rise to power and tragic fall and atavism.

On November 1, 1920, *Jones* opened in Greenwich Village's Provincetown Playhouse. As the Village production competed with several Broadway premieres, New York critics took several days before reviewing *The Emperor Jones*. Heywood Broun of the *Tribune* wrote, "Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* seems to us just about the most interesting play which has yet come from the promising playwright in America." Broun also noted that "the setting of the

play on the little stage is fine and imaginative and the lighting effects uncommonly beautiful The Emperor is played by a Negro actor named Charles S. Gilpin, who gives the most thrilling performance we have seen any place this season It is performance of heroic stature” (qtd. in Gelb and Gelb 446 - 447).

On November 4, Kenneth Macgowan of the *Globe* praised both the play and the black actor:

An odd and extraordinary play, written with imaginative genius Gilpin’s is a sustained and splendid piece of acting. The moment when he raises his naked body against the moonlit sky and prays is such a dark lyric of the flesh, such a cry of the primitive being, as I have ever seen in the theater. (qtd. in Sheaffer 34)

Macgowan’s review exemplifies the mainstream critics’ reactions to the play, fueling newfound enthusiasm for the Provincetown Players, which had been a struggling production company. The Players increased their patron list to fifteen hundred in just a few days after the play premiered (Gelb and Gelb 446).

Though critics praised both O’Neill for originality and Charles Gilpin, the black actor, for his performance, the loser was African American portraiture. O’Neill wrote *The Emperor Jones* for white audiences holding preconceived opinions of black behavior and character. In 1972 Bogard, asserted that, “Taken as a ethnic study displaying the racial characteristics of the American Negro, the part by present-day perspectives is an unacceptable stereotype of the negro in terms of a crap shooting, razor-cutting Pullman porter.” He further suggests that as with Vachel Lindsay’s *The Congo* (1912), O’Neill “attempted to depict the forces ‘that come creeping

through the black”” (qtd. in Bogard, 139). Bogard went on by comparing Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* (1899) to *The Emperor Jones*:

O’Neill makes no generalization such as Conrad does that there is savagery in the hearts of all men. Instead, it is the Negro who is essentially uncivilized wearing the contemporary sophistication as a loosely fitting mask over an incorrigibly savage countenance. In its own time, the point of view was possible, and when disguised by theatrical excitements, acceptable, but today, the ethnic and social implications of the play can no longer command respectful attention. (139)

In Bogard’s view O’Neill perpetuated the stereotype of the incurably savage black. This perspective presented a decidedly racist perspective of African American portraiture.

During the opening season black critics of the same era challenged the premise and the language, particularly the repeated use of the word nigger. As Gagnon points out, O’Neill used nigger both with a modifying adjective, as in “bush nigger,” “common nigger,” “no-count nigger,” “trash nigger” and singularly as a noun throughout the play. Gagnon further suggests that O’Neill employed the epithet as a linguistic device that allowed the tyrant Brutus Jones to demonstrate his superiority to other blacks referenced in the play. He suggests that as Jones regresses, he begins identifying with his own race as a victim, dropping the term in the latter scenes as he assumes the victim’s role (125). In 1921, Edgar M. Gray of the *New York News* “expressed the opinions of many Negroes” that the play “is uninstructional, degrading and does not conform to history nor geography.” Along with nigger, Gray noted O’Neill’s use of pejorative epithets such as “money chaser,” “black trash,” and “black heathen” (qtd. in Krasner 107).

O'Neill's use of derogatory epithets may have been an expressionist device, but it also illustrates his ambivalence to and disregard for the sentiments of black audiences.

According to Sheaffer, the term "nigger" not only drew criticism from black writers, but also created a rift between O'Neill and his first Emperor Jones, Charles Gilpin. Gilpin bridled at the use of the pejorative term as self-demeaning and disrespectful to his fellow actors. Despite his personal reservations, Charles Gilpin enjoyed critical acclaim because of his portrayal of Brutus Jones, which ran for over two hundred performances on Broadway followed by a two-year road tour. His acting and the play's success earned Gilpin fame and recognition. In recognition for his performance as Brutus Jones, the New York Drama League invited him to their 1921 annual dinner as an honored guest. The League eventually rescinded its invitation in reaction to League members' protests against dining with a black man. Eugene O'Neill, along with other honored guests, joined a counter protest led by critic Kenneth Macgowan. Gilpin supporters outnumbered the bigoted protesters forcing the League's re-invitation of Gilpin to the dinner. In light of the controversy, the dinner drew more than double the usual attendees and Gilpin won the biggest hand of the evening (Sheaffer, *Artist* 35 - 36).

Gilpin later remarked that upon learning of the original invitation, he had intended to spend only a few minutes at the dinner. After making an appearance, he had planned to go home in Harlem rather than hob-nob with the New York theatre crowd. Despite his intentions, he spent four and a half hours at the event, though not losing sight of its personal and social significance for his image and that of his community. He remarked, "I am really a race man -- a Negro and proud of being one, proud of the progress the Negroes have made in the time and with the opportunity they have had. And I don't want the public to think anything different" (qtd. in

Sheaffer, *Son* 36). O'Neill's participation in defending the star of his play may have begun the process lessening his ambivalence to the effects his play had on African Americans.

Gilpin's fame was a mixed blessing for the actor. The negative stereotype that he portrayed took its toll on him personally. According to Krasner, Gilpin resorted to drink and to reinterpreting the role Eugene O'Neill had written. As Brutus Jones, Gilpin's lines required that he refer to himself and to the other black actors in the play as one of the many O'Neill's permutations of the descriptive nigger. Sensitive to the critical pressures, Gilpin substituted "Negro," "colored boy," and "black baby," for nigger (199). O'Neill responded to Gilpin's changes by stating: "If I ever catch you rewriting my lines again, you black bastard, I'm going to beat you up" (qtd. in Gelb and Gelb 449). Ironically, in 1946, years after Paul Robeson had taken over the role, both in the theatrical revival in 1925 and the 1933 movie, O'Neill remarked on Charles Gilpin: "As I look back now on all my work, I can honestly say there was only one actor who carried out every notion of a character I had in mind. That actor was Charles Gilpin" (qtd. in Sheaffer 37). In that context, Charles Gilpin's performances as the uniformed dictator, full of bravado, regressing to a superstitious naked fugitive delivered to O'Neill's audiences the atavistic character that O'Neill had envisioned.

O'Neill's pursuit of realism in dialogue contributed to the stereotype of the inarticulate African American. He exaggerated the vernacular of the black and tan saloons he frequented, including the language of acquaintances such as Adam Scott. The Gelbs identify Adam Scott, the black New London bartender and part-time church elder, as O'Neill's model for Brutus Jones's language, bravado, appearance, as well as his religious and superstitious beliefs. He also exaggerated Scott's speech, creating the patois African American critics challenged. As an example, when asked the question, how he reconciled bartending with his church duties, Scott

replied, “I’m a religious man, but after Sunday, I lay my Jesus on the shelf.” O’Neill channeled Scott in Jones’s black dialect as, “Doesn’t you know dey’s got to deal wid a man was a member in good standin’ o’ de Baptist Church. I’s after the coin, an I lays my Jesus on de shelf for de time bein’” (qtd. in Gelb and Gelb 203). Brutus Jones’s lines and his behavior represent an uneducated social group that challenged the portraiture of the New Negro, drawing criticism from black writers of the era.

As a first play dramatizing a black protagonist, one that moved from an obscure experimental playhouse to Broadway and then on to a national tour, it lacked the image and message, which black intellectuals, such as Alain Locke and W.E.B Du Bois, expected. Literary historian John Cooley wrote that Brutus Jones was “more clown than hero, ultimately a laughable pretender to be pitied and dismissed” (qtd. by Krasner 195). W.E.B. Du Bois, a realist in political philosophy, initially defended O’Neill in 1921 by describing *The Emperor Jones* as a “splendid tragedy.” Du Bois later reversed himself in a 1926 by adding *Jones* to a published list of theatrical works handicapping African American portraiture (qtd. in Krasner 196). In effect, *The Emperor Jones* presented a mixed blessing to the New Negro image and the Black Renaissance, perpetuating derogatory stereotypes while making blacks commercially viable subjects for American drama.

All God’s Chillun Got Wings (1924)

Eugene O’Neill’s second drama featuring black protagonists, *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*², premiered four years after *The Emperor Jones*. The play tells the story of a New York City couple raised in adjoining tenement neighborhoods. It begins with the couple playing as

children at a street intersection between the two neighborhoods: one black and one white. The children are products of their communities: Ella, an eight-year-old girl of Irish descent and Jim, an eleven-year-old African American boy. In this first scene, the couple splits from a larger group of children as they taunt Ella Downey with the name Painty Face, a reference to her white and rose skin coloring. Jim Harris, nick-named Jim Crow, defends her. As the scene ends the two disclose their desires to change their race: she wishes to be black and he drinks chalk water, hoping to become white.

In the following scene, the couple cross paths at the same intersection, Ella with her Irish boxer boyfriend and Jim, now a high-school graduate, with a black companion. Prior to her arrival, Jim confronts the boxer, accusing him of being unfaithful to Ella. Unfortunately for Jim, teenage Ella hates blacks and rejects his interference by saying, “Of all the nerve! You’re certainly forgetting your place! Who’s asking for help, I’d like to know? Shut up and stop bothering me!” (O'Neill, *Plays* 100). The scene ends with Jim’s black friend asking him if Jim is a nigger or trying to “buy white” -- crossing over to the white world. Through the course of the play, Ella becomes a prostitute, bears and loses her boxer boyfriend’s baby and is rescued by Jim Harris, now a law student. Jim and Ella marry, moving to France in the hopes that the French would accept their interracial marriage. Despite marriage to Jim and their emigration to France, Ella has not lost her disdain for blacks. Her racism torments her to the point of neurosis, resulting in their decision to return to America and face her demons.

In New York, Jim and Ella survive in Jim’s parents’ former home, living on an inheritance from his father. Jim repeatedly attempts and fails the bar exam, while his sister Hattie cares for Ella during the day. Hattie projects the image of a strong black woman, proud of her African heritage. She, for example, gives an African mask to Jim and Ella as a wedding present.

In the final scenes, Ella's world closes in on her. O'Neill expresses the cocooning effect of her psychosis by shrinking the stage. Eventually, Ella alienates her sister-in-law by calling her a "dirty nigger" (125). Jim, once again siding with his wife, denies that Ella would denounce his sister in such a way only to have Ella call him a nigger. In the last scene, Ella awaits word on Jim's latest attempt at the bar exam. Her psychosis has driven her to stab the symbol of her marriage to her black husband, the African mask. After stabbing the mask, she waits for Jim, still bearing the butcher knife. As he reveals his latest failure, Ella becomes visibly delighted, regressing into a childlike state. Jim kneels before an infantilized Ella, whom she refers to as "Uncle Jim," a playmate. As the play concludes, Ella touches Jim's hand as if to assist him in getting up and swears, "Honey, Honey, I'll play right up to the gates of Heaven with you!" (128).

The premise of *All God's Chillun Got Wings* appeared to have been an indictment of interracial marriages. In fact, it may well have been less about the fictional Harrises than a fictionalized version of O'Neill's parents' turbulent marriage. The Gelbs point out that the lives of Eugene O'Neill's parents, James and Ella O'Neill, shared similar attributes to the lives of the Harrises, including first names. They assert that as with Ella Harris, Ella O'Neill lived in a marriage in which she had sought refuge, but the marriage turned into a prison. The differences lie in Jim Harris's race versus James O'Neill's profession as an actor, the similarity lies in the wives' perception of isolation (Gelb and Gelb 535). Ella Harris accepts isolation by marrying a black man. According to Louis Sheaffer, Ella O'Neill felt near isolation as she accompanied her husband in his constant travels (Sheaffer, *Playwright* 18-19). O'Neill's disaffection with his father influenced his social behavior and playwriting. Louis Sheaffer illustrates the intensity of O'Neill's disaffection by including in his book's endnotes a handwritten diagram, presumably in O'Neill's handwriting, which graphs O'Neill's animosity towards his parents. The diagram

includes phrases such as “resentment against father,” “hatred + defiance of father,” and “discovery of mother’s inadequacy” (Sheaffer, *Playwright* 506). In effect, Eugene O’Neill expressed his mother’s debilitating inadequacy, her morphine addiction, through Ella Harris’s debilitating racism. Though the discordant lives of Ella and Jim Harris living in a mixed-race marriage may have been a fictionalized version of his family, the general public and theatre critics of the time reacted to the obvious premise: miscegenation. In 1924, an O’Neill production depicting an interracial couple stirred controversy prior to the show’s opening. *The Dreamy Kid* and *The Emperor Jones* had established the precedent of using black actors in white productions written by a well-known playwright, though white actresses in black face played the roles of the West Indian women in *Moon of the Caribbees*. The Provincetown Players had taken *Jones* a step further by employing both black and white actors in race-appropriate roles creating an interracial cast. In light of his success with *The Emperor Jones*, the logical choice in O’Neill’s ostensible pursuit of realism made *Chillun* the first show to depict a white woman and black man as a mixed couple.

According to the Gelbs, the role of Jim Harris went to Paul Robeson, a graduate of both Princeton and Columbia Law School. Upon learning the twenty-five year old black actor would play opposite a white actress, Mary Blair, in *Chillun*, Brooklyn *Eagle* theatre critic Augustus Thomas wrote that the proposed casting was “an unnecessary concession to realism” (547). Prior to the show’s premiere, the script had been published in the literary magazine *Mercury*, which should have mitigated much of the resulting outrage. A national newspaper syndicate described Robeson as “a full blooded Negro” and pictured Mary Blair with the caption: “WHITE ACTRESS KISSES NEGRO’S HAND.” In response O’Neill published a statement summing up

his view of the play, “The racial factor is incidental: “The play is a character study of two human beings” (qtd. in Sheaffer, *Artist* 135).

The Gelbs note that O’Neill was certainly aware of the potential incendiary reactions to the play, but he explained:

The real tragedy is that the woman could not see their ‘togetherness’ -- the Oneness of mankind. She was hemmed in by inhibitions. Ella of the play loved her husband, but could not love him as a woman would a man, though she wanted to, because of her background and her inherited racial prejudice. But the Negro question, which it must be remembered, is not an issue in the play, isn’t the only one which can arouse prejudice. We are divided by prejudices. Prejudices racial, social, and religious. Tracing it, it all goes back, of course, to economic causes. (qtd. in Gelb and Gelb 536)

Though O’Neill realized that the race issue would appear to be a central theme, he used race as a device that would illuminate prejudice in its various forms.

In effect, Eugene O’Neill illustrated his parent’s dysfunctional marriage by dramatizing the clash of two cultures joined by common economic backgrounds, but divided by America’s color line. When asked by a reporter about his views of intermarriage and the superiority of the white race over blacks O’Neill responded:

I admit that there is prejudice against intermarriage of whites and blacks, but what has that to do with my play? I don’t advocate intermarriage in it. I am never an advocate of anything in any play -- except humanity towards humanity.

Spiritually speaking, there is no superiority between races. We're just a little bit ahead mentally as a race, though not as individuals. But I've no desire to play the exhorter in any racial no man's land. I am a dramatist. (qtd. in Gelb and Gelb 552)

As a dramatist, O'Neill pointedly explained that he was not advocating miscegenation or African Americans. He used race to create a visual delineation between the black and white cultures.

According to Sheaffer, despite O'Neill's attempts to defuse the pre-premiere criticisms of his play, the cast and the playwright received hate mail and threats from across the country. The producers diverted the most vicious letters from Mary Blair. O'Neill received mail from the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia on official Ku Klux Klan letterhead. The letter, signed by the Grand Kleagle, threatened his sons if the show premiered. O'Neill wrote a three word response in bold letters, "Go fuck yourself!" (qtd. in Sheaffer, *Artist* 140).

Once again, O'Neill was forced to defend his work and his actors against racial prejudice and criticism from the community at large.

According to the Gelbs, newspapers papers warned of riots, asking New York City's mayor to cancel the play's premiere. On May 15, 1924, O'Neill's *Chillun* opened in the refurbished and renamed Provincetown Playhouse, formerly the Playwright's Theatre. As a subscription theatre and not a public venue, the mayor could not stop the first performance. Upon discovering the technicality that the mayor's office issued licenses for child actors, the mayor refused, without giving any grounds, to authorize children to perform in the first scene. The director read the first scene to the audience and the play went on without incident (551-553).

The theme of miscegenation drew criticism from African American leaders concerned about the image the play suggested of black men. Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church and father of the Harlem congressman, called the play "intensely

harmful.” He explained his position by noting that the play was “harmful because it intimates that we are desirous of marrying white women.” Similarly, the *Chicago Defender*, a black newspaper, attacked the play for having “an educated, high-minded Negro, whose sister is a school teacher, take into his home a wife who has come from the streets” (qtd. in Sheaffer, *Artist* 138). The interracial marriage that O’Neill depicted in *Chillun* challenged the New Negro movement’s image of African Americans by depicting a self-deprecating black man, whose life of becoming white overshadowed his self-esteem.

In contrast, W.E.B. Du Bois acknowledged that O’Neill’s play provided a new visibility to African Americans. As was often the case, Du Bois commented on O’Neill’s work as a realist:

Any mention of Negro blood or Negro life in America for a century has been an occasion for an ugly picture, a dirty allusion, a nasty comment or a pessimistic forecast. The result is that the negro today fears any attempt of the artist to paint Negroes. He is not satisfied unless everything is perfect and proper and beautiful and joyful and hopeful. He is afraid to be painted as he is, lest his human foibles and shortcomings be seized by his enemies for the purposes of the ancient and hateful propaganda.

Happy is the artist that breaks through any of these shells, for his is the kingdom of eternal beauty. He will come through scarred, and perhaps a little embittered -- certainly astonished at the almost universal misinterpretation of his motives and aims.

Eugene O’Neill is bursting through. He has my sympathy, for his soul must be lame with the blows rained upon him. But it is work that must be done. (qtd. in Sheaffer, *Artist* 138)

Du Bois recognized the mixed blessing that O’Neill’s plays offered African Americans. Prior to O’Neill, black roles and characters had been primarily the province of minstrel shows.

Though not writing of O'Neill or his work, Zora Neale Hurston pointed out the public indifference to stories of minority romance unless the story involved racial tension. She pointed out, as theatre promoters they would only sponsor works that would sell (Hurston 1160). O'Neill exploited that racial tension in *Chillun*, making black drama commercially viable for his own benefit. Louis Sheaffer's asserted that O'Neill never accounted for black's feelings towards *All God's Chillun* (Artist 138). O'Neill's comments before the play's premiere validate that assertion. Eugene O'Neill used race as a dramatic device that provided visual and cultural contrasts to the tragedy of the Harris's marriage. To this point in O'Neill's career, the racial themes were incidental: suggesting that though he had been close friends with the blacks he used as character models, his plays were not written to illuminate or to rectify the African American condition. In fact O'Neill's black themed plays exploited the African American condition as tragedy, the positive or negative effects on black portraiture were circumstantial.

CHAPTER 4

DEFINING RACE: BLURRING THE COLOR LINES

Eugene O'Neill's sentiment towards African Americans appears to have evolved from ambivalence to advocate after the run of *All God's Chillun Got Wings*. According to Virginia Floyd's book, *Eugene O'Neill at Work*, the playwright began making notes and writing plays that addressed the black condition in America. She notes that as early as 1921, O'Neill made notes for a play called "Honest Honey Boy," modeled after the life of his gambler friend Joe Smith (38). Similarly, O'Neill modeled *Chillun* on another friend's life, Johnny T., a black man married to a white woman. O'Neill's notes assert that he based the play on experiences he witnessed "intimately" (53). Though O'Neill modeled his black characters on friends, the early portrayals seem exploitive and unsympathetic to the African American condition. In the years following *All God's Chillun*, he experimented with black portraiture in three additional plays: *The Hairy Ape* (originally premiering in 1922), *The Bantu Boy* (written in 1927, though never produced), and *The Iceman Cometh* (1939).

The Bantu Boy (1927)

Virginia Floyd suggests that O'Neill conceived that "Bantu Boy" would tell the story of an African chief tricked and his honor played upon resulting in his and his wife's enslavement and transport to America. The playwright characterizes the former Bantu chief as a man of integrity, reluctantly Christianized, despite his wariness of "white men's hearts" (178). After escaping from his white master during the American Civil War, he fights in a black regiment. After the war, the former Bantu chief realizes that he has traded the slavery of the South for

another form of slavery in New York. The disillusioned chief renounces Christ and returns to his South African village. He foresees the industrial slavery of the future and after rallying his village to war dies at the hands of the Boers (178).

Following O'Neill's "Bantu Boy" notes, Floyd asserted that the playwright attempted to depict the plight of African Americans as victimized by society. She contends that his family's rejection by the Yankee New London society influenced his compassion for the black community he knew in Greenwich Village. The "Bantu Boy" entries span more than a decade of O'Neill's diary, including brief descriptions of ten scenes in the context of "A Negro Play." The scene sketches reveal O'Neill's attitudes towards his unnamed character, the former Bantu chief, and the chief's perception of the world, a world filled with treachery and disillusionment. In one, slavers separate the former chief from his wife. He tells her "not to show grief before whites" (Floyd 177). It appears that O'Neill had begun attributing self-respect to his black characters, unlike the self-denigration associated with *Chillun's* Jim Harris. Staked to a tree, after an attempted escape, the former chief states, "You can't set me free, White Man, I am free" (178). O'Neill's notes concerning "Bantu Boy" / "A Negro Play" supports Floyd's assumption that O'Neill's treatment of black characters in the late 1920's and through the 1930's paints blacks as victims of society's prejudices. In the case of "Bantu Boy," the protagonist is not only a victim, but also honorable, resolute and defiant -- making his disillusionment with God and society dramatic. The earlier plays share a depiction of black atavism and improvident behavior with only cursory allusions to personal integrity, self-discipline, and resolve. Though never completed, "Bantu Boy" may well have been an evolutionary step in O'Neill's perception of the American black experience. His notes suggest that the chief's story was a tragedy created by America's racist culture rather than character flaws. O'Neill continued experimenting with

blacks in tragic narratives with his 1931 London revival of *The Hairy Ape*, featuring Paul Robeson.

The Hairy Ape (1922)

In *The Hairy Ape*, Eugene O'Neill tells a story of rage, social and economic class rage directed towards American capitalism by the working underclass. The playwright employs expressionism by channeling his story of class rage through Yank, whose appearance resembles that of a stereotypical Neanderthal as perceived in the early twentieth century. The ocean liner acts as a microcosm of American society with elements of both the upper, middle, and lower classes represented. Yank and his crewmates, a multi-ethnic collection of similarly built laborers, work in the stokehole or the boiler room of the ship. O'Neill's original stage notes state that stokehole crew represents "all the civilized white races" (O'Neill, *Plays* 39). Throughout the play, O'Neill uses the stokehole crew as a chorus, hurling ethnic slurs at each other and expressing Yank's sentiments as he ponders his situation. He and his mates point out the contrasts between their lives on the bottom rungs of society and that of the wealthy capitalists. Yank, fueled by drink and the company of his fellow laborers, assumes the thoughtful pose of Rodin's "The Thinker." He reflects upon his contributions to the ship's efficiency by comparing his physical strength with that of the ship's steel construction. In his stage notes, O'Neill describes Yank's bravado and self-glorification in the form of superficial physicality. "Sure! It takes a man to work in hell," he boasts (48). Yank defines his manhood and his value to the ship by his ability to endure the stokehole's heat.

Yank manifests his reflections as bravado, but an unexpected visit by a passenger derails his train of thought and self-esteem. The chief engineer escorts Mildred Douglas, the upper class daughter of a steel magnate, into the stokehole. Upon seeing Yank, his face blackened with coal dust and hunched simian posture; she swoons in fear and disgust whimpering, “Take me away! Oh, the filthy beast!” (58). The latter scenes in the play depict Yank’s futile attempts at avenging the Mildred’s condescending visit and exclamatory insult. He assumes that her visit was similar to that of a zoo patron, visiting a “hairy ape” (62). He makes futile violent attempts against Mildred from afar, going unnoticed by her and by other members of her social class. In turn a sympathetic crewman, a well-dressed gentleman, and a socialist organization each reject his violent ramblings, reducing his self-esteem. The play concludes with Yank’s failed attempt to befriend a caged gorilla, a creature to which he thinks he can relate, a fellow hairy ape observed by the world through steel bars. Yank frees the gorilla, which rewards Yank by killing him, escaping into the city streets.

The significance of *The Hairy Ape* to African American portraiture is threefold: by virtue of the parallel marginalization of the black underclass in American society, the stereotypical association with blacks and primitivism, and O’Neill’s expressionist trope of replacing the white character, Yank, with a black actor in his London revival. The prevailing theme of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* is that of atavism as a consequence of the industrialized world’s class distinctions. Yank accepts the industrialized world’s socio-economic class delineations, but not the subordinate role to which his class has been assigned. He perceives Mildred’s visit as an intrusion into his domain and, therefore, an insult. Mildred’s short onstage presence creates the impetus for Yank’s rage and degeneration. John Nickel interprets Mildred’s entry into the stokehole as an intrusion not only by a representative of the capitalist class into the world of the

proletariat, but also by whites into the black world. O'Neill dramatizes the meeting visually by dressing Mildred airily in white -- contrasting her with the hot, lower deck, coal blackened stokehole environment. Yank and his crewmates appear as pitiless denizens of the underworld and she the epitome of social condescension thereby earning his scorn. Each scene heightens Yank's rage against Mildred and her class as he degenerates into a true hairy ape, dying at the hands of the gorilla he freed from its cage. Yank dies alone, essentially a discarded machine, in the dark of night, a contrast to Mildred's white opulent world. The play illustrates the marginalization of the underclasses and their disposability in the context of the modern, dehumanizing Industrial Age.

The Hairy Ape premiered in 1922, between the initial runs of *The Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillun Got Wings*. Unlike the latter plays, *The Hairy Ape* as originally produced, had no black themes, no African American character and no black performers. The significance to black portraiture lies in its exploration of atavism, often associated with black behavior, and the show's 1931 revival in England. By having Paul Robeson assume Yank's role in the London revival, O'Neill made the play about race. Though the critics praised Robeson's performance, the play ran for only five performances. He made theatre history by performing a role written for a white actor, but British critics disliked the change. A reviewer for *The Star* wrote: "It upsets the balance or alters the whole direction of the piece. One cannot help thinking that here is something which has to do with racial consciousness and the oppression of the negro" (qtd. in Duberman 148-149). *The Star's* review appears to confirm the evolution O'Neill's view on black portraiture. Yank originally portrayed a white everyman, personally devoid of ethnic description, but surrounded by a white multiethnic crew. Robeson's performance made blacks primitive victims of the industrialized world.

Eugene O'Neill's early depiction of blacks, as exemplified by the cannibalistic Sailor in *Thirst*, attributed atavistic behavior to blacks in stressful situations. John Nickel argues that as originally written, *The Hairy Ape* offered a counterpoint to that stereotype. He refers to the primitivism associated with blacks in terms of racial degeneration. After Mildred encounters Yank, he refuses to wipe away the black coal dust. Nickel points to O'Neill's stage notes: Yank is "blackened" by the coal dust, which "sticks like black make-up," becoming spotty like a "piebald nigger" (qtd. in 34). Nickel's observation asserts that O'Neill employed Expressionism to suggest the primitivism of blacks in Yank. In the later production with Paul Robeson, O'Neill makes Yank's descent into primitivism more direct by employing a black actor. In addition, Nickel asserts that Yank represented a white everyman descending into the black world: "By having a white man "become black and quickly regress, O'Neill seeks to convince his audience that degeneration is not biological, -- or racial -- but cultural" (35). Despite Nickel's opinion of O'Neill's intent, the playwright appears to have been suggesting that physical blackness in the degenerating Yank supported the stereotype of black primitivism. In fact, Nickel notes that in 1906 the Bronx Zoo maintained a live exhibit of an African pygmy in the Monkey House. Such an exhibit implied the primitive nature of Africans, as did the blacken face of the original atavistic Yank, and the black actor Paul Robeson: all three of which perpetuated the stereotype of black primitivism. O'Neill's black portraiture evolved beyond the atavism of Yank and the victimization of Jim Harris in his depiction of an African American character in *The Iceman Cometh*.

The Iceman Cometh (1939)

The Iceman Cometh was the final play contributing to O'Neill's portrait of African Americans. He set *Iceman* in Harry Hope's bar in 1912, a location and an era reminiscent of his days frequenting The Hell Hole (Gelb and Gelb 457). The plot describes the anticipated arrival and interaction of hardware salesman Theodore "Hickey" Hickman with the bar's patrons and staff. Hickey's arrival is an annual event celebrating Harry Hope's birthday. Hickey pursues dual missions throughout the play: encouraging and subsequently destroying the saloon's self-deceptive patrons in their unattainable hopes for the future, referred to as "pipedreams." The bar's patrons, Harry Hope and his bar tenders, each entertain pipedreams and self-delusions nurtured within cocoons of alcoholic hazes. Each patron has squandered past successes, but harbors dreams of recovery or re-instatement into their former occupations. They all live in sodden despair, swathed in covers of alcoholic stupors, presenting themselves to the community of Harry Hope's bar behind masks of their former glories. As an example, two Boer War veterans continued reliving a common battle in which they fought on opposing sides. There are eighteen denizens of Harry Hope's bar, some of whom room on the upper floors. His saloon acts as a sanctuary for its owner, prostitutes, and outcasts of a variety of occupations: including the Boer War veterans, former political activists, a one-time carnival worker, and a former gambling house operator, Joe Mott. Joe Mott, the only African American in the play, once operated a gambling house for blacks.

Unlike O'Neill's earlier plays, the playwright treated Joe Mott as a tragic figure equal to the play's white characters except Hickey, the play's central character. During the early scenes of the play, each character describes a lost way of life and articulates the pipedream of recovering it. Joe Mott harbors the pipedream of owning once again a gambling house for blacks, a

pipedream that stands on equal footing with the other patrons in Harry Hope's bar. Each patron fosters the self-delusion that he will regain his former social position and Joe Mott is no exception. He also shares the bar's communal reliance on alcohol, the common enabler for each of their pipedreams. Hickey goads Joe Mott into pursuing his pipedream, but Joe Mott fails because he lacks the investment capital and the means to achieve it. In the end, Joe Mott rejoins the bar's clientele in a drunken stupor rationalizing their inability to achieve their pipedreams.

Gagnon asserts that because of O'Neill's personal experiences in New London, he understood the marginalization and degradation caused by prejudice and ostracized cultures (73). Norman Berlin describes O'Neill as a "white playwright who used black characters to explore his own sense of alienation" (qtd. in Gagnon 171). In that context, O'Neill continued using blacks to dramatize the social alienation he experienced as a young man in New London. The recognized stereotypes in Joe Mott are less exploitive of blacks and more descriptive of a socio-economic class.

In the character of Joe Mott, O'Neill became an advocate for the African American condition by illuminating the effects of ethnic prejudice. When a Boer War veteran refers to Joe as a nigger, Joe Mott responds, "But I don't stand for 'nigger' from nobody. Never did. In de old days, people calls me "nigger" wakes up in de hospital" (O'Neill, *Iceman* 40). Unlike many of O'Neill's black characters, Joe does not accept "nigger" as an acceptable description of himself, challenging those that he considers to be his equals.

O'Neill dramatizes through Joe Mott, the African American effort at living life in both white and black societies. He demonstrates that race is the price of economic success by having Joe Mott refer to Harry Hope's help in establishing Joe Mott's earlier gambling house. During Harry Hope's heyday, he vouched to the local gambling boss that Joe Mott was white. O'Neill

described Joe Mott as brown skinned and his face “mildly negroid in type” (19). Gagnon asserts that O’Neill’s description of Joe Mott is one of inclusion (175). The description implies that he had a mixed heritage, clearly placing him on the border between two worlds. Joe Mott’s mixed identity contributes to his life-lie and despair. By including Joe Mott in the white world, O’Neill made the concept of double-consciousness problematic. His inner struggle alternates between accommodating his white friends, as in sweeping up the bar after Harry Hope’s birthday party, to retorts concerning his blackness when he feels rejected or challenged.

Unlike the atavism of Brutus Jones or the self-deprecation of Jim Harris, Joe Mott’s descent into tragedy marks a more realistic depiction of human nature, inclusive of blacks. Joe Mott’s descent as a black man is not principally a function of biology, but rather a product of racial discrimination, resulting in economic inequity. Gagnon asserts that as a victim of economic inequity as a function of social bias, Joe Mott became an everyman (Gagnon 180). His race is not incidental, but a nuance that included the African American narrative in O’Neill’s interpretation of the American class struggle.

O’Neill modeled Joe Mott after his friend and drinking companion Joe Smith. Louis Sheaffer credits Joe Smith as one O’Neill’s primary sources for realism in depicting African Americans. As previously noted, his bar stories planted the seed for the character Dreamy. His life story, as a former saloon in the shrinking black neighborhoods of Greenwich Village, inspired the O’Neill in creating Joe Mott. (Sheaffer, *Playwright* 424-425). Unlike O’Neill’s earlier black characters, Joe Mott is not a helpless, atavistic victim, but a tragic figure, with complex reasons sustaining his downfall as with the white characters.

Though *The Iceman Cometh*’s Joe Mott improves upon the black imagery that O’Neill had previously portrayed, he continued to rely on popular negative black stereotypes as elements

of his realism. Edward Shaughnessy points out that Joe Mott faces the certain failure of his pipedream. He considers getting a gun to mug someone for the money he needs to finance his new gambling house. In an altercation with one of the bartenders Joe Mott pulls out a knife. Shaughnessy contends that though sympathetic to the black cause, O'Neill was unable fully to shake the negative black stereotypes prevailing in the twenties (90). Unlike Dreamy or Brutus Jones, Joe Mott considers robbing a stranger, as a last resort, rather than harboring the goal of a successful underworld life. His intended crime suggests a means to end, rather than the end itself. O'Neill saved Joe Mott from the atavistic caricatures he had employed directly in *Thirst*, *The Emperor Jones* and by critical interpretation in *The Hairy Ape*. Though Joe Mott's tragic life predictably dramatizes a fatal flaw in his alcoholism, society has facilitated his descent. The final portrait that Eugene O'Neill paints of an African American character is not one of a primitive living in a civilized world, but of a character with universal appeal, marginalized by prejudice.

After *The Iceman Cometh* closed on Broadway, it went on tour, including the National Theatre in Washington, D.C., O'Neill learned that a group called the Washington Committee for Racial Democracy was protesting the theatre's policy of barring blacks from its audiences. In reply to a wire that a committee member sent to the playwright O'Neill: "I am and always have been opposed to racial discrimination of any kind. I assure you I will insert a non-discrimination clause in all my future contracts" (Gelb and Gelb 886). Eugene O'Neill no longer simply exploited the use of blacks as theatrical devices, actors delivering a realistic performance or serving as symbols for his tormented family life and social isolation. Instead his development as an artist and awakening social awareness resulted in his advocacy for racial justice.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Eugene O'Neill's depiction of black portraiture evolved over the twenty-six years that he included black characters in his plays. Though his later black characters appear less stereotypical than his first depictions, they lent themselves to common negative preconceptions, preconceptions that perpetuated racist attitudes. Psychologist Jefferson Fish, Ph.D. expands the common definitions of racism to include: "holding pre-formed negative opinions or stereotypes about a group or category of people. *Prejudice* (from pre-judging) and *bigotry* are good words for that concept. In his early works O'Neill satisfies Fish's definition of racism by exploiting traditional negative black stereotypes that accentuated the drama in his plays. In his later plays, O'Neill used negative stereotyping that fit Fish's definition of racism to illuminate black life as an advocate for the African American condition. O'Neill's black portraiture is a mixed blessing of inclusion of blacks in the American narrative and a perpetuation of negative racial stereotypes.

As O'Neill concentrated his efforts on balancing expressionism with his interpretation of black realism *The Emperor Jones* became the most egregious representation of blacks. Travis Bogard asserts that the theatrical visibility African Americans derived from the plays popularity disguised the play's "essential racism" (Bogard, *Contour* 139). In his 1925 revival of *The Emperor Jones*, O'Neill replaced Charles Gilpin with Paul Robeson in the title role. As Brutus Jones, Gilpin had run afoul of O'Neill's version of black realism, resulting in arguments concerning the character's dialogue. According to the Gelbs, Robeson's performance was not up to Gilpin's performance of the character. After the revival's premiere, a heartbroken Gilpin declined a friend's drink offer by stating, "I feel kind of low. I created the role of the Emperor.

That role belongs to me. The Irishman, he just wrote the play (450).” Gagnon interprets the remark as a reference to the O’Neill’s perpetuation of the minstrelsy’s black stereotypes and the major role that Irish performers played in minstrelsy (549). *The Emperor Jones* exploited the accepted caricatures of minstrelsy and added credibility to the character by including a black actor instead of the traditional burnt-cork performer. Though the play perpetuated negative preconceptions, it also put a national spotlight on the black actor Charles Gilpin. His performance and the resulting furor over his acceptance as a competent professional opened the doors for later works using black actors, including the development of theatre troops such as the Cleveland’s Gilpin Players and Paul Robeson’s performance in O’Neill’s *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*.

O’Neill claimed that race and miscegenation were incidental to the story of Jim and Ella Harris’s dysfunctional marriage in *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*, but racial stereotyping was implicit in Paul Robeson’s performance. The notoriety once again illuminated a play performed by actual black actors, introducing Paul Robeson to national fame. O’Neill portrayed Jim’s life as dualism on several levels. Jim and his wife yearn for him to become white, a physical impossibility. They cling to the illusion that as a lawyer, Jim will have earned respect by the white world at large, becoming the “whitest of white” (O’Neill, *Plays* 120). Jim essentially attempts to pass as white, a traitorous ambition to his race (Bogard 196). Jim’s submission to Ella’s unreasonable request of a solitary and fraternal life perpetuated the racist sentiment of African American subordination to whites. Bogard characterizes Jim’s submission as a defeat for blacks in terms of the play’s ethnic context (199).

In effect, O’Neill contradicted the sentiment that W.E.B. Du Bois and Alan Locke both extolled: African Americans demonstrating achievement would be accepted into the white world

as equals. Jim Harris's inability to assimilate into the white world challenged the concept of black double-consciousness and the positive stereotypes promoted by New Negro movement and the Harlem Renaissance. In response to African American critics concerning his portrayals of blacks in theatre, O'Neill sent an open letter to the magazine *Messengers*. The magazine, a cultural and politically radical African American magazine published in Harlem, printed his letter which asked the readers and black leaders, "where are your playwrights?" (Krasner 214). O'Neill's challenge to the African American community ran parallel to similar challenges by the Harlem Renaissance's father, Alan Locke.

From the premiere of *The Emperor Jones* through the run of *The Iceman Cometh*, O'Neill's position in African American portraiture appears mixed and contradictory. Despite his long-term friendships with African American bartenders and drinking companions, all of O'Neill's plays depicting black characters appear to have perpetuated negative black stereotypes, labeling O'Neill as a racist. In the years between *Thirst* and *The Hairy Ape*'s revival in London, O'Neill's representation of blacks changed. His portrayal of blacks evolved from exploitive to ambivalent to social change advocate. During the 1924 premier of *All God's Chillun*, O'Neill publicly distanced himself from a position of advocacy for blacks or miscegenation, but in 1931 he asked Paul Robeson to perform the role of Yank in London adding a racial tone to the formerly all white cast. Both *The Hairy Ape* and *The Iceman Cometh* illustrate O'Neill's advocacy for blacks by perpetuating negative stereotypes, a seemingly contradictory approach. In *The Hairy Ape*, Robeson's Yank dramatizes the stereotype of black primitivism by regressing into a primal state. Similarly, Joe Mott of *Iceman* regresses into the black stereotype of criminality to support his pipedream. In both cases, O'Neill dramatizes the tragedy of hopelessness resulting from ethnic prejudice.

Both *The Hairy Ape* and *The Iceman Cometh* are social commentaries. Virginia Floyd noted that O'Neill began writing the unfinished play "Bantu Boy" in 1927. Subsequently, in 1928 he made a note for a "A play laid during the Draft Riots in New York in the Civil War (183). The trend over this period of time suggests that Eugene O'Neill had extended his social consciousness beyond the white working classes represented by Yank and his stokehole crewmates to the living conditions of the socially and economically challenged black under-class represented by Joe Mott in *Iceman*.

By 1939, Eugene O'Neill had written Joe Mott's part in *The Iceman Cometh*, a black character eliciting sympathy for those members of society victimized by ethnic prejudice. Joe Mott and Brutus Jones had been modeled on O'Neill's black friend Joe Smith, whose small watchman's pension O'Neill occasionally supplemented. Joe Smith reportedly referred to the checks O'Neill sent as "my royalties" (Gelb and Gelb 657). O'Neill's ongoing relationship with Joe Smith and other Greenwich Village saloon dwellers, plus his public defense of the characters that Charles Gilpin and Paul Robeson portrayed, the actors themselves, and eventually the audiences completed the transition from using the black themes as shock value to illuminating social conditions as African Americans assimilating into mainstream America's culture.

Eugene O'Neill's first use of black characters may well have perpetuated the racist stereotypes of minstrelsy. He made the degrading expressionist caricatures of blacks, as exemplified in *The Emperor Jones*, real by having the black character roles performed by actual African Americans. O'Neill exploited the nuances of skin color within the African American culture and the perception that skin color defined acceptance in the mainstream world. In *Thirst*, *Dreamy*, *Chillun*, and *Iceman* O'Neill describes the black characters by their mixed heritage skin colors: mulatto, light-skinned, or light brown. Each of the latter plays demonstrates elements of

dualism in which the black characters have both positive and negative attributes. The white attributes are most often associated with modernity, the black characteristics associated with primitivism and regression. In *The Emperor Jones*, though O'Neill's describes Brutus Jones as a "full negro," the description implies a black man lacking the duality of heritage, but representative of the acculturating duality and social conflicts of the Great Migration. In the case of Jones, the full-blooded black man regresses to a full-blooded primitive. O'Neill's use of color illustrates his awareness of the social implications of skin color and links skin color to African American behavior and by extension acceptance into the white world.

Eugene O'Neill's plays may well be considered racist renderings, similar to the treatment Africans received in Vachel Lindsay's *The Congo*, but O'Neill's contribution to African American portraiture evolved from exploitive to advocate. In his later works, the playwright employed realism as a tool that dramatized the African American condition. As W.E.B. Du Bois asserted, O'Neill's realism, though perpetuating negative stereotypes, served the purpose of illuminating the effects of social injustice. O'Neill's personal evolution advocating social justice, within the purview of theatre, suggests that he was a product of his era and his personal experiences. The playwright's attitudes evolved as a result of his personal relationships and as American society changed, principally as a function of the black migration from the rural South to the urban North. His depictions of black behavior and dialect, however misguided, were forays into realism, as he perceived it. His stories perpetuated stereotypes, but illuminated racism. In turn, his personal actions mitigated social injustice. The question of racism versus realism to dramatize social injustice appears to typify O'Neill's works -- creating discourse that lacks easy answers.

End Notes

¹ Sheaffer asserts that O'Neill used the stylized mode of Expressionism in *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*. Sheaffer defined the genre as an onstage representation of what goes on in the character's mind. As an example, O'Neill used the characteristic feature of masks and distorted settings to suggest a claustrophobic world closing in on the characters. (Sheaffer, *Artist* 76).

² The title of *All God's Chillun Got Wings* was taken from the African American spiritual of the same name that begins as follows:

I got wings
 You got wings
 All God's Chillun got wings.
 When I get to Heav'n
 Gonna put on my wings
 Gonna fly all over God's Heav'n (Gelb and Gelb 536).

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